

The Classroom Teacher's Guide

To
Instructional
And Curricular
Modifications



by Wendy Dover Balough

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Dedication

To Bill—it's a lovely dance!

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About the Author

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Wendy received the 1996 Kansas Special Educator of the Year award from the Kansas Federation of the Council for Exceptional Children. As a practicing educator, Wendy has taught students with mild to moderate disabilities in South Carolina, Texas, and Kansas through a wide variety of service delivery models at elementary, middle, and high school levels. She has served as a special education coordinator in which her primary function was to support staff, administrators, and parents in the inclusion of students with special needs in schools and general education classes.

Wendy earned her B.S. in Special Education from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. She completed her M.S. and Ed.D. in Special Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. She has published several other books and video series with THE MASTER TEACHER®, which support teachers and assistants working to provide students with disabilities access to the general curriculum.

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Introduction

Some students simply need assistance in one or more areas associated with instruction, classrooms, and schools—that is, assistance with academic activities, daily living skills, behavioral difficulties, emotional needs, or social skills. Inclusion has changed how and where students get assistance or extra help. *Inclusion* is the term used today to describe the efforts to keep students who have diverse learning and behavior needs in the classrooms and even the schools they would normally attend with their age-level peers.

Historically, students with different learning needs were sent somewhere else, away from their friends, classrooms, or schools, and separated from the general curriculum. But now, support and assistance to students and their teachers has been brought into the general education classrooms. In fact, the current federal special education law—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004)—requires that students with disabilities “... to the maximum extent appropriate are educated with children [without disabilities], and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

Supplementary aids and services include an array of instructional supports, adaptations, strategies, and modifications. Support for students in and out of special education comes in the form of team support and assistance to teachers, as well as direct services from special education, Title I reading and math, English as a second language, and at-risk programs. Students identified with special needs will warrant special consideration during instruction in the general education classroom—in the form of modifications.

For the first part of this book, the term *modification* will be used to describe any change teachers and support staff make to activities, assignments, and materials in the classroom or curriculum. The very important distinction between instructional modifications (accommodations) and curricular modifications (modifications) will be addressed in Section 3: Modification Basics.

Preparing a school—or district, for that matter—to develop and deliver an effective inclusive educational environment is a multifaceted task and will not be directly addressed in this text. The overall intent of this book is to provide classroom teachers, special education teachers, and other support personnel with hands-on, practical ideas and procedures for implementing instructional accommodations and modifications for students with a variety of special needs.

This book specifically targets the area of academic support for students with special needs—defining and implementing instructional modifications and curricular modifications in a variety of instructional settings, specifically in the general education classroom and curriculum. The charge so often given to educators and support personnel to “go forth and modify” will almost always include which classroom to go to and which student or group of students to work with, but that directive does not always suggest “what” to modify or “how.”

This guide will provide information about two main classifications of modifications—instructional modifications and curricular modifications. The differences between the two are very important. Understanding those differences will help to better define the roles and the tasks of all involved instructional staff, including general classroom teachers and special needs program personnel, in meeting classroom and student modification needs. This guide will begin with general modification basics, which include why modifications are made, the differences between instructional and curricular modifications, and beginning strategies for providing instructional support in the general classroom. These basics will lay the foundation for more specific strategies and interventions described later.

Modification assistance to students includes questioning techniques, specific teaching methods, reading materials and tests aloud, extended time, oral answers, note-taking assistance, task analysis, making and modifying study guides, acting as a scribe, math computation, puzzles and games, using textbooks, pop quizzes and oral activities, organizational skills, cueing, shortening assignments, and behavior management. This guide will also address ways school personnel can be more proactive and feel better prepared to meet individual student needs while moving through the workday, using planning tools and strategies.

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Section 1: **Why We Modify for Some Students**

Some students just need more help than others when it comes to learning, listening, and behaving. Decisions to use modifications are initiated either by individual teachers or by teams of educators.

Schools use a variety of resources to help students, and the need to provide modifications may come about in several ways. A teacher may decide to implement a modification for a student who just needs a little more help to make gains on a lesson. The teacher usually includes ideas for modifications in planning and delivery of instruction. Decisions by a teacher to modify may occur during instruction. That same teacher may also be required to implement a modification because it has been determined by a special program team. Let's examine the issue of modifications required by special support programs.

Support Programs

Students identified as having specific and special learning or instructional needs will receive some type of assistance from school support structures or special programs. Student assistance teams or prereferral teams may provide suggestions for modifications which will be carefully documented and monitored for effectiveness. Special programs provide specific support and help to students who meet specific eligibility guidelines. The main student support programs are national and state programs such as special education, Title I reading and math, and English as a second language (ESL). Students who are placed in one or more of these support programs will need special support and consideration—whether they participate in general education classrooms, special program classrooms, or a combination of both. That special support needed by a student may include instructional modifications or support and assistance for academic, behavioral, social, or environmental needs. The intent of special assistance is to identify special needs and either adapt the learning environment to accommodate the needs or adapt the instructional content to benefit the student. Here's how it all works: A student who has been tested or otherwise found to meet program eligibility requirements has some type of written plan describing the problems or concerns and exactly

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what the program will do to help the student improve. The suggestions that will help the student participate or learn may be termed as accommodations, adaptations, or modifications, and these can be found in a written program plan, such as an IEP (Individualized Education Program) in special education. But special education is not the only student support program. The following are short descriptions of the main student support programs and the type of modification information associated with each.

