

Gymnastics

Facilitating Inclusion in Educational Gymnastics

by Brent Hardin

Students of all ability levels can be safely and effectively included in regular educational gymnastics. The purpose of this article is to introduce a variety of instructional techniques that teachers can use to accommodate students with special needs in educational gymnastics. The techniques you choose to implement will depend on the particular needs of your students, the age group with which you are working, the make-up of your class, and the availability of support staff, equipment, and facilities (Block, 1994).

The average physical education class contains students with a wide range of disabilities. For example, a class may have a student with a visual impairment, a student with asthma, a student with diabetes resulting in obesity, a student with cerebral palsy, and a student with attention deficit disorder. Educational gymnastics teachers must be able to adapt and modify their instruction to meet the various needs of their students. The following instructional modifications promote success for students across all ability levels, and most are relatively simple to implement. These suggestions, adapted from Block (1994) and Sherrill (1993), provide examples of how subtle changes can be implemented to accommodate students with special needs without obtrusively changing the class for other students.

Instructional Environment

The physical teaching environment can make a big difference in how well students with disabilities progress in educational gymnastics. The first step when making any environmental change is to consider the special needs

of individual students (Treanor, 1993). Simple changes to the gymnastics setting can produce a more accommodating environment for students of varying ability levels. For example, extra padding can be placed in the areas where students with balance problems are practicing traveling actions to cushion any falls. Brightly colored tape or cones can be used to mark boundaries for students with mental retardation or students with visual impairments. Be sure to avoid setting up equipment until the equipment is about to be used, because balls and cones set up in the environment for a later activity may be extremely distracting for a student with mental retardation or attention deficit disorder.

You can also help students focus on the task at hand by using music to make your instruction more alluring. Using music during a gymnastics warm-up can drown out the sound of noisy distracters (e.g., other classes) in the gymnasium. When the music is turned off and the gym is quiet, you can then give directions since your voice will be the most noticeable sound in the environment.

Peer Tutors

Peer tutors are students who have been trained to assist other students in the classroom. These tutors can work with special needs students to provide the extra attention and feedback that these students need in order to learn successfully in educational gymnastics. Using peer tutors can enable you to divide your attention more equally among the students.

Although all students can teach each other, you should carefully select the peer tutors who will work with your disabled students. Not all students will be ready or able to work in a one-on-one relationship with special students. Ellery (1995) recommends that peer

tutors should be (a) slightly older than their disabled counterparts, (b) emotionally mature, (c) good communicators, (d) highly skilled, and (e) volunteers.

Peer tutors may need ongoing training to become skillful helpers, so set aside 5–10 minutes sometime before class to make sure that tutors understand their responsibilities for the lesson. Also, do not be afraid to let competent students with physical disabilities tutor nondisabled students. For example, a student with spina bifida who is confined to a wheelchair is very capable of providing instruction, encouragement, and feedback about another student's gymnastics sequence. This type of arrangement gives everyone in the class the same peer tutor status.

Time and Duration

The time of the educational gymnastics class is an important consideration as well. Some students who receive medication, such as children with attention deficit disorder, may do better in class once they have taken their medication. For these students, it may be important to schedule their class for the afternoon. On the other hand, students who fatigue early in the day or students with allergy-induced asthma may be better suited for a morning class. You also may need to consider how much time a student will be engaged in an activity. A student with mental retardation may need to work at a balance station activity for at least 10 minutes in order to receive a sufficient amount of practice to learn the concept, while a student with attention deficit disorder may only be able to tolerate that station for 2 minutes. In contrast, their peers may be best suited to working at the station for 5 minutes. In addition, a student with mental retardation may need 6 full weeks to reach his or her goal on a



Educational gymnastics can easily be adapted to meet the needs of all students. Photo provided by author.

particular gymnastic skill, while other students need only 3 weeks.

