Instructional Approaches at the Secondary Level

Secondary special education teachers fulfill many roles and have diversified responsibilities.

(Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002)

MEET MRS. GREEN

First year high school special education teacher Mrs. Green is reviewing student files before school starts, so she can begin instructional planning. As she reads files, individualized transition plans (ITPs) and individualized education programs (IEPs), she records each student’s present level of performance, goals, objectives, and other pertinent information on an Excel spreadsheet, so she can plan each student’s program. Having each student’s information on one document helps her view all critical student information at a glance. As she enters student information, Mrs. Green quickly realizes that her students have numerous varied needs. She wonders how she can help all of her students experience success.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the realities of teaching secondary special education. Understanding these realities—such as unique curricular, student, and instructional issues—will help teachers like Mrs. Green prepare for her new position. The chapter describes and provides examples of the seven instructional approaches used by secondary special educators and acknowledges that teachers work from more than one approach—often even within a single lesson.
THE REALITIES OF SECONDARY TEACHING

Welcome to the world of teaching middle or high school (or secondary) special education. Mrs. Green will soon discover that she will assume numerous roles and responsibilities. Secondary special education teachers teach content, skills, and strategies; modify curriculum; assess students; coordinate work experiences; write IEPs; collaborate with parents and community members; serve on committees; consult with general education teachers; collect and analyze behavioral and academic data; plan for paraprofessionals; and help students meet common core state standards. Clearly, the roles and responsibilities of the secondary special educator are varied and challenging.

Researchers have discovered some reasons for these challenges. Many special education teacher preparation programs do not offer methods, collaboration, or transition courses specifically for the secondary special educator (McKenzie, 2009; Morningstar, Kim, & Clark, 2008) or provide adequate clinical or student teaching experiences in exemplar placements, so special education majors lack opportunities to observe and experience best practices. Secondary special educators also feel pressure to help students pass classes, and these teachers experience challenges collaborating with some general educators who appear reluctant to implement individualized interventions (Conderman & Pedersen, 2007).

UNIQUE ISSUES AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

For many reasons, the roles and responsibilities of secondary special educators are unique and much different from those of elementary general and special education teachers. First, the students themselves are different, as they are experiencing physical, emotional, and intellectual changes. Some secondary students are able to think more abstractly, debate moral and ethical issues, and hypothesize more than elementary students. They are seeking to understand themselves, their future, and their belief systems. Adolescents are also trying out new behaviors and seeking approval from peers. Peer pressure may lead to unhealthy behaviors or poor choices. Some students struggle with self-esteem issues, while others experience depression and isolation that lead to suicidal thoughts or actions.

Second, curricular expectations at the secondary level are different from those at the elementary level. Secondary students with and without disabilities are expected to meet rigorous academic and social-behavioral standards. However, many secondary students with mild disabilities function academically well below grade level, have short attention spans,
experience difficulty processing information, test authority figures, display poor organization skills, and rely on adults for assistance. Similarly, they often have an external locus of control, as they attribute success or failure to outside factors rather than assume personal responsibility. They also use strategies ineffectively and have a limited awareness of the usefulness of specific strategies for given tasks.

Secondary schools are also organized differently than elementary schools. Most secondary schools are organized by departments or subjects rather than grade levels. This structure often adds more bureaucracy, and teachers from each area may have different behavior, grading, and assignment expectations. Students move from teacher to teacher and therefore must adjust to varied teaching styles and expectations, which is often difficult. The number of teachers also makes collaboration and co-teaching more challenging for special educators who must also adjust to multiple instructional approaches, expectations, and personalities. These differences in organizational structure require more flexibility on the part of students and special educators.

Finally, general education secondary teachers are prepared differently than elementary teachers. Elementary education majors typically do not specialize in a content area, but middle and high school general education teachers are experts in their specialty area due to their concentrated preparation in a particular subject. Elementary education majors typically take many methods courses, while secondary general education majors typically take fewer methods courses, so they may be less familiar with instructional adaptations and strategies for students with disabilities within their content area. Co-teaching in these specialized subjects is more challenging for special educators who do not possess content knowledge to contribute meaningfully. Based on this discussion, we offer the following dos and don’ts to guide your instruction.