Special Education

Special education is a program that is outlined in federal legislation known as IDEA, which was reauthorized in 2004. Federal, state, and local guidelines have been established to ensure that all students, regardless of the severity of a disability, receive a free and appropriate education. Children with identified disabilities from birth through age 21 receive individualized and appropriate education that, to the greatest extent possible, is like the education of their peers without disabilities. There are specific categories of disability recognized by the federal law. States may use different terminology, but those categories include learning disabilities; sensory problems (blind and deaf/hard of hearing); health, physical, and motor problems (other health impairments, physical disabilities, traumatic brain injury); intellectual disabilities (mental retardation); emotional problems; communication problems (speech and language, autism); and developmental delays (birth to nine years of age). In some states and school districts, students needing special consideration due to high abilities (gifted and talented) also come under the umbrella of special education. Instead of disabilities, the specific areas may be referred to as "exceptionalities" and include gifted and talented students.

In special education programs, students have an individual written plan called an IEP. There are several key components to an IEP, including a list of specific and individualized modifications for instruction and testing, all developed by the IEP team. The IEP team, responsible for writing and updating the IEP annually, is composed of teachers and therapists who work with the student, other school or district personnel, the parents or guardians of the child, and even the child, if appropriate.

If the child is too young to go to school, the plan is called an IFSP, an Individualized Family Service Plan. This plan also targets help and

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support to the young child's family and may include community resources, services, and therapies. For older children, usually in middle school and high school, the IEP will also include transition information and may be called an ITP (Individual Transition Plan). ITPs describe needs and supports necessary for the student to successfully make the change from school to life after leaving or graduating from school. Most of the students who receive special support, special instruction, modifications, and accommodations in schools today will be supported through the special education program. It is the largest and most diverse of the student support programs.

Title I

Title I is a federal program designed to improve the teaching and learning of children in high-poverty schools and help those children meet academic and performance standards, such as state and local tests. Title I money from the federal government can be used for children in preschool through high school, but most of the students served by Title I programs are in grades 1 through 6. Individual schools with poverty rates above 50 percent may use Title I funds to run schoolwide programs that are designed to improve instruction in the whole school. These schoolwide programs may concentrate on student skills, teaching strategies and methods, and instructional materials, as well as parent education and involvement.

Schools with poverty rates below 50 percent can choose to run programs that provide individualized instructional programs to students who have failed or are at risk for failing state performance standards and tests. Those types of programs are classed "targeted assistance programs." While these programs may also include teaching strategies, methods, and materials, as well as parent education and involvement, they concentrate more on individual student skill development and improvement. Title I schoolwide programs and individual student programs most often involve the academic areas of reading, writing, and math.

Since students served by Title I programs are defined by basic skill needs and poverty, it may be helpful to become familiar with the characteristics often associated with learners and poverty. The effects of poverty on education are generally considered some of the most negative. Students affected by poverty are at high risk for failing in school and in life (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). These students

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may lack basic needs, meaning that they may have poor nutrition or not get enough to eat. They may have poor housing or may be homeless. Their homes may lack adequate water, electricity, heating, or air conditioning. They may be living in crowded conditions with extended family or even nonfamily members. They may have a lack of health care. Parents of these students may have little to no education, affecting their willingness to become involved with their children's schools and educational programs. Suggestions for working with students from poverty include:

- Developing trust.
- Planning predictable, secure, and stable learning environments.
- Showing children and parents respect.
- Accepting the feelings of children.
- Allowing children to make decisions.
- Providing positive information to parents about activities and student achievements.
- Coordinating activities between the school and parents.

English as a Second Language

Programs for students with limited English proficiency, such as ESL or bilingual education, are aimed at supporting students who don't speak English as their native or "first" language. These students may be from other countries or from homes in which the family or parents speak another language. ESL is a program aimed at increasing a student's proficiency in English. ESL support may be provided in general education classrooms, in separate classrooms, or through a combination of both. English-language learning (ELL) students may be able to read in their native language, or they may have had very little schooling. While students with limited English skills may sometimes have special needs, please remember that not knowing English is *not* a learning disability or a characteristic of any disability. These students simply don't know or have little experience using the English language. Some suggestions for working with ELL students include:

- Use more visual aids and manipulatives, such as maps, pictures, and actual items.
- Vary groupings of students, and work with smaller groups.
- Review specific vocabulary words or lists of words with the student or students to reinforce instruction.

- Be mindful and respectful of cultural differences. You might ask for information or staff development about differences in verbal and nonverbal social behaviors of different cultural or ethnic groups.
 - Verbalize, model, and reinforce school and classroom procedures and expectations. Many ELL students may be unaware of the right way to handle unwritten procedures and expectations.

