

The Media Center: Get your Special Education Brain in Gear  
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A friend was overwhelmed with packing her household for a move to another state; panic set in for a few days. A few days later she was organized because “my special education brain just kicked into gear.” I’ve been thinking about Carol’s special education teacher mind-set. Her practical teaching ideas and helpful nature benefited our middle school’s fledgling media program when we began to change a 60’s era school library into a modern media/technology program. Carol always “had an idea” and an abundance of energy. Her strength was in taking a lesson apart and breaking it down into meaningful, doable parts that worked with her students. At the beginning it meant adding a simple, basic technology experience to a basic lesson. Her ideas spread beyond special education; they added new dimensions to mainstream classrooms and our growing middle school media program. Her evangelistic teamwork and practicality led to technology infused units and projects. Our collaboration was a prosperous melding of program growth and raised my awareness.

Special needs students - those with physical, behavioral, cognitive, and learning disabilities represent a diverse range of learners. Media specialists by the nature of their job must provide resources that meet their needs.

Former AASL president Helen Adams, author of *Ensuring Intellectual Freedom and Access to Information in the School Library Media Program* (Libraries Unlimited, 2008) commented “school library professionals have both legal and ethical responsibilities to provide *access* to resources and services in the library media program for students with physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities. For students with special needs, access to the resources and services of a library media center is an integral part of their intellectual freedom. In January 2009, the American Library Association Council voted to

approve a new Library Bill of Rights interpretation— ‘Services to Persons with Disabilities: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights.’ This newest interpretation will speak strongly to your school community about its legal and ethical responsibility to provide *access* to resources and services in the library media program for students and staff with disabilities. There are many ways to meet this goal, making connections to a broad range of learning needs and working with a broad range of teachers. The situations described here are primarily about students who are not severely disabled.

Connecting learners with age and ability appropriate resources is a first step in meeting student needs. It may range from identifying high interest-easy reading books or web sites, large print books, audio books, or purchasing and supporting adaptive technology applications. It may mean providing text-to speech software, adaptive keyboards or even e-book readers such as Kindles as some media specialists are beginning to do. For instance, one media specialist and her school’s special services director are considering Kindles not only to encourage reading but to build motor skills dexterity, and provide a dictionary immediately available for their use. Intervention at the right time might help students utilize easily forgotten features of web browsers and computer operating systems that can make using technology easier.

Media centers and the information finding process can be daunting for special education students who are simply looking for a good book to read or completing a class project. Dr. Carol Kuhlthau\* addresses this need when she challenges us not to forget the emotions involved in the research process in her writings about the information search process. A special education teacher was reminded Kuhlthau’s research model as she described her students. “Our students have different learning styles and intelligences. If we have felt a bit overwhelmed, I can only imagine how some of our students might feel. “Once we acknowledge feelings, and make personal connections, these students are more likely to view the media center as a place that is a ‘safe to risk’ type of environment.” A secondary specialist described interventions she made in her school’s media center with some success. “Frequently we work with the

special education teachers and classroom teacher to provide guided research help for our special education student. One way we do that is with a graphic organizer. This is especially helpful to our struggling learner or visual learner. We have provided graphic organizers and individual assistance for our special education students when they come to the media center for research. By preplanning with the classroom teacher and often times the special education teacher, we can be better prepared with a visual way to help the learner define, find, and organize the research materials he or she needs to complete the task.”

Many special education students come from disadvantaged families. A welcoming, media staff and media center may be just the environment they need to feel positive and building relationships. I smile remembering a middle school student with behavioral issues who loved to read. He was excited about the book fair but couldn't afford to purchase a book. He came to fair every day for a week so he could read one of the books chapter by chapter. He was one of our best customers. One of Carol's junior high special education students helped bar code on books when the collection was automated. Many doubted his abilities, but with good directions and a set task he accomplished a lot. He had such a positive experience and felt so good about himself when we helped him be successful. His feeling of accomplishment made him one of our most enthusiastic patrons.

