

Mindshift

When I went college there were plenty of lectures about least restrictive environment for Special Education students. However, professors didn't go over the different options nor was I given experiences in different environments for my practicums or student teaching. I was either placed in Special Ed rooms or in Gen Ed rooms to work with students. In the elementary schools I subbed at the students were pulled out of the classroom to work on ELA and Math in another room except for one school. The Special Education teacher would come in, have the students go to a back table and work on other curriculum (Dream Box for math). This was their version of a push-in model. Always using a different curriculum for Special Ed kiddos.

Jumping forward a couple of years when I came to Chase 8 years ago when I was one of the two Behavior Intervention teachers. The first year of teaching BI we taught our kiddos all the subjects and they stayed in our rooms all day other than one class period for their elective. The only subject which was remotely the same as the General Education curriculum was Washington State History. The second year we went to the book-end model where students started with us and ended the day with us. I also taught a math class this year as well. However, in the math class I did not use the same curriculum as the Gen Ed teachers used. I was told KEMS would be best to use.

The third year I taught math along with a learning center. I started incorporating the Gen Ed curriculum (Engaged NY) into my lessons. I still had the mind set that my kiddos were not fully capable of learning this curriculum because of my past experiences. I knew they could learn, I knew it would take them longer to learn, but how could I reach all of their goals when I had a wide array of learning levels within each of my class periods. Some kiddos were at a 1st grade learning level and some were close to a 6th grade learning level. I knew I was also bound to teaching them specific goals and filling in missing foundational skills. I honestly spent more time teaching foundational skills and working with the kiddos' individual goals than I did working with the actual curriculum. Following years became more difficult as I had classes with 7th and 8th graders in them.

Jumping to last year, the first year of co-teaching. Something new, another change, more apprehension, and a mind shift. At first I wasn't sure if some of my students who would typically be in a Resource class could manage being in a Gen Ed co-taught class. I knew the students who would be in my resource would struggle. I worried they would struggle to the point of giving up. I thought they could not do some of the math, how could they when they are missing so many foundational skills? However, over time I realized this was the best place for them. They were finally getting to be involved in their own learning. They were becoming better thinkers and problem solvers. I was able to see students who came to me with multiplication goals fly through and understand linear equations. One student who had a telling time goal became one of our top students. They were thriving. Would they master the content in the same way and same time as their peers? Not all of them, but they were still capable of learning the same information. Before I knew what was happening, I had a complete mind shift. I knew my kiddos were capable of learning, I just didn't realize how much they could learn in the same amount of time as their typically developing peers. For the first time in my teaching career I was able to see first hand what was meant by least restrictive environment with lower-level learners.