All of these programs have specific guidelines for eligibility and some type of documentation system for reporting needs and accomplishments. Title I programs are most often found in elementary and middle schools, and ESL programs can be found at all grade levels within a district. These programs, including special education, provide resources and staff to ensure that the accommodations and modifications listed in the plans are carried out.

Many terms are used in various locations around the country when referring to students whose first or native language is one other than English. Some of these are *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse* (CLD); *Students Acquiring English* (SAE); *English Language Learners* (ELL); *Non-English Speakers* (NES); and so on. The term *English as a Second Language* (ESL) is used more formally with regard to programming, but a great many schools use this term to refer to their language minority students as well. *Limited English Proficiency* (LEP), though in vogue for some time, is now frowned upon due to the negative connotation that it carries. We don't want to look at students as limited simply because they do not speak English fluently.

There are a great number of individuals and organizations who approach the topic from a grammar-based, foreign language perspective and, hence, use *English Speakers of Other Languages* (ESOL). Because of the focus on language learning, the term ESOL is considered more “politically correct.” This is not to say (this is important) that it comes from a philosophical approach with regard to appropriate instruction for language minority students that is grounded in research. In other words, the preference may reflect political correctness vs. philosophical approach. This guide uses *ESL* when referring to programming and *ELL* when referring to students.

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Some students may have a modification plan called a Section 504 plan. A school team that is not a special education team uses the federal guidelines set forth in Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Law of 1973 to develop this modification plan. This plan only lists modifications that must be made for the student to ensure that no discrimination takes place because of the student's qualifying condition. There are no programs or personnel directly associated with Section 504 plans, but it's up to the school administration and the teachers involved with the student to see that the reasonable accommodations or modifications defined by the plan are made. Section 504 is considered a general education responsibility and is not a part of special education.

Student Intervention Teams

Most schools today have some sort of support system or problem-solving teams in place for helping teachers and students deal with problems of student performance and achievement. These school- and district-based support teams use available school resources, including special programs and personnel, to solve academic and behavioral problems before trying to fit students into federal programs that require labels and, historically, separation from their classmates. These teams, given names by schools or districts, often write modification plans, action plans, or reteaching plans listing accommodations, modifications, strategies, and interventions that help students succeed in school and in the general curriculum. Names such as General Intervention Team, Preassessment or Prereferral Team, CARE Team, and Student Assistance Team are used to identify these building-level problem-solving teams.

Reasons to Modify

Why are modifications made for some students? Basically, they allow students with special needs to benefit from instruction and make appropriate progress in the general curriculum. There are many reasons to define appropriate modifications for students. The following is a list often used to show the variety of viewpoints which favor the use of modifications in instruction.

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- **It's the law for some students.** If a student has an IEP or a Section 504 plan, access to those accommodations or modifications becomes a due process, or nondiscriminatory, right. If a documented modification or accommodation is deemed necessary and is denied, that due process right or civil right may have been violated.
- **Modifications can lead to student success and improvement in motivation, self-esteem, and behavior.** Success leads to more success. Students who are successful will probably be more motivated, have higher self-esteem, and demonstrate better behavior than students who are not enjoying success. Most students want to repeat the feelings that go along with success and achievement.
- **Students cannot be forced to learn and achieve.** Just because a student *should* learn and achieve doesn't mean he or she will. The adults involved can engage in a power struggle, or they can try making a change. A modification may be just the change that will get the situation "unstuck" and allow the student to remember what success feels like.
- **Learning is being defined differently than in the past.** Education today is more than rote memorization or recitation of facts. More and more emphasis is being placed on processes such as solving problems, finding and sorting information, and applying what is learned. Different types of intelligence are also being recognized and valued. Accommodating some of these differences in both learners and processes is appropriate.
- **Assessment of student knowledge may not match student achievement.** Modifications and accommodations are made to help us truly assess what students have learned. The way an assessment is made or how a student is asked to show what was learned may not match the student's true ability. For example, a student with a writing disability will most likely show you more if he or she is allowed to tell you about the book instead of writing a paper.
- **Diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and learning styles may require instructional diversity.** Today, we know much more

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than we used to about learning styles and other influences on performance. No one way works with all students. We accommodate because we know students are different from each other and we accept those differences.

- **Some students included in the general classroom have different needs.** Students may be in the general classroom for reasons other than mastery of every element of the general curriculum. Some students supported by special education may have distinct needs represented as goals and objectives on their IEPs or transition plans. Those needs might be academic in nature or they may be behavioral, social, physical, or daily living needs. The student may not need to “do what everyone else is doing.” Instead, he or she may be working to improve in some individual area.
- **It is often the only way some students will benefit from general classroom instruction.** Classrooms in which students are merely included in the physical space—with the instructional benefit left to chance—should become classrooms in which students are supported and taught deliberately. That benefit may not always be measured by acquired academic knowledge or by a comparison with his or her classmates but by individual gain and needs that are met.

Whether modifications are made because they are required or because the benefits are too convincing to ignore, they are a reality in the general education classroom. Modifications can level the playing field for some students with special needs. Modifications are made because plans are developed and decisions are made to support student success. The role of teachers, administrators, and support staff is to support and implement defined modifications.