The Itinerant Special Education Teacher in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Every state is now applying the early childhood itinerant model (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Roth, & Ramaswamy, 2001). In this model, early childhood special education teachers act as inclusion specialists supporting preschoolers with disabilities in community settings. Unfortunately, this new role for teachers is not clearly defined by states or the school districts within them (Dinnebeil et al., 2001). Wesley, Buysse, and Skinner (2001) interviewed 86 early interventionists providing [itinerant] consultative services and reported that “despite a growing reliance on consultation as a primary support for general early childhood professionals . . . there is little agreement in the field on a particular approach or set of procedures to guide consultation practice” (p. 113).

As an itinerant teacher for the past 9 years, I have found the job, at times, to be an overwhelming one. In my experience, it’s been particularly difficult to keep abreast of the best practices for teaching preacademic skills and to know what to do when confronted with conflicting practices in the community. This article discusses the itinerant model from a practitioner’s perspective and suggests ways that itinerant teachers might apply their knowledge of best practices in preacademic instruction to their work within community settings.

Variety of Approaches in the Community

In the large metropolitan school district where I teach, the itinerant model is particularly popular for 3- to 5-year-olds with only mild delays. In our situation, parents choose their own community preschool programs. Itinerant services are offered within these settings as a combination of direct services (usually once a week) and collaborative-consultation services. The direct services portion could best be described as: “individualized within classroom routines.” (See Wolery & Odom, 2000, for their continuum of itinerant consultation models.)

The consultation portion is aimed at helping classroom staff address the individualized education program (IEP) objectives during the remainder of the week. The early childhood programs in our community vary widely in the content of their preacademic instruction, as well as in their instructional methods. This variability, combined with the vague procedural guidelines provided for itinerant teachers, makes the job a confusing one.

What Do Itinerant Teachers Need to Know?

What do itinerant teachers need to know and do to ensure that their stu-
Itinerant teachers need to understand this approach because, in a system where parents choose their own community programs, teachers are often called on to provide guidance as families consider their options. To help parents, the itinerant teacher must keep current on not only developmentally appropriate practices, but also on appropriate curriculum content for this age group. The High/Scope Curriculum (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995) and The Creative Curriculum (Dodge & Colker, 1996) with its accompanying supplement (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2000) describe in detail appropriate content, as well as practices, for preschool programs. Although rarely will the itinerant teacher find pure examples of developmentally appropriate practices and curriculum, the teacher must be able to recognize when a program is clearly inappropriate for the student with disabilities.

The itinerant teacher’s expertise in best practices should not be used to improve programs that are seriously off track. Programs of poor quality are like a swamp for the itinerant teacher. They can bog the teacher down by eating up huge amounts of time with little payoff in the way of progress toward short-term objectives for the child with disabilities. To help families evaluate programs in their community, the itinerant teacher may want to share with them a program quality checklist. The Administrators Guide to Preschool Inclusion provides the table: “Quality Indicators for All Programs” (Wolery & Odom, 2000, Table 1) and NAEYC (1997) publishes a brochure entitled: “A Good Preschool for Your Child.” Circle of Inclusion has created a form entitled: “Selecting a Preschool or Child Care for Your Child” (Stroup & Cripe, 1997).

**Know When Children Need an Annual Goal for Preacademic Skills on Their IEP**

Typically, in the past, all preschool children eligible for special education attended self-contained programs. There every child received the “whole package”: a strong program, meeting several days a week, addressing all developmental areas and taught by certified special education teachers. Now, with the emphasis on least restrictive and natural environments, children receive only the minimum of intervention. The current ideal is to not interrupt or modify their typical experiences any more than necessary.

Within this inclusive context, when should an itinerant teacher advocate for adding an annual goal with short-term objectives in the area of preacademics? Frequently, in my experience, the decision is based solely on the child’s performance on cognitive measures, such as intelligence tests. This is faulty thinking for two reasons:

- Cognitive measures are unreliable in young children (Lowenthal, 1998).

The early childhood curriculum must incorporate developmentally appropriate practices.
Short-term objectives for young children in inclusive settings need to be as generic and practical as possible.

- Preacademic skills are not just cognitive skills:
  Preacademic skills are intertwined with each other and with all other areas of development. (Allen & Schwartz, 2001, p. 272)

  Thus, the itinerant teacher should consider the child’s strengths and needs in the broad domain of preacademic skills, not just cognitive skills (see box “What Are Preacademic Skills?”).

