

Nine Strategies for Helping Middle School Students Weather the Perfect Storm of Disability, Diversity, and Adolescence

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Abstract

This article examines instructional strategies that middle school educators can use in inclusive settings in order to support the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) students. These nine strategies are appropriate for both typical and atypical learners in a whole group setting, but they are particularly useful for helping adolescent students meet the challenges associated with diversity and disability in an environment that is generally geared toward their White, typically developing peers.

Key Words: *inclusion, adolescence, diversity, best practice, culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional students*

Culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) middle school students who are educated in inclusive settings are a unique population of learners. They are negotiating the challenges associated with diversity and disability in an environment that is geared toward White, typically developing peers (Kea & Trent, 2013). Mix in fluctuating hormones, puberty, and an overwhelming desire to fit in, and you are left with a very distinct population of learners struggling to achieve academically in general education settings. The achievement gap between CLDE middle school students and their White counterparts leaves many educators unsure about how to provide instructional support for this unique population (Kea & Trent, 2013; Salend, 2016).

This article outlines nine instructional strategies that inclusive middle school educators can use in a whole group setting to accommodate for disability, diversity, and adolescence while supporting both typical and atypical learners.

The 2010 United States Census report stated that Hispanic or Latino populations have increased by 43% since 2000. Additionally, 27.4% of the United States is now labeled as non-White, compared to 12% of the population in 1970, making culturally and linguistically diverse students the fastest growing population today (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012). With this influx of diversity in schools has come an overrepresentation of culturally diverse students receiving special education services (Herzik, 2015). Research indicates a disproportionate number of special education referrals, academic underachievement, and increased disciplinary actions for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008) when compared to White typical peers.

Two potential reasons for the achievement disparity can be linked to the achievement disparity for CLDE populations: student-teacher incongruity (Au, 2009) and instructional practices that are appropriate for White learners, but have proven ineffective (Kea & Trent, 2013). While the number of diverse students steadily increases in U.S. schools, teacher demographics remain primarily female and White (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Ortiz, 2012). As a consequence, Eurocentric teaching styles, which rely heavily on narrowed curriculum and exam based instruction (Renter et al., 2006) are used more commonly than culturally responsive teaching techniques that foster multicultural strength-based approaches where all students are included and expected to achieve (Kea, 2008).

Instruction focused on test preparation has replaced content that recognizes student culture, diversity, history, and personal experience (Au, 2009), which are effective strategies for supporting diverse learners (Gay, 2013). The absence of critical thinking, real world learning, and engaging instruction has been associated with the low academic achievement reported for CLDE students (Grigg, Donahue, & Dion, 2007).

The lack of culturally responsive pedagogy has ignited increasing concerns over the appropriateness of assessment practices and the lack of evidence-based instructional strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). As a result, schools are being asked to provide a multi-tiered, culturally responsive referral process to properly identify and serve culturally diverse students with disabilities (Hoover, 2012). Educational stakeholders must be confident that their referral process does not mistakenly use culturally incompatible instructional and assessment techniques as evidence of a disability for culturally diverse students (Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Educators are also being asked to use culturally responsive teaching techniques with all students to account for those students’ prior learning experiences, cultural background, and language abilities in order to build bridges for new learning experiences and achievement

in school (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2013; Utley, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011).

Disability, Diversity, and the Common Core State Standards

The *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) is an initiative to ensure that all students in the United States are held to the same academic standards from state-to-state. The primary purpose of CCSS is to prepare students for college and the workforce (Saavedra & Steele, 2012). The Common Core State Standards (2016) are designed to be (a) evidence based; (b) aligned with work expectations and college; (c) built on the lessons of current state standards to include rigorous content and higher level thinking skills; (d) informed by other top performing countries; and (e) clear, understandable, and consistent. Unlike past initiatives that dictated curriculum, assessment, and instructional pacing, the CCSS is a roadmap for educators to follow. Each teacher can determine how to teach the curriculum, although school officials determine the development and implementation of school-wide curriculum goals. (Common Core State Standards, 2016)

According to the Council for Exceptional Children (2011), the CCSS should be read to allow the widest possible range of students to have access to these curricular guidelines. This interpretation corresponds with the least restrictive environment (LRE) initiative under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004). General education teachers and special education teachers must work together to provide the appropriate curricular accommodations to allow students with special needs access to the general education curriculum, but some questions have yet to be resolved: Can modifications be implemented without lowering expectations? Does this change the body of knowledge that special education teachers need to understand in order to practice? And how will transitional skills be integrated into the scheduled curriculum? While these questions are still being considered at the policy level, middle school inclusive practitioners are faced with the task of implementing rigorous content and higher level thinking with students who range from typically developing to a spectrum of strengths and needs associated with language, culture, or disability.

