Including Students with Disabilities

The discipline of Special Education has made significant strides during the 20th century toward creating equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. As recently as 1976, students with disabilities could be legally excluded from our nation’s public schools. However, with the passage of federal legislation in 1976, students with disabilities were guaranteed the right to a free and appropriate public education. Today, students with disabilities not only attend public schools, but many are no longer relegated to segregated “resource rooms” but are included in general education classes with their nondisabled peers.

The movement to include students with disabilities in our nation's mainstream classrooms continues to gain momentum. While the inclusion movement is certainly welcomed by the disability community, many general education teachers often feel ill-equipped to deliver a quality education to students with a wide variety of diverse learning styles and needs. To help remedy that situation, special education teachers, as well as their students, are increasingly leaving their resource rooms behind to co-teach with their general education colleagues. Co-teaching, however, takes planning and forethought if it is to effectively meet the needs of both students and teachers alike. Planning and forethought take time, a commodity often in short supply in most schools today. Any vehicle that can help teachers make the best use of time, and better serve students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, is indeed a valuable tool. Technology may well be that vehicle, as it holds great promise for inclusive education. Assistive technology already has proved to be invaluable in helping students with physical challenges bypass the effects of their disability through the use of computer-assisted telecommunication devices, switches to operate computers, voice activated computers, computer-generated large print, braille translation, augmented computer devices such as speech and text synthesizers, etc. In addition, programs are available to help students with learning disabilities compensate for difficulty in spelling, handwriting, and grammatical skills by using word-processing equipment.

Today, most teachers have access to a range of technology that can enhance the delivery of the curriculum to their students, not least among them, the use of computers in the classroom. However, making effective use of computers and selecting software programs to help students meet their instructional objectives remains a challenge for many teachers. For students with disabilities computers are most commonly used to provide instruction through drill and practice programs. These programs can be effective for students with special needs as they facilitate learning in small steps, provide systematic feedback, and allow for lots of practice until the student gains mastery of the particular skill. However, students with disabilities should also be exposed to programs that develop higher order thinking skills in problem solving, decision making, and risk taking. Since many pre-service teachers often lack knowledge of strategies that allow students with special needs access to the curriculum, as well as the time to collaborate with their colleagues; his short presentation will focus on technology as a means of facilitating the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, as well as empowering teachers by giving them the tools they need to help all students succeed. The presenter will familiarize participants with a technological resource (www.powerof2.org) used with a class of pre-service teachers at Cleveland State.
University. The Power of 2 website is an interactive resource where teachers can share effective strategies, complete learning modules, and have access to useful training and teaching materials. The site is divided into several sections, such as the “Feature Article” where each month a new article focuses issues that are relevant to teaching students with special needs, such as collaboration, modifications, behavior management and cooperative learning. The section entitled, “Teacher Vista” allows teachers to share new and useful strategies for teaching all students and serves as an excellent resource for teachers working with students with special needs. The “Resources” contains wealth of information, organized by grade level and subject area. The “Learning Module” section provides interactive training in co-teaching, collaborative consultation, effective teaching, etc. The website also provides a “Links” section that helps educators sort through the myriad of Internet resources for teaching students with special needs. In addition to demonstrating some of the resources available on the site, handouts will be provided of the website used in preparing pre-service teachers to better serve students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Deborah Webster
Cleveland State University