**Know How to Write Preacademic Objectives That Are Relevant to The Child, Family, and Classroom**

In the itinerant model, daily classroom staff and parents will address the child’s IEP objectives more frequently than will the itinerant special education staff. Thus, the itinerant teacher must lead the team in developing short-term objectives that all team members clearly understand and support. Nortari-Sylverson and Shuster (1995) provide some guidelines that can help the team choose practical skills, as follows:

- The team should choose objectives that will improve the child’s ability to function within the contexts of natural environments.
- The opportunities for using these skills should be multiple and should occur daily.
- The objectives should describe skills of a “generic process, rather than a particular instance” (Nortari-Sylverson & Shuster, 1995, p. 31).

For example, the objective: “Catherine will use descriptive vocabulary to tell about or request objects of various sizes during typical classroom activities” is more practical than this one: “Catherine will identify the concepts big, little, long, short and tall as measured by the developmental inventory.” In my experience, the itinerant model is most effective with generic objectives because teachers and parents can use naturalistic techniques for teaching the objectives within a variety of classroom routines.

After the IEP conference, the team will develop a plan for how team members will address these generic objectives. Teams can use tools such as an “activity matrix” or an “embedded learning opportunity (ELO)” planning form, as described by Sandall and Schwarz, 2002 (pp. 35, 132).

**Know a Continuum of Techniques That Could Be Used to Teach These Objectives in Community Settings**

When early childhood general educators and itinerant special educators work together to choose instructional methods, conflicts can ensue because of their different theoretical backgrounds. Minzenberg, Laughlin, and Kaczmarek (1998) propose a framework that can help itinerant teachers with this discussion. They recommend that special education staff present teaching behaviors as existing along a continuum, going from child-initiated learning to teacher-directed learning. When team members present a variety of techniques along this continuum and discuss them as “choices” appropriate to use separately or in combinations for different children in different situations, then the tone is set for productive problem-solving.

When applying this idea to the instruction of preacademic skills, the continuum might look like this when listed from child initiated to teacher directed:

- **Level A:** Make environmental adaptations to maximize the child’s engagement in all areas of the classroom.
- **Level B:** Improve the social environment to increase the child’s engagement in exploring, verbalizing, and problem-solving.
- **Level C:** Apply naturalistic strategies to embed specially designed instruction on preacademic objectives during free play.
- **Level D:** Include effective instruction related to the child’s preacademic objectives in typical teacher-directed activities.
- **Level E:** Create separate individual or small-group instructional times specifically for the direct instruction of the child with special needs.

**Child-Directed or Teacher-Directed Instruction? A Continuum**

**Level A: Make Environmental Adaptations to Maximize The Child’s Engagement in All Areas of the Classroom**

In most cases, the early childhood classroom environment will already provide typical play areas with appropriate equipment, such as a table toy area, a home center, block area, sand/water table, book corner, and art center. All these areas provide opportunities for learning preacademic skills. *The Creative Curriculum* (Dodge & Colker, 1996) has a section devoted to each area with a discussion of the many objectives that could be taught within each of them. The child with a disability may however, avoid some areas (see box, “Novelty”).

**Literacy and the Environment.** Given the recent emphasis on the importance of early literacy, the itinerant teacher may want to help classroom staff go beyond the typical classroom setup by including emergent literacy materials in all the play areas. The itinerant teacher might do this by using the “environmental literacy scan” found in Goldhaber, Lipson, Sortino, and Daniels (1996/97).

**Language and the Environment.** Many preacademic objectives are language based. Ostrosky and Kaiser (1991) outlined seven strategies that the itinerant teacher might share with classroom staff for arranging the environment to increase children’s interest and thus increase the opportunities for teaching language concepts. Using an individual interest inventory to guide toy selection
Even if the classroom equipment and its arrangement are appropriate for teaching preacademic skills, each child must find the environment personally motivating. Educators have long known that novelty attracts children; rotating equipment is an easy way to make old toys seem “new.” McGee, Daly, Izeman, Mann, and Risley (1991), in their inclusive classroom, divided classroom toys into 12 sets. “Including items that represent a range of developmental levels in each rotation makes it possible for every student to experience success” (p. 45). Two sets are present at any one time, and their rotation is staggered so that each week one set is new and one set came out the week before. They also “showcase” less-preferred toys by demonstrating their use at circle time.

The itinerant teacher might suggest this showcasing and toy rotation plan for increasing a child’s engagement in areas usually avoided. The table-toy area, for example, may be avoided by a child with fine motor delays or difficulties with attention, but it is an important area for learning kindergarten readiness skills. Novelty, Novelty, Novelty

Teaching strategies exist along a continuum, going from child-initiated learning to teacher-directed learning.