How Can Inclusive Middle School Educators Support CLDE Students?

Inclusive middle school educators can accommodate their diverse student populations by combining culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive instructional practices, as well as strategies that are specifically intended for culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional learners (O'Keeffe, 2012). Culturally responsive pedagogy can be defined as a dynamic relationship between school culture and home/community culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It uses the students' prior learning experiences, cultural background, and lan-

gauge abilities to build pathways for new learning experiences and achievement in school (Turnbull et al., 2013; Utley, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011).

Inclusive practices are also designed to build relationships, though these relationships are centered on atypical learners engaging in learning activities alongside typical learners. Inclusion education is defined as partial or full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms. The level of support that is provided is determined by the number of students with disabilities included in this setting and the severity of the disabilities (McNally, Cole, & Waugh, 2001; Turnbull et al., 2013). The level of support can refer to a one-to-one paraprofessional, special education teacher, collaborative partners, or no additional support.

Inclusive strategies permit typical learners to engage with the curriculum while allowing students who need a more scaffolded support the opportunity to receive it in a whole class context (Raymond, 2016). Although research indicates that Eurocentric teaching strategies are incompatible with CLDE populations (Orosco & O’Connor, 2011), culturally responsive inclusive strategies such as cooperative learning (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Snowman & Biehler, 2003), peer tutoring (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001) and the use of visuals to aid in student comprehension have been shown to be beneficial for both diverse and typically developing learners (Curtis & Bailey, 2001; Raymond, 2016). As a result, it is recommended that educators use instructional techniques that are inclusive, engaging, and promote academic success with all learners.

Strategies Used to Educate CLDE Populations in Inclusive Settings

When educating CLDE middle school students in inclusive settings, nine strategies stand out as being most frequently used among exemplary educators (O’Keeffe, 2012). These strategies include: (a) visual aids, (b) whole group accommodations, (c) modifications, (d) cooperative learning, (e) peer tutoring, (f) instructional scaffolding, (g) social skill instruction, (h) active and applied learning, and (i) alternative assessment. The following are practical teaching strategies intended to accommodate for the unique learning combination of disability, diversity, and adolescents. These strategies are designed to increase student engagement, provide differentiated instruction, and capitalize on the natural inclination of adolescents to collaborate and socialize with peers.

Use a Variety of Instructional Visual Aids

Visuals are effective instructional tools for CLDE populations because all students commonly understand visual stimuli. Visuals assist English language learners with word comprehension by providing a concrete instructional image for auditory words and concepts, visual stimulation to reinforce key concepts, and stimulation to keep students engaged throughout the lesson

(Allison & Rehm, 2007). A critical component to providing visual material is to ensure that the content provides an accurate reflection of the cultures that are present in the classroom (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). If cultural diversity is not present in the materials mandated by the district, it is up to the teacher to supplement them with visual resources that reflect the language, culture, and personal experiences of the students (Gay, 2013). Visuals can be used both for instructional and for student assessment. Ideas for including visuals in middle school settings include:

- Provide opportunities for students to create collages from magazines, the Internet, or personal photos to accompany writing (e.g., historical biographies).
- Encourage students to demonstrate their knowledge through poster, clipart graphics, diorama, or PowerPoint presentations.
- For vocabulary logs, include a section for students to draw or cut/paste a picture that represents the meaning of the word.
- Provide video clips or pictures as a jumping off point for a writing/speaking assignment.
- Use a wide range of visual aids to aid in both presentation and student response (e.g., videos, movies, diagrams, pictures, maps, charts, graphs, cartoons, comics, etc.).
- Label rules and classroom items in a student's native language and in English, whenever possible (e.g., *libros/books*, *mesa/table*, *lapiz/pencil*, *silencio/silence* or *be quiet*, *le vanta tu mano/raise your hand*).

Provide Whole Group Accommodations

Although accommodations are usually considered to be individualized instructional supports, whole group universal accommodations can provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners in a heterogeneous group of students. Accommodations change how instruction is delivered without changing the objective mastery requirements (Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams, & Higgins, 2010). Planning and a clear indication of how individualized and whole group accommodations will fit into current classroom practices and procedures are essential components of success (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

The key to providing effective accommodations in an inclusive environment is to create a classroom culture where stronger students will want to challenge themselves to be as independent as possible, while the students who need more support will feel comfortable using it. Middle school students, in particular, reported a preference for accommodations that were

fair, helped to build skills, gave them control of their learning, and were not embarrassing to use (Nelson, Jayanthi, Epstein, & Bursuck, 2000).