**Do**

- Determine, from each general educator, requirements for being successful in the general education class, and explain these explicitly to students. Emphasize that each class and each teacher may have different expectations, grading scales, and rules.
- Provide general educators with a list of accommodations—and their rationale—as listed on each student’s IEP. Indicate your sincere interest in collaborating with them.
- Role-play with students appropriate ways to approach teachers to remind them of or request accommodations.
- Ensure that students know why they receive special services and understand the content in their IEP. Encourage them to be active
members of their IEP meeting. If they did not attend their IEP meeting, share their IEP with them, and request their signature showing their understanding of their goals and objectives.

- Proactively communicate a clear vision for your special education program; otherwise students, teachers, administrators, and parents may assume your primary role is to help students with homework. Post your mission statement on your website and refer to it often.
- Plan opportunities for students to research various career options by having them interview community members; make college campus visits; complete transition, interest, and aptitude inventories; and research military requirements.
- Get to know each student, and note behavior or personality changes that may signal serious issues such as drug or alcohol use, depression, or thoughts of suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds, and one of the most serious emotional issues facing young adults is depression (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008).

**Do Not**

- Use instructional materials developed for younger children, even if your students have skills considerably below grade level.
- Rely on the one-teach one-assist approach as your primary co-teaching model.
- Use the resource room as a modified study hall.
- Succumb to pressure from others to just tutor students or just help them pass their classes.
- Assume that students with mild disabilities cannot understand complex material.
- Assume that general educators fully understand the unique characteristics and needs of students with disabilities.
- Assume that you and only you can meet all of your student’s needs.
- Encourage students to become overly dependent on you.

**INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES**

Researchers have identified seven instructional models or approaches used in secondary special education programs. We will discuss and provide examples of each approach, which will help teachers like Mrs. Green determine which model or combination of models to use with each
student. These include the functional, tutorial, basic skills remedial, compensatory, career or transition, co-teaching or collaboration, and strategy approaches.

**Functional/Life Skills Approach**

The functional approach emphasizes everyday survival skills that students need to be independent in society and tends to be used more frequently with students with more moderate disabilities. Examples of functional skills include shopping, cooking, cleaning, reading and following recipes, completing job applications and other forms, using public transportation, and paying bills. Many teachers use the community as the core curriculum by taking students shopping, practicing using transportation systems, and gathering application forms from local businesses for student practice. The functional approach may also include social skills instruction in such areas as getting along with employers and coworkers.

Some limitations or concerns include (a) outcomes, activities, and standards are much different from those in the general education curriculum, which is an issue if students take state and district tests; (b) teachers can incur extra expenses associated with taking students into the community; (c) teachers may be unsure which skills to emphasize with each student; and (d) developing authentic assessments that indicate student growth may be more challenging.

This approach prepares students for some of their adult responsibilities. The special education teacher carefully selects and teaches functional skills. As Mrs. Green reviews student files, she notices that David has a functional math goal associated with determining the best value when given two shopping items, and Rael has a functional writing goal of independently and accurately completing job application forms.

**Tutorial Approach**

The tutorial approach emphasizes helping students complete assignments from their general education classes and is frequently used in high school resource rooms. Using this approach, teachers remind students of upcoming assignments, provide time for assignment completion, assist students with assignments, and prepare students for tests. They might also break down complex assignments into smaller parts, provide student feedback on each part before advancing to the next part, and pre-teach or reteach skills from the general education class that confused or might confuse students. The general education curriculum is used with this approach.
Some advantages of this approach are that students complete homework, pass classes, and earn their high school diploma. Some disadvantages are that special education classrooms often become study halls, teachers devote little time to teaching new skills or strategies, and students often become dependent on the special education teacher. As Mrs. Green reviews her students’ schedules, she realizes that Lonnie, JoAnn, and Brianna are taking chemistry. Due to the difficulty of this course, she realizes she will need to provide some tutorial support.

**Basic Skills Remedial Approach**

Used more often in the elementary grades, the basic skills remedial approach focuses on teaching students basic reading, writing, spelling, or math skills. The goal is to remediate skill weaknesses through explicit, sequential, or direct instruction. Examples of the remedial approach include teaching students math facts, sight words, or spelling words. Instructionally, this approach typically includes teacher modeling (teacher demonstrates the new skill and talks through each step), guided practice (teacher and students complete problems or tasks together), and independent practice (students complete a task on their own).