Sometimes what special education students need the most are a challenge and the encouragement to do their best. A senior high special education teacher teaches Organizational Skills to older special education students. Collaboratively we've worked to provide access to specialized data analysis software for math and *Microsoft Publisher*, previously only available in a business education lab. The math software helps students with higher level thinking. Their creative writing projects created with *Publisher* are a source of pride. A junior is very interested in writing and wants to be published. He has struggled with many things, but has "discovered his voice and found his joy" in writing. This same teacher challenges her students *Jeopardy* types of games she has developed to teach students the roots of Greek words. She developed Geocaching activities for her the students who search for caches on the school campus. The caches may include earth science quiz questions asking students to identify rocks and

minerals stashed in a packet. At first she hid the caches and assigned the GPS coordinates; now students are doing that and developing activities tougher than their own. It's rewarding to support this creative teacher who encourages those students to "stretch" and rewarding to see how they do well with technology

Another teacher struggled with the concept of information literacy standards benefiting special education students. She asked "do you see some of these standards being impossible for Special Education kids? How are standards, in general, handled with Special Education? As we talked she realized she was already implementing the standards in a *Movie Maker* project, but hadn't thought a lot of the most appropriate resources or activity structure for student success. For her students, "The hardest part is finding information because there is just too much on the web." I encouraged her have the students stick with the basic resources including at level- books and an online encyclopedia so they could find their information quickly and then move on to the creative process they enjoyed. The teacher got even more excited about the project because "once they found they could find their information without being overwhelmed by Google they just went to town on their work." The students were also required to use only public domain photos from NSAS and cite their resources properly.

My job description specifically states a requirement to "provide support to teachers in ordering and setting up assistive technology, a charge that may be met simply by being advocating for special education teachers and working with Information staff to order and install software or ensuring that special needs software and hardware is readily available. It also means providing ready access to a full range of standard audiovisual equipment such as audio cassette players and televisions.

Availability isn't enough if no one knows where it is or access. An upset teacher had the right to be upset when media staff couldn't readily find a computer that had some unique special education software installed. After a phone call or two and some digging, we found what we needed. To prevent the problem in the future we labeled the computer and made notes in the procedures book. It can also be parents who are upset if their special needs children are not given opportunities to use computer labs

along with other students. In one case the teacher had the misperception that her students were not allowed to use the media center's computer lab, a situation remedied with a brief conversation.

Support may be simply being practical and providing needed tech support. Support often comes in helping teachers with their web sites. I helped one teacher who provides opportunities for her students to publish classroom newsletter on the school's web site and post her own study guides and pod casts to study to help struggling learners.

One time it meant assisting a special education teacher with digital photo editing and printing. She took digital photos of food products at a local grocery store where she takes her low-functioning students to apply their menu planning and math skills. The photos were used to provide illustrations for a statewide test given to special education students. The photos helped the students think through their task as they completed word problems.

Offer staff development sessions designed just for special education teachers to raise awareness of ability appropriate resources and special features of hardware and software that are easily forgotten. For instance, a practical staff development session might be based on utilizing the auto summarize features of Microsoft Word to make a long document more readable, teaching students how to increase the size of web browser text, identifying web sites for older students with easier reading abilities, showing staff how to use visual search features in online catalogs, or becoming familiar with ADA compliant features of online databases. Invite paraprofessionals in staff development opportunities; they are often the adults who accompany students to the media center or lab and work one-on-one with students who are completing class projects. Special education teachers working in buildings or districts without special education consultants are especially likely to turn to media staff as a resource. Keep up with your own staff development by learning about adaptive technology, resources including human resources services and staying abreast of new tools.

Kick your special education thinking into gear; it's not that hard and it's often about practicality. Think about what's best for the kids when you purchase resources and plan with teachers. Reach out to

busy and challenged teachers to help them maximize student learning. Just simple little things can make a huge difference.

\* Kuhlhou, C. C. (2003) *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services* Libraries, Unlimited.

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