Teaching Social Studies to Students with Mild Disabilities

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For a generation, national legislation has moved “vigorously” to compel schools to place students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment.” For students with mild disabilities, this placement usually means including them in general education classrooms and teaching them according to the general curriculum. This commitment is reflected in the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) Amendments passed in 1997, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Over the same period, leading educators have stressed that discovery methods of teaching and high-level thinking skills (such as problem solving and analysis) should be used in the elementary classroom.¹

These two factors—students with disabilities in the classroom and the use of a discovery method of social studies instruction—create a challenge for elementary teachers. Not only must they teach to a class with a wide variety of abilities, but also ensure that all students are able to learn the social studies content in the curriculum for a specific grade. The purpose of this article is to assist teachers with this challenge by reviewing the characteristics of students with mild disabilities and discussing some recommendations for guiding social studies instruction with these students in the general classroom.

Students with Mild Disabilities

Students with many types of disabilities receive social studies instruction in the general education classroom; however, the most prevalent groups include students with learning disabilities, behavioral and emotional disorders, intellectual disabilities, and attention deficits and hyperactivity. The students who are identified in any of these categories typically exhibit characteristics that can interfere with social studies instruction. Deficits in basic skills, for example, such as reading, writing, and spelling make it difficult to work on assignments in the classroom and for homework.² Even a first grade social studies textbook includes abstract vocabulary words, such as “continent,” “citizen,” “government,” and “culture,” that make text comprehension challenging.

Students with mild disabilities frequently have cognitive processing or perceptual problems.³ Visual processing problems interfere with the understanding of text, illustrations, and written work associated with a social studies lesson. Most social studies textbooks include many maps and graphs. For most children, these maps clarify the topics covered; however, children with visual spatial and visual processing disorders may have difficulty interpreting such information. Auditory processing problems, on the other hand, make it difficult for students to understand a discussion or lecture in social studies or even participate in a small group project that involves much interaction. Motor processing deficits affect handwriting or even keyboarding that is often required for assignments and homework.

Attention deficits and hyperactivity disorders are common, and are sometimes present with other disabilities.⁴ Social studies lectures and discussions that require focus for long periods of time are often overwhelming for students with this pattern of behavior. Group projects and individual assignments that involve extensive concentration are also frustrating.

Social and emotional deficits include interrupting activities and conversations of others, difficulty making friends, lack of participation in group activities, constantly asking for assistance with work, loud talking, and perhaps even fighting.⁵ Some of these behaviors would be disruptive to the whole class or group during a social studies lesson; other behaviors like withdrawing from group activity could interfere with a child’s learning even though they may not disrupt the class. In either case, the progress in social studies is affected.

Examples of cognitive deficits that interfere with a social studies lesson are difficulty checking one’s progress accurately on a long-term project, difficulty planning appropriate time for assignments, and trouble studying for a test. For a long-term social studies project that involves library research, reading, group projects, and presentations; a student with cognitive processing problems would be overwhelmed by the complexity and number of activities involved, even if he/she has the ability to complete each individual task.⁶

Language disorders are also typical for students with mild disabilities. Receptive language disorders, for example, can result in difficulty understanding a social studies lecture. Expressive disorders result in difficulty responding to a question about a social studies lesson.⁷

Modifications for Social Studies Instruction

A variety of interventions and modifications can enable students with learning problems to master social studies content and succeed in the elementary classroom. Collaboration between special education and elementary education teachers is an important beginning to ensure consistency and effective instruction. Both teachers can work together to provide assistance with the reading of social studies chapters, writing of social studies assignments, and guiding students with academic and social needs during cooperative learning activities.⁸
Having students work in pairs or cooperative groups can enhance comprehension of social studies content for students at all levels. When students with behavioral and social problems work with students without disabilities, several advantages can accrue, including the development of higher-level thinking skills such as analysis and problem solving, modeling of sensitivity, practicing effective social skills, engaging in appropriate behaviors, building independence and motivation to learn social studies, and appreciation of diversity.

It is critical that students with processing difficulties get assistance to understand directions prior to a lesson or task. To clarify directions, it is helpful to present them in written and oral forms, go over a long series of directions one at a time, and provide cues and reminders of directions as the students work. In addition, it is often useful to ask students to repeat or rephrase the directions, give examples to clarify, and allow questions about the directions.