The remedial approach addresses the issues that led to the students’ qualification for special services, provides systematic and individualized instruction, and uses assessment results to inform instruction. Teachers misuse this approach when they use elementary-looking materials that insult older learners or when they use this approach (e.g., spending a considerable amount of time teaching high school seniors multiplication facts) when a different approach (e.g., teaching students calculator use) would be more beneficial. The teacher’s roles are to diagnose and remediate student errors and provide explicit instruction to remediate skill weaknesses. As Mrs. Green inventories her curriculum, she notices scripted curricula such as *Corrective Reading* (Science Research Associates, SRA), *Spelling Through Morphographs* (SRA), and others that introduce skills in small steps and provide explicit teacher modeling of each step. She will administer placement tests to determine which students will benefit from a remedial approach using these materials.

**Compensatory Approach**

The compensatory approach accommodates for student weaknesses by providing support or technology to help students access the curriculum or assessment. In other words, this method bypasses a
student’s weakness. For example, students may use spell or grammar checkers, cue cards, calculators, multiplication cards, audio tapes, and assistive technologies that provide access to the general education curriculum or an assessment. Consequently, this approach allows students to be included in general education classes and meet general education standards. Students also learn how to become proficient with various technologies.

Disadvantages are that students do not learn new skills, some compensatory tools are expensive, students often need training, and students might be embarrassed using their tools in front of others.

Using this approach, the teacher’s role is to develop compensatory tools for students or advocate for the purchase of them. Some assistive technologies appropriate especially for secondary learners include (a) Thinking Reader (Tom Snyder Productions), (b) Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems), (c) Start-to-Finish books (Don Johnston), (d) Read: Outloud (Don Johnston), (e) Draft:Builder (Don Johnston), and (f) Inspiration (Inspiration, Inc.).

Most students who benefit from the use of compensatory tools also have necessary accommodations (or modifications) noted on their IEP. Accommodations are techniques that provide student access to the curriculum or assessment without changing the standard. They do not give the student an advantage, but rather they even the playing field. Accommodations generally fall in one of the following four categories:

- **Presentation accommodations** allow students to access information in a mode or modality that best suits their learning preference. For example, rather than reading print materials, the student with a reading disability who has good comprehension skills accesses the text through taped materials, such as text-to-speech presentations. Some textbook publishers now include websites featuring the text in different presentation formats.

- **Response accommodations** allow students to display their learning in a different mode or modality. For example, rather than writing an essay, the student who has difficulty writing but has good expressive language is allowed to speak the essay response. The essay question has not changed, and unless writing skills are being evaluated, the assessment tool has not changed, either.

- **Setting accommodations** refer to the time, location, and conditions of an assignment or assessment. For example, due to distractibility or other processing issues, some students prefer study carrels, while others need a quiet location outside of the classroom to complete an assignment or assessment.
• **Timing and schedule accommodations** adjust the amount of time the student is allowed to complete a task. Students who work or read slowly often need time-and-a-half to complete assignments or assessments. Similarly, some students need to have large assignments or tests divided into smaller sections.

*Modifications*, on the other hand, are *significant changes* in the assignment or assessment. Students might have a simplified test, they may have a different assignment (but on the same topic) that corresponds with an adjusted learning standard, or they may be working at a different skill level.

Just like IEP goals and objectives, accommodations and modifications are individualized and listed on the IEP, and they should be communicated to all IEP team members, including the student. Team members should also periodically review the accommodations or modifications to determine if they are appropriate and if the student still needs them. Team members need to be sensitive to changes in the student as well as to changes in curricular demands and adjust accommodations and modifications accordingly, as necessary.

As Mrs. Green reviews her students’ IEPs, she reads that Michael, Elizabeth, and Steven are allowed to use the accommodation of cue cards for math. Cue cards are portable, low-tech devices (such as a note card) that include steps, prompts, processes, abbreviations, or a mnemonic for completing a task or solving a problem. Cue cards may contain the steps, a checklist for students to check off as they complete each step, visuals, and/or examples (Conderman & Hedin, 2011). Cue cards are helpful for learners who, due to processing or other issues, need a memory support system. Figure 1.1 provides an example of Michael’s math cue card for remembering the steps of dividing fractions.