In addition to using a variety of indirect data collection techniques such as assessments, work samples and student observations to determine how to best support each student (Salend, 2016), the educator should consider each student’s input when designing an accommodation plan (Prater, Redman, Anderson, & Gibb, 2014). Lastly, teachers need to be very explicit about what achievement looks like in classrooms that support culturally diverse students. This gives each learner a clear indication of how he or she can succeed in the class. Some ways in which educators can provide whole group accommodations for CLDE students include:

- Read text (word problems, notes, lab activities) out loud to the students while posting a large visual for students to follow along.
- Allow students to use their class notes, graphic organizers, or information charts to complete class work while encouraging those who can complete the work independently to do so.
- Vary the amount of time spent on skill development in guided practice and independent practice. A teacher can accomplish this by “releasing” part of the class to independent practice/enrichment and then working with the students who need additional guided practice.
- Give students the option to work in teams, pairs, or small groups when completing lesson activities. For example, students can participate in a pair-share activity where one student shares his/her ideas and the other writes them down. Students would then switch to allow all students to experience both roles.

Provide Curricular Modifications Discreetly

Teenagers have an overwhelming desire to fit in with their peers. Hormonal fluctuations, social pressures, and an awkward stage in one’s development exacerbate the challenges faced by CLED students. Primary students with disabilities tend to have a higher self-concept of themselves within inclusion settings (Fitch, 2003; Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999), while high school and middle school students with special needs tend to have more negative views of themselves within general education settings (Howard & Tryon, 2002). To alleviate negative self-perceptions in CLDE students, it is recommended that educators use discretion when providing individualized modifications. Modified exams and assignments should be distributed with whole-group materials and should have no identifiable characteristics (e.g., colored paper).

Educators working to modify whole group lessons for CLDE populations should capitalize on skills that are commonly used within native cultures,

such as oral traditions and print/picture combinations (Peterson & Montfort, 2004). For example, dramatic activities such as music and kinesthetic movements may be more compatible with the learning styles of African American students (Gay, 2010). Some curricular modification strategies include:

- Provide written or prearranged instructions to reduce the number of practice problems/answer choices per objective, lessening the overall cognitive load of assignments and homework (e.g., assign odd or even numbers).
- Modify homework and exam assignments ahead of time for CLDE students and pass out modified and traditional assignments together. The modified assignments might, for example, shorten questions or provide an alternative response such as matching vocabulary with definitions versus writing definitions. Teachers might also assess only content knowledge versus both content knowledge and grammar/spelling, or provide an alternative exam or assignment at the student's instructional level.
- Use small group instruction to modify learning outcomes for CLDE students. This can be achieved by removing extraneous information from lessons to focus on more foundational skills needed to achieve the specific learning objectives.
- Consider which skills are being assessed and modify assignments and homework to target only those skills. For instance, if word problems are used to assess a student's understanding of multiplication, he or she may not be able to demonstrate math knowledge due to the challenges associated with reading the problems.

Engage Students Through Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that groups students in heterogeneous working communities to collaborate and cooperate on an instructional task. This strategy is especially beneficial for diverse populations (Toppel, 2015) because it increases student engagement and motivation while fostering interdependence among peers (Au, 2011). For culturally and linguistically diverse students, cooperative learning provides an opportunity to practice English (Karathanos, 2010), while their peers provide clarification and explanations in a non-threatening context. Collaborative activities using dramatic play has been shown to aid in student comprehension (Rosser, Martinez, & Moore, 2013). This type of learning is especially effective for African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American students who come from cultures that prioritize human connectedness and collaborative problem solving (Gay, 2010). Cooperative strategies include:

- Use both purposeful and random grouping and both and both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping. Manipulatives such as poker chips, playing cards, and popsicle sticks are especially useful when creating collaborative learning groups.
- Allow time for students to share class notes and debrief on the lesson or activity. One way to do this is to use a timer to allocate a few minutes at the beginning and end of a lesson to review prior learning and debrief on the lesson that day.
- Build team or partnership opportunities for students to demonstrate critical thinking skills by interacting with the content. Educators can allow students to demonstrate their understanding of literature through Readers Theater, choral response, mime, story reenactments, and tableaux.
- Create a classroom culture that encourages students to speak in complete sentences at all times. One way to accomplish this is to reiterate a student’s fragmented response into a complete sentence, then prompt the class to repeat the phrase using choral response. Similarly, educators can create opportunities for students to converse in pairs or small groups using questioning prompts and sentence frames/starters to guide student responses using complete sentences.