Level B: Improve the Social Environment to Increase the Child’s Engagement in Exploring, Verbalizing, and Problem-Solving

The importance of the social context in every child’s learning process is strongly emphasized in the revised DAP. “In a task just beyond the child’s independent reach, the adult and more-competent peers contribute significantly to development by providing the supportive scaffolding that allows the child to take the next step” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 14). For this supportive social context to occur, both peers and adults must be in physical proximity to the child with special needs, and they must be responsive in their interactions with the child.

Scheduling Adults. To increase the proximity of adults to the child with special needs, the itinerant teacher may choose to collaborate with classroom staff regarding the scheduling of teachers and assistants. Whaley and Bennett (1991) in their article “Promoting Engagement in Early Childhood Special Education” recommended that “a daily schedule should reflect both the children’s activities as well as the staff responsibilities.” “The schedule is designed so that at least one caregiver is preparing a zone while the others are teaching.” (p. 51)

Frequently I choose to provide some direct services during free-play, thus increasing adult availability at least once a week for the child with special needs.

Responsive Communication

Washington Research Institute (2000) has published a pair of tapes (available in several languages) that the itinerant teacher can use to teach classroom staff as well as parents how to follow the child’s lead, make comments, ask open-ended questions and respond. Child Care Plus+ (1999b) also publishes a set of reproducible posters depicting responsive communication strategies that teachers can post in the classroom as reminders.

The Importance of Peers. Peers also are an important social factor in any child’s learning. As Wolery and Wilbers (1994) noted in their summary of the research on how the presence of children without disabilities is beneficial to the child with disabilities:

Social and communicative exchanges and peer imitation are more likely to occur when children with special needs are in small groups, when competent peers are in the group, when the group includes mixed ages, and when teachers encourage and support social exchanges and imitation. (p. 115)

Planning for Small Groups. Understanding this, the itinerant teacher may choose to collaborate with classroom staff on ways to increase the opportunities for playing or working in small groups. In my experience some programs don’t believe it’s appropriate to set limits on the number of children who can use a play area. Some children with sensory issues, however, may avoid crowds and thus continually change areas or avoid some activities that are routinely crowded. The itinerant teacher can help staff establish limits at least in some areas by posting signs or by arranging furniture in such a way that the numbers are naturally limited. The itinerant teacher may also want to convince staff to add a small-group time to their class schedule. HighScope Press publishes a helpful book called 100 Small Group Experiences by Michelle Graves (1997). It includes the rationale for having a
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small-group time, suggestions for planning, and tips for leading the activities. Facilitating Peer Interactions. Social exchanges and imitation of peers can be encouraged with parallel talk and by referring children to their peers. “Parallel talk is very much like the running commentary a sports announcer uses to describe what is happening on the court or field” (Childcare Plus+, 1999a, Chapter 10, p. 12). The itinerant teacher can explain that to use the technique the adult makes descriptive comments that include individual’s names thus drawing the children’s attention to one another.

Referring children to their peers when they need help is another technique that the itinerant teacher can encourage classroom staff to use. This technique can be thought of as “passing it on.” When a child asks for help, the adult “passes it on” by steering the child to a more capable peer and prompting them to repeat their request for help. The adult might say, for example, “I’ve seen Sam do that floor puzzle. Let’s go find Sam and you can ask him to help you.”

Being Responsive. Early childhood teaching manuals often recommend being a “responsive” adult—but just exactly what does this mean? If the itinerant teacher wishes to coach the classroom staff to be more responsive, he or she must be able to define it and describe it with examples. Jones and Warren (1991) recommend following the child’s lead and using systematic commenting. In systematic commenting, “the teacher’s comments should highlight the action or toy that is the focus of the child’s attention” (Jones & Warren, 1991, p. 49). This joint attention to the same activity paired with the adult’s verbal description supports the child’s continued engagement in the task, as well as modeling vocabulary for the child (see box, “Responsive Communication”).

Level C: Apply Naturalistic Strategies to Embed Specially Designed Instruction on Preacademic Objectives During Free Play

In my experience, modifying the physical or social environment is usually done in combination with some method of embedding instruction on specific objectives. Two naturalistic techniques that teachers can easily use for embedding instruction on preacademic skills are incidental teaching and the mand-model procedure.

Incidental Teaching. Incidental teaching is useful for teaching preacademic skills that involve language, such as using descriptive vocabulary to talk about quantities, sizes, shapes, colors, or positions. The itinerant teacher can explain to classroom staff that incidental teaching requires adults to be on the lookout for naturally occurring teaching opportunities throughout the day. Incidental teaching requires that the child initiate the interaction. This ensures that the child is motivated to participate in the lesson.