**Figure 1.1** Michael’s Cue Card for Dividing Fractions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Check When Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copy the problem</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{2} \div \frac{1}{4}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flip the second fraction</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{2} \div \frac{4}{1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the division sign to multiplication</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{4}{1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiply numerator by numerator and denominator by denominator</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{4}{1} = \frac{4}{2}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check your answer; simplify if possible</td>
<td>$\frac{4}{2} = 2$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Career/Transition/Vocational Approach

An important outcome of secondary special education is to prepare students for the world beyond high school. Teachers using the career approach achieve this goal by having students complete career assessments, reflect on their strengths and weaker skills, explore jobs, consider future goals, and research jobs, careers, postsecondary settings, and military options. During this process, students and team members collaborate to gather information from various sources to develop an accurate picture of the student’s strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (SPIN) (Conderman, Hartman, & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). This information helps team members craft the ITP.

Challenges with the career approach are that many special education teachers are inadequately prepared in this model, teachers must reserve time for completing career assessments, the student’s team members must find common time to collaborate, some students and their family members may have inaccurate or unrealistic future goals, and some students are placed repetitively in the same types of service jobs.

Teachers using this approach update career assessments and coordinate transition planning activities. As Mrs. Green reviews students’ transition plans, she discovers that her students lead their ITP meeting by discussing their goals through a multimedia presentation that they develop. Some career or transition assessments and curricula that Mrs. Green may use with her students include (a) Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) (PRO-ED), (b) Choicemaker Self-Determination Series (Sopris Learning), (c) Reading-Free Vocational Interest Inventory (PRO-ED), (d) Your Employment Selections (YES) (Trisped), and (e) The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale (The Arc), available free from www.ou.edu/content/dam/Education/documents/miscellaneous/the-arc-self-determination-scale.pdf.

Co-teaching/Collaboration Approach

As students with disabilities increasingly receive more of their education in inclusive settings, general and special educators collaborate to ensure students have access to a rigorous general education curriculum and receive individualized accommodations. One method of collaborating is co-teaching.

Co-teaching involves co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. Generally, researchers describe five co-teaching models, which include (a) one teach, one observe; (b) one teach, one assist; (c) station
teaching; (d) parallel teaching; (e) alternative teaching; and (f) team teaching. In some secondary co-taught classrooms, the special educator is considered the strategy expert who introduces strategies to all students.

Secondary co-teaching can be especially challenging, because special educators typically are not highly qualified in academic subjects. They need time and support to learn or relearn the general education content, so they can contribute meaningfully to the co-taught classroom. When special education teachers lack content knowledge, they often assume a passive role in the co-taught classroom, and in such cases, co-teaching does not realize its purpose or potential.

Other times, special educators serve as consultants to general education teachers by providing ideas and materials that the general educator can use with students in inclusive environments. When the general educator expresses a need for support regarding a student, the special and general educator often engage in a problem-solving process to clearly identify the issue, determine an intervention, and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Sometimes the consultation supports requirements of a school’s RTI (Response to Intervention) approach. The consultation may take the form of a mentoring or coaching relationship. Regardless of the purpose or approach, the goal of consultation is to provide support to students as they receive instruction in the general education setting.

The special educator’s roles in the collaborative model are to advocate for students with disabilities, ensure student accommodations or modifications are in place, contribute meaningfully by consulting or co-teaching, and maintain open lines of communication with parents, teachers, and students.

Although Mrs. Green is not co-teaching this year, as she reviews her students’ schedules, she identifies all the general educators with whom she will collaborate. Her first task is to develop a student summary sheet with pertinent student IEP goals, accommodations, and other special notations for each general educator. She wants to be proactive in collaborating with her general education colleagues.

**Strategy Approach**

The final approach, and the one emphasized in this book, is the strategies approach. This approach focuses on teaching students how to learn, not what to learn, and therefore fostering student independence. Many strategies have a metacognitive component, requiring students to stop, think, reflect, and evaluate their progress using the strategy, thus
promoting self-regulation. Perhaps the most well-known, researched set of learning strategies for adolescents with learning disabilities has been developed and published through the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) and is referred to as the Strategic Intervention Model (SIM).

We will describe some of these strategies in subsequent chapters. Teachers can learn more about the SIM approach at http://kucrl.org/sim/index.shtml. These strategies are quite specific, and to implement these with fidelity, teachers must receive training and materials from certified strategy trainers. Teachers should e-mail simpd@ku.edu to request information about SIM trainers in their state or geographical area.

The teacher’s role in the strategies approach is to choose or develop a few applicable strategies to teach students. Introducing too many strategies can confuse and overwhelm students. Therefore, we do not support the “teach a strategy a week” approach. Teaching robust strategies, such as many of those described in this book, usually takes several weeks of instruction. As Mrs. Green reviews student files, she believes several students will benefit from strategy instruction, but she knows she will be selective regarding which ones she will introduce.