While it is true that programs are often locked into schedules, adjustments can be made to accommodate students with special needs. An example of an adjustment would include that made for a student with mental retardation who has not yet established competency in the foundational skills of gymnastics as the unit draws to a close. This student can continue to work on gymnastics with rotating peer tutors who already have a strong foundation in the skills to be covered in the next unit. The student can still do warm ups with the rest of the class so as to be in contact with his or her peers, but the student would then practice different activities. Similarly, a student might be working on two key rolling actions while his or her peers are working on more complicated rolling skills. Meanwhile, a student with attention deficit disorder could rotate through stations on rolling much faster than his or her peers, repeating each station two or

three times to acquire adequate practice trials without being forced to focus on one station longer than tolerable. While most schools do have set daily schedules, these types of changes can be made in collaboration with administration at the beginning of the school year.

Routines and Rituals

Students with disabilities may need alternative demonstrations and signals to excel in educational gymnastics. You can provide a demonstration that is appropriate for the majority of the class and serve the special needs student with simple alterations. For students with mental retardation, for example, you may need to highlight key aspects of the demonstration that other students may be able to easily grasp. This could be accomplished by using a peer tutor to repeat the demonstration several times. Another example of a simple modification would be to bring a student with a severe visual impairment to the front of the class to assist in demonstrations with physical assistance. For a student with a visual impairment, you could adapt a demonstration of a proper forward roll by placing the student's hands and feet in the proper position on the mat. With this simple modification, you could provide a demonstration to the class while meeting this student's individual needs.

Finding the best way to give starting and stopping signals to special needs students is also important. Some students with disabilities may need physical assistance to stop traveling actions, and others may need hand signals. The teacher can use one cue for the entire class and still provide hand signals or physical assistance to the students who need extra cues. For example, you could use a cowbell to start and stop a traveling warm up for your class. When the students hear the bell, they know how to locate the students with a hearing impairment and visually signal them to stop.

Modification Criteria

While some specific examples have been provided, it is important that you focus on the particular needs of your students when making modifications. The goal is to allow all students,

including students with disabilities, the opportunity to participate in an educational gymnastics class that is safe and challenging and provides opportunities for success. It is important to evaluate the effect that any modification will have on the entire class. The following four criteria developed by Block (1994) can be used whenever considering a modification in your gymnastics unit.

1. Does the modification allow the student with disabilities to participate successfully, yet still be challenged? For example, a student with balance difficulties will probably be more challenged by attempting balance activities on adapted equipment like a balance board or a lower and wider balance beam rather than just balancing on a cushioned mat.

2. Does the modification make the setting unsafe? It is important to remember the safety of all students when making adaptations. For example, if you include a student who uses a wheelchair in traveling activities, you might want to place cones around the student's chair so that other students hit the cones first rather than the hard metal wheelchair.

3. Does the modification adversely affect students without disabilities? It might be fun from time to time to try alternative activities that allow students without disabilities to experience what it is like to be in a wheelchair by having them design a movement sequence from chairs or possibly blindfolded. However, such changes implemented on a regular basis might negatively impact the program for ambulatory students.

4. Does the modification cause undue burden on the teacher? For example, a student with autism may need special assistance when performing traveling actions and transitional movements to music. It may not be feasible for you to assist this student constantly and teach the other students in the class at the same time. A better adaptation might be assisting this student for part of the exercises and allowing a peer tutor to assist at other times.

Students with special needs often have difficulty performing educational gymnastics activities. Reasonable modifications will often allow these

students the opportunity they deserve to participate in typical gymnastics activities safely and with more success. Reasonable adaptations can be implemented to make educational gymnastics meaningful and challenging to students of all ability levels.

References

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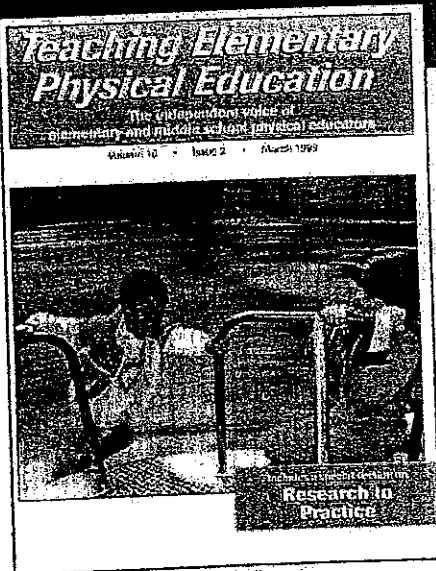
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