Use Peer Tutoring Strategies

Peer related activities capitalize on a teenager’s natural inclination to build relationships with peers. When native English speakers are paired with English language learners, peer tutoring creates opportunities to practice speaking in authentic, conversational situations. Language skills such as conversing, listening, and sharing ideas are all practiced, while opportunities for immediate clarification, feedback, and modifications are present (Allison & Rehm, 2007). Peer grouping strategies are valuable for students with and without disabilities because they have been shown to increase social interaction and academic engagement for all students (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Teachers must provide opportunities for students to practice reciprocal collaboration where turns are taken so students can experience the roles of both tutor and tutee (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Some examples of ways to incorporate peer tutoring in a middle school inclusive setting include:

- Teach the steps to peer tutors explicitly by (a) discussing with the class what peer tutoring will look like in their particular setting (setting guidelines), (b) model the peer tutoring procedures in front of the class, (c) allow time for guided practice, and (d) provide opportunities for independent practice.

- Create a classroom culture that encourages informal tutoring. Display a visual (e.g., class sign that can be turned around stating *Ask for Help/Work Independently*) that can be used to signal the boundaries of the working environment.
- Recognize each student’s personal academic strengths and ensure that students have an opportunity to act as both the teacher and the student. One way to accomplish this is to use classwork and beginning of the year interviews to identify each student’s personal and academic strengths.

Provide Instructional Scaffolding

Instructional scaffolding provides temporary support structures within lessons to support students with learning new skills. Students who have received this type of instruction reported that their teachers seemed more comfortable with meeting their instructional needs, and showed greater interest in their successes as well (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013). Typically, educators use instructional scaffolding to teach multi-step, complex skills that students may not be able to initially master on their own. When a skill is first introduced, the teacher should provide an abundance of instructional support to students, and then gradually decrease the support until students can complete the task independently. Providing timely and explicit feedback is key to scaffolded instruction (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012), because it allows students to recognize errors and make corrective changes early in the learning process before a skill is internalized. When a skill is mastered, supports are removed to sustain maintenance of the skill. One common example of instructional scaffolding is the use of graphic or advanced organizers. Graphic organizers are effective for CLDE learners because they provide the students with graphic cues that assist with organizing learning (Hart, 2009). They include activities that activate prior knowledge, provide basic information, and assist students with instructional tasks. Other examples of scaffolded instruction include:

- Use scaffolding to support a new skill by modeling the skill(s), practicing the skill(s) with the class, providing partner practice, and then initiating individual performance.
- Condense information into smaller more manageable chunks. For example, provide an alphanumeric outline to accompany larger text.
- Use response prompting techniques such as cue cards, coaching, providing hints, physical cues, miming, and questioning.
- Use think-alouds to explain multi-step processes. To do this, an educator can (a) describe the thought processes used by skilled learners to solve a problem, (b) show students how to solve the

problem using their inner dialogue, then (c) explain to the students why the multi-step processes are necessary.

- Cloze procedures can be used to help prompt students to activate vocabulary recall, while strengthening spelling, writing skills, and conversational language. Cloze procedures require that students fill in the blanks by using recall or a given word bank (e.g., I _____ the Internet to _____ Gabriela Mistral).

Embed Self-determination Instruction

Self-determination strategies are skills that enable students to engage in autonomous, self-regulated, and goal-directed behavior. Research suggests that students who develop self-advocacy skills are better equipped to make informed decisions regarding the support they will need to achieve their educational and career goals (Prater et al., 2014). Self-determination skills can be geared toward social/emotion and academic problem solving.

For academic tasks, self-regulation strategy development is a series of learning techniques that are used to teach students strategies and skills to complete core academic assignments. These are effective for students with specific learning disabilities because they teach memorization and problem solving strategies that aid in learning and can be generalized across the curriculum. Furthermore, these strategies teach self-control in learning and student empowerment (Wehmeyer, 2014). These strategies can be effective for initiating active participation for both students with special needs in inclusive settings and for their typically developing peers (Copeland & Cosbey, 2008). These concepts are typically explicitly taught by the instructor; however, modeling and redirection tend to be a more effective strategy for teaching social skills at the middle school level. There are a number of ways to embed social skills instruction:

- Model the behavior that you would like your students to use with their peers and you.
- Use explicit verbal feedback to let your students know when they are performing well (e.g., “Thank you for working silently on this objective”).
- When an unwanted behavior occurs, discreetly give the student a warning, a natural consequence, and/or explicit feedback on what s/he should be doing instead. Teachers can accomplish this by establishing a physical cue with students who may struggle with repeat behavior (e.g., speaking out, off task behavior, side bar conversations, day dreaming, etc.). Such a physical cue can be used to remind the student to get back on task.