For example, if a child’s IEP objective is to identify colors, then staff might recognize that the art area is going to be a natural place for working on this objective. When the child initiates a request to paint at the easel, the adult encourages the child to use the target words. For example, the teacher might say, “Look at all these paints. Tell me which colors you want to use.”

If the child does not provide the target response (e.g., points instead of speaking), then the adult assists the child in producing the correct response. In this situation, assistance could be in the form of a verbal model for imitation, such as “You pointed to red and blue. Tell me ‘I want red and blue paint.’”

A summary of this technique with an example of its use is in Including Children With Special Needs in Early Childhood Programs by Wolery and Wilbers (1994, pp. 144-145). I like to refer to this technique as “seize the teachable moment.”

Mand-Model Procedure. The mand-model procedure is another naturalistic technique that can be used for teaching preacademic skills involving language. The primary difference between this technique and incidental teaching is that this technique is initiated by the adult rather than by the child. For children who are low initiators, this can be a more effective technique than incidental teaching (Santos & Lignugaris/Kraft, 1997) but adults must be careful to pose questions that are of interest to the child.

The itinerant teacher explains to classroom staff that with this procedure the adult “mands” (as in de-mands or com-mands) that the child respond to a question. If the child gives an incorrect answer, then a model is given, and the teacher implies with his or her body language that the child should imitate the response. If the child answers correctly, the teacher repeats the child’s response and adds a little more to it. In this way new information is taught whether the child gives a correct or incorrect response.

For example, a child might have an objective to use concept vocabulary to describe positions. While observing the child playing with a dollhouse, the teacher might say, “It looks like you have a whole family in the dollhouse. Tell me where everyone is. Is the mom? Where is the dad?”

If the child doesn’t respond with an appropriate phrase, then the teacher would model a phrase with an expectant pause that encourages the child to imitate. Wolery and Wilbers (1994) also provide a summary of this procedure with an example (pp. 141-143). I like to rephrase this technique as “question-pause-model.”

Repetition Is Needed. With these naturalistic techniques the itinerant teacher must be on the lookout to see if sufﬁ-
Graduated Guidance to the Rescue

When coaching staff to use graduated guidance, the itinerant teacher can explain that the technique is used for activities that have steps or a motor component, such as craft projects, sorting, sequencing, doing puzzles, and playing matching games.

Many preacademic objectives can be addressed in these types of activities, such as cutting out shapes or copying block patterns. “The graduated guidance procedure requires the teacher to make moment-by-moment decisions about whether to provide and withdraw assistance” (Wolery & Wilbers, 1994, p. 147).

In my experience it is natural for teachers in quality programs to use this technique. It can be helpful, however, for the itinerant teacher to discuss the many forms assistance might take, and to share some of his or her own “tricks” for subtly providing support. For example, prompts can be verbal, gestural, modeled, physical, or pictorial. Some forms of assistance are so subtle they become a form of “invisible support.” (For more on providing invisible support, see Sandall & Schwartz, 2002).

Discussions of preacademic objectives are occurring. In my own experience, presenting a sufficient number of learning trials each day or week is the biggest challenge within an inclusive setting. Classroom teachers who normally work with typically developing children are not accustomed to providing the amount of repetition that the child with a disability may need. Sometimes the number of teaching opportunities can be increased by combining naturalistic techniques during free play with other more direct instruction during teacher-led activities.

Level D: Include Effective Instruction Related to the Child’s Preacademic Objectives in Typical Teacher-Directed Activities

This type of intervention is further along the continuum because the teacher chooses the topics and materials for this type of instruction in addition to being somewhat more directive in his or her interactions with the children. The itinerant teacher can influence group instruction by advocating that lessons regularly address IEP objectives.

Collaborative on Lesson Plans. If the IEP objectives have been developed collaboratively with classroom staff, if they describe generic processes, and if the team chose the objectives because of their functionality, then it isn’t difficult to see that the objectives are regularly included in teacher-directed learning times.

I find that my weekly presence (data sheet in hand) paired with periodically asking the teacher how the student is progressing keeps group instruction on target for my students. I also ask staff if they would like to meet with me to brainstorm some activity ideas or if they’d like to borrow some materials. For example, together we might decide that counting sets should be done daily at snack time and that I will make some laminated placemats with sets to count on them. We might agree that puzzles should be a part of small-group time at least once a week and that I will lend them some four-piece puzzles because they have so few. This give and take goes a long way toward promoting relevant activities for all the children.

Discuss Ways to Engage the Child.

Providing typical group instruction related to the IEP objectives may be insufficient, in some cases, for the child with a disability. The instruction must be presented in a manner that is effective for that individual child. The itinerant teacher should periodically observe group instruction times to see how the student is doing.