The Combination Approach

For illustration purposes, we described each instructional approach separately, but in reality, teachers use them in combination with individual students and groups of students. For example, as Mrs. Green helps Sarah complete an English homework assignment (tutorial approach) requiring a written composition comparing and contrasting two main characters in a novel, Mrs. Green reviews capitalization, spelling, and grammar rules (remedial approach) and teaches Sarah the steps of writing a comparison essay (strategies approach). This approach helps Sarah independently complete a similar future task.

Several factors—such as the student’s IEP, ITP, number and type of general education classes, and input from the student and the student’s family members—guide which instructional approach or combination of approaches teachers should emphasize with each student. The instructional emphasis for each student is fluid and may—and in fact should—change from year to year based on new and revised goals and the student’s vision for the future. Figure 1.2 provides additional recommendations about these various instructional approaches.
### Figure 1.2 Instructional Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Cautions or Reminders</th>
<th>Suggestions or Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Outcomes are typically not aligned to common core state standards.</td>
<td>Use occasionally for skills not tested on high-stakes assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial</td>
<td>May not address student’s original purpose for receiving special education services.</td>
<td>Combine with basic skills or strategy approaches to increase instructional power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Skills</td>
<td>Analyze age-appropriateness of materials and methods.</td>
<td>Combine with student goal-setting and frequent monitoring to increase student motivation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory</td>
<td>Does not teach the student new skills.</td>
<td>Use occasionally but not as sole instructional approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career/Transition</td>
<td>Begin early and be flexible with changing student needs.</td>
<td>Involve the student, family, and community agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-teaching/Collaboration</td>
<td>Build relationships with colleagues, and if possible, begin with co-teaching volunteers.</td>
<td>Be proactive in establishing yourself as an equal in the co-taught classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Appropriate sufficient time to teach strategy to mastery.</td>
<td>Collaborate with colleagues to promote strategy generalization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SUMMARY

This chapter overviewed secondary special education and described seven approaches special educators use at this level. Secondary special educators assume numerous and varied roles and responsibilities. The “job description” of secondary special educators is much different from that of their elementary counterparts due to the characteristics of adolescents, curricular expectations, the organization and structure of secondary schools, and the way secondary general education teachers are prepared. Researchers have identified seven main instructional approaches used in secondary special education programs. Each has its own purpose, advantages, and concerns. Teachers may feel pressure by parents, administrators, and students to emphasize the tutorial model, which provides only short-term student gains. Rather than rely on one approach, most teachers use a combination of approaches with each student, based on the student’s vision for the future as noted in the IEP and ITP.
Apply your knowledge from the chapter by discussing or completing the following application questions or activities. Suggested answers are provided below.

1. As noted in Chapter 1, teachers often operate from more than one instructional model simultaneously within a single lesson. Which combination (of at least three different instructional models) is Mrs. Yates using when, while working with ninth grader Diane in the resource room on math story problems from Diane’s general education math class, she allows Diane to use a calculator and asks her to read the problem, paraphrase what the problem is asking, think of which operation(s) to use, complete the problem, and check her answer?

2. You also work with Diane, and you decide to develop a basic two-column cue card for Diane containing the steps of solving the math story problem noted in Question 1. What might that cue card look like?

3. Diane’s IEP meeting is soon approaching, and you are on Diane’s IEP team. The team will be discussing Diane’s accommodations. Diane has short- and long-term memory issues that make memorization difficult and language processing issues that affect comprehension in both written and spoken form. What accommodations would you recommend for Diane?

Suggested Responses

Responses will vary, but here are some suggested ideas:

1. Mrs. Yates is providing tutorial support by helping Diane with work from her general education classes, she is using a compensatory method (allowing Diane to use a calculator), and she is teaching Diane a learning strategy.

2. Here is a cue card for solving math story problems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Check (✓) when that step is completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read the problem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase what the problem is asking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think of which operations to use.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete the problem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check my work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Diane may benefit from various accommodations. The IEP team may consider these: cue cards, calculators, spell checkers, allowing the use of some “fact notes” or graphic organizers during tests, having questions on study guides or tests reworded or simplified, allowing test questions to be reworded or paraphrased, etc. These kinds of accommodations are directly related to her memory and language processing issues.

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR CHAPTER 1