Presentations of social studies content can be modified in several ways to help students with mild disabilities. Visual use of organizers before lessons as well as summaries and reviews after lessons can assist students with processing, attention, and conceptual deficits. The organizers and summaries can be in the form of guided notes, charts of key information, outlines, and webs.

Teachers can incorporate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses into a social studies lesson by using maps, illustrations, videos, sound recordings, dance and body movement, and guest speakers. Such multisensory presentations can assist students with processing, language, and conceptual deficits.

Teachers can clarify social studies instruction to students with processing and conceptual difficulties by providing real life examples. Comprehension and success can be strengthened when students build on their experiences and see the connections between the social studies content and their own lives. For example, in a chapter on government, teachers could clarify key ideas on leadership by relating them to the principal and assistant principal in the school.

Emphasis on reading comprehension and learning strategies will help students with language, reading, and attention deficits understand social studies reading assignments. Small group discussion of text assists students with disabilities in their content comprehension. Specifically, students in the group can be directed to generate comprehension questions and lists of main ideas in each section of a reading. While reading the text, teachers can also assist by previewing vocabulary, breaking down assignments into small segments, emphasizing the key ideas in each section, and developing charts of information in each chapter.

Mnemonic strategies can be used to assist students with memory, processing, and attention problems. Acronyms to memorize information, songs, and highlighting can all help students with mild disabilities remember key information. Key words and pictures to represent concepts and information in social studies lessons can be valuable memory aids and also enjoyable for students. A picture of the president, for example, could be used to remember executive branch, judges for the judicial branch, senators for the legislative branch, and a flow chart to illustrate the concept of checks and balances.
Suggestions for Teaching Social Studies to Students with Mild Disabilities

- Collaborate with special education teachers to provide assistance with reading chapters, writing assignments, and completing social studies projects.

- Allow students to work in pairs and cooperative groups when appropriate for social studies projects and assignments.

- Clarify directions by providing them in oral and written forms, going over each part one at a time, having students rephrase or repeat, encouraging clarifying questions, and providing examples.

- Use advance organizers prior to social studies lessons and summaries following lessons such as guided notes, charts, outlines, and webs.

- Use visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies including maps, illustrations, stories, videos, and guest speakers to reinforce social studies content.

- Include real-life examples to clarify new and abstract social studies concepts.

- Use group discussions to clarify social studies chapters, including review of main ideas, listing of related questions, and answering key questions.

- Clarify social studies textbook readings by previewing vocabulary, breaking down assignments into small segments, and summarizing key ideas.

- Use mnemonic devices and other memory strategies such as acronyms, songs, highlighting, keywords, and pictures.

- Use explicit instruction principles such as modeling, repetition, drill, extensive review and practice, structure, and feedback.

- Use alternative assessment techniques such as shorter tests, tests broken down into shorter segments, allowing clarifying questions, reading tests aloud, interviewing students, and using journals.

Many of the explicit teaching or direct instructional strategies supported in the special education literature for language, reading, and mathematics skills can also be applied to social studies instruction for the benefit of children with special needs. A very structured format, with modeling, repetition, drill, and feedback, for example, would be effective for teaching a lesson on specific content such as bodies of water, names of states, or identification of continents.

Strategies for evaluating social studies learning can also be modified to assist teachers and benefit students with learning problems. It would be helpful to use alternatives to social studies tests, depending on the students and the content. Possible options include shortening tests, breaking down tests into shorter segments, allowing clarification of terminology, reading tests aloud, interviewing students about content, and using journals for assessment of new material. These modifications of evaluation procedures would be useful for assessing students’ understanding as well as guiding teachers to make appropriate instructional decisions as needed to ensure content mastery.

Conclusions

Students with learning problems can succeed in the general education classroom and learn the social studies curriculum. The corresponding table summarizes the ideas presented in this paper that will maximize their opportunities for success. These strategies are appropriate for social studies instruction, but can also be modified for use in other subjects such as science, language arts, and mathematics. Finally, the recommendations may be critical if students with learning problems are to be successful. They will also make learning more effective and efficient for all students in the classroom.

Notes


5. Mercer and Mercer.

6. Raymond.

7. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


22. Olson and Platt.


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