If the child with a disability is not paying attention or doesn’t seem to be catching on to the material, then the itinerant teacher can offer suggestions for making instruction more effective. In my experience these suggestions might include using graduated guidance techniques (see box, “Graduated Guidance to the Rescue”) for small-group games and projects; modifying the materials or techniques used for storytime; or using more group responding during circle times.

Modifying Storytime. One of the most common forms of teacher-directed instruction in general education preschool programs is storytime. Teachers can address IEP objectives related to early literacy skills during this time. These objectives might include identifying the parts of a book, re-telling familiar stories, or answering comprehension questions after a story. “The challenge for teachers of young children with special needs is to adopt curriculum and procedures similar to, yet more structured than, those successfully used with nondisabled learners” (Katims, 1994, p. 66). The following are some easy suggestions:

• To make instruction more effective during storytimes, the itinerant teacher can talk with classroom staff about using more engaging materials, such as large-format “big-books,” flannel cut-outs, or stuffed figures backed with Velcro.

• Predictable stories might be recommended. “Predictable books and stories may, in some cases, afford young children a special kind of access because their predictable features directly aid, facilitate, and encourage the children to reconstruct the story independently” (Katims, 1994, p. 62).

• Providing children with a purpose for listening, that is not too challenging, can also help sustain their engagement during a story. For example, when reading Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, instruct the children to make wild-thing noises whenever they hear the words “wild thing” (Watson, Layton, & Pierce, 1994).

• Using props from real life to introduce stories can also help children relate personally to the story’s content and motivate them to listen.

• Frequently, I suggest repeated readings of a story. “Researchers have found that after repeated readings, children use more language and respond more frequently to questions in more complex ways than they do after hearing only a single reading of a story” (Watson et al., 1994, p. 140). One way to help this happen is to lend classroom teachers “big books.”
and send home a matching copy of the book in small format. Parents are asked to read the book several times at home before it is read at school. I have seen my student’s eyes light up when the big book is brought out and it is a familiar story.

**Choral Responding.** Large-group instruction can sometimes be ineffective for many children because they are not participating in an active enough way or because they are not getting enough opportunities to practice the skill that is being introduced.

Santos and Lignugaris/Kraft (1997) in a review of the literature describing instruction of young children with disabilities in natural environments concluded that when “presenting new materials, teachers should provide children with obligatory response situations within instructional arrangements that promote numerous response opportunities with clear reinforcement criteria” (p. 125). One technique that can increase the opportunities for children to respond during group times is choral responding. In my experience, large-group instruction in early childhood programs usually includes calendar, weather, show-and-tell, and instruction related to the current “theme.” The itinerant teacher can encourage classroom staff to develop a comfortable signal, such as “Simon says,” for cuing all the children to respond chorally during these types of activities. The itinerant teacher might want to demonstrate the pacing of this approach by taking a turn to lead a large-group activity.

**Level E: Create Separate Individual or Small-Group Instructional Times Specifically for the Direct Instruction of the Child with Special Needs**

This level of intervention is the least natural and requires that the itinerant teacher be directly involved in the instruction of preacademic skills with the child.

**Disadvantages.** This level has several disadvantages. It may single out the child with a disability and the skills learned in this artificial situation may not transfer to the classroom setting.

Wolery and Wilbers (1994) propose five guidelines to use when considering the creation of designated times for teaching selected skills:

1. Make the instructional time efficient and effective by using direct-instruction techniques such as response-prompting.
2. Keep the sessions short.
3. Try to include some children without disabilities to reduce the stigma of being singled out.
4. Be sure to provide opportunities for children to transfer the skills to other situations.
5. The instruction should be brisk, involve reviews of previous lessons, be monitored, be characterized by frequent feedback, and result in independent performance of the objectives.

**Advantages.** My colleagues and I use this level of intensity when site staff are not able to embed a sufficient amount of instruction for some objectives within classroom activities or when a child is extremely distractible.

**Final Thoughts**

Wesley et al. (2001), after interviewing 86 itinerant early interventionists, concluded that teachers who provide consultation services should be viewed as “scientist-practitioners.”

Because there is little support in the literature for consultation practices that rely on an eclectic approach, the field needs to bring researchers and practitioners together to develop a sound conceptual and empirical base for consultation practice in early intervention. (p. 125)

As more itinerant teachers share their personal experiences, the best methods for providing itinerant services will become clearer; and recommendations will be established for the types of settings where these services can be most successful. I am hopeful that over time the itinerant model will become a reliable and effective service-delivery option for young children and their families.

**References**