- Critique the moral/ethical fiber of the characters that you read about as a class or individually, and lead discussions around them.
- Use role-playing activities to allow students the opportunity to practice healthy ways to express their feelings/emotions.
- Have a visual (e.g., a feelings chart) where students can learn to identify their feelings/emotions.
- Provide instruction on self-monitoring skills that allow students to recognize and cope with unhealthy feelings or actions.

Provide Opportunities for Active and Applied Learning

The combination of actively engaging students in learning activities and providing opportunities for students to apply what they have learned is considered best practice for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Patton, 2011). Teachers promote active learning by encouraging students to become involved in a variety of listening, speaking, writing, viewing, and reading behaviors throughout a lesson (Schmidt & Ma, 2006), while applying target instruction through constant monitoring and ongoing assessment (Pugach & Blanton, 2012). For active learning to occur with CLDE populations, students need to engage with the curriculum in a way that both acknowledges and celebrates funds of knowledge, a unique set of skills, strategies, abilities, or trades associated with each student's individual culture (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013).

Educators of CLDE populations can activate their students' prior knowledge by encouraging students to choose reading materials that allow them to recall prior experiences (Orosco & O'Connor, 2013) or by creating opportunities for students to celebrate their cultural selves through projects such as an ethnoautobiography (Chenowith, 2014). Ideally, educators should create learning environments that will allow students to develop a critical consciousness so they can learn how to contribute to their community and society as a whole (Kea & Trent, 2013). Some active and applied learning strategies include:

- Use priming, student interest, and prior knowledge activities as a jumping off point for lessons. For example, educators can use current news or pop culture that links with curricular content to encourage students to make text-to-world connections.
- Use interactive technology such as SMART BOARDS, tablets, iPads/Pods, and educational software. For example, an educator can use *Google Maps* and *Google Earth* to locate places discussed within curriculum.

- Facilitate inquiry learning by developing a context for the problem, assisting in the inquiry process, and scaffolding learning according to each student’s ability. More specifically, encourage students to solve real world problems (e.g., *What are the challenges and cost associated with bringing locally grown food to the table?*).
- Monitor student readiness and interests by using ongoing assessment to deliver the support, enrichment, guidance, and additional instruction that is needed to promote student achievement. Educators can involve students in this process by providing objective mastery charts and conducting regular check-ins where students and teacher discuss progress.

Use Alternative Assessments

Unlike traditional assessments that rely on decontextualized recall of knowledge (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005), authentic assessment allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in ways that represent real world learning conditions (Lewin & Schumaker, 1998). To accomplish this with CLDE populations, teachers should ensure that assessments target student strengths and confirm that both the measurement and measurement procedures are validated for the assessed population (Gay, 2013).

For alternative assessment, students need to have a multitude of presentation options to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of a skill. This ensures that students can demonstrate their content knowledge in formats that are compatible with their expressive abilities, and that they are not being assessed on expressive skills that they are still developing due to their diversity or disability. In addition, educators should use a variety of formal evaluation methods to assess the whole child. Formal assessments, such as native language evaluations, assessment of language development, and bilingual assessments, can be used to assess a student’s stage of language development to provide targeted instruction that addresses the student’s specific language needs (Scott, Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014). Some options for alternative assessment include:

- Use varied informal assessment products that demonstrate understanding which include drawing, acting, working collaboratively, making a poster, singing a song, writing a poem, or creating an oral/theatrical presentation. Educators can use standard interviewing and progress monitoring to determine their students’ preferred response styles.
- Increase interrater reliability by working with a colleague to assess and/or evaluate the work of each other’s students. This will give a fresh perspective on your students’ abilities.

- Use project based learning to engage kinesthetic learners. Educators can work with colleagues to create projects that incorporate cross-curriculum learning.
- Collect longitudinal data on your students using portfolio assessment. This will highlight each individual child's growth throughout the school year.
- Use a variety of multiple intelligences (e.g., spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and/or - naturalistic) to assess your students' strengths and needs. Keep documentation of how your students learn best and try to target all learners daily.

Final Thoughts

Educating middle school students can be a complex process, considering the social and emotional changes that adolescents are experiencing. The addition of diversity and disability turn best instructional practice for this population of students into a multifaceted consideration. Educators can overcome these educational challenges by incorporating engaging and diversified instruction into their classrooms using active, collaborative, and targeted strategies.

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