

## Real-Life Success

# Bridging the Gap Between General Education and Special Education: The ImPACT of Universal Design for Learning

As the author of the research-based teaching framework called T.H.E. P.A.C.T., I collaborate with and train numerous teaching staff and related services across the United States and in Canada. I have supported countless teachers – both in general education and special education – in their daily work and also in our research studies across North America. And, unfortunately, I can say that, since completing a fellowship at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1988, many of the same problems continue to exist in education, regardless of the year on the calendar or the postal code of the location.

### AGE-OLD ISSUES AND A PERSISTENT MYTH IN EDUCATION

Time and time again, staff members, in both general education and special education, attempt to cover an incredible amount of information in an unrealistic, often impossible, amount of time. This instruction is

typically delivered in days filled with multiple things to do and simply not enough time in which to do them.

Staff rarely get time to collaborate to be on the same page. Because of these time constraints, they are frequently forced to take a reactive approach to instruction and differentiation, as opposed to a proactive one, often not knowing what the other person is doing. I know this because I spend a great deal of time in schools, supporting teaching staff, in days where I typically have less than 180 seconds to go to the bathroom each day! Sound familiar?

The longstanding myth in education is that learners receiving specialized services need much “different” teaching strategies than those that can be used in the classroom in order to succeed in their least restrictive environment or general education setting. The TRUTH of the matter is that the successful, research-based strategies used with our learners in special education should be used

with students of all abilities, in any general education classroom.

It is also important to remember that good content does not always equal sound instruction. A vast amount of curriculum content is not delivered in “bite-sized” chunks in the classroom, nor in a language-based sequence, that best foster understanding and demonstration of knowledge that our students need, regardless of ability, in order to meet the standards. Although educational plans are in place “on paper” for our students with disabilities, teams continue to struggle with meaningful inclusion of these learners, ranging from kindergarten to high school.

The chances are that, during the brief time you have been reading this article, you have already thought of some of your very own classroom teachers and educational team members, serving learners with varying abilities, who are experiencing these same problems. In fact, you probably are too!



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## THE CRUCIAL MISSING PIECE

The fundamental fact is that multisensory learning techniques reach all students in any setting. This is the crucial missing piece that exists between general education and special education. Multisensory teaching needs to be used consistently in both settings!

Integrating these multisensory strategies into a system of instruction, to guarantee the principles of Universal Design for Learning in the general education classroom, is essential when making it both “doable” and “sustainable” in a jam-packed school day. At any grade level, sequencing instruction into “connect-the-dot” lessons is essential for any learner’s brain to reduce cognitive load in the learning process. Using a system of instruction in the classroom assists with making this become a reality.

In addition, it is important to explicitly teach all language components in each lesson, so that we do not cut corners, in what I refer to as “drive-by” lessons, and assume knowledge of language that learners do not possess. Teaching staff sometimes need to be reminded of this, as I often see that they know their content so well, that many times they forget what it is like to “not know it.”

For example, Terry Griffin, Assistant Professor at Westfield State University in Westfield, Massachusetts, describes, “Through T.H.E. P.A.C.T. framework that Phyl has authored, this four-module, research-based approach to learning does a wonderful job of making the ‘too often invisible’ language of all curriculum ‘VISIBLE’ to learners of any ability.” This professor goes on to explain that, through the framework’s color-coded modules of “Learn About, Read About, Write About and Talk About,” students of all abilities become proficient in the key areas of language in the classroom. See image 1.

## THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What type of impact is this really having in the trenches when bridging the gap between general education and special education?

### Bridging the Gap: Real-Life Success Stories

To help answer this question, we will examine the largest, multi-district School Administrative Unit (SAU) in New Hampshire: SAU 29. So, let me now introduce you to the real-life success in Joanne Sullivan’s kindergarten classroom at Benjamin Franklin El-

ementary School in Keene, New Hampshire, which consists of a diverse group of 20 students. This teacher has typical developing students in her classroom, as well as learners with moderate to severe developmental disabilities and students who are English language learners from China, Taiwan, Canada, Mexico, India, Pakistan and Malaysia.

Joanne explains, “My goal of meeting or exceeding the needs of every child in my class has been achieved using T.H.E. P.A.C.T. This program is designed to help all teachers create lessons that can meet the needs of learners of any ability within an inclusionary setting.” This kindergarten teacher has become a master at “learning for all” at any developmental level for her students using

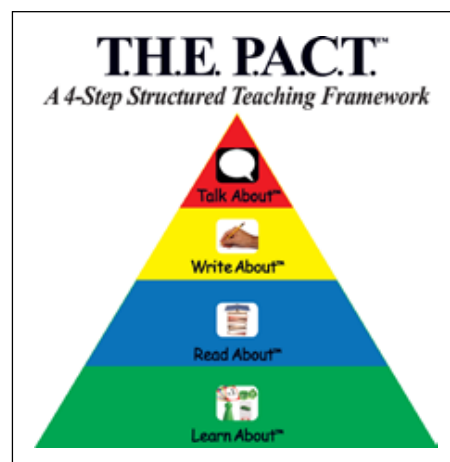


Image 1: Build Comprehension to Improve Expression



Photo 2: Explicitly Teaching Language to Learners of All Abilities in General Education



Photo 3: A UDL Blueprint for Building True Comprehension



this system of instruction. See photo 2.

Joanne truly delivers universal design for learning, in collaboration with special education staff and specialists in her building, in each of her classroom lessons, when building solid comprehension of curriculum content in the Learn About and Read About Modules of the framework, aligned to the Language and Reading Strands of the Common Core Standards. See photo 3.

This has resulted in expanding the students' expression of what they learned, in the Write About and Talk About Modules, for both the Writing Strand and Speaking and Listening Strand. Joanne, who is nominated for the 2015 New Hampshire Teacher of the Year, describes, "Using T.H.E. P.A.C.T., I have successfully taught lessons in every subject using differentiated instruction with very creative teaching techniques."

The special educator serving this kindergarten classroom, Jessica Hall, shares that she knows that her students are receiving what they need in this classroom since the teacher is using the framework related to inclusive lessons for her students with moderate to severe disabilities. Long gone are the days of this special educator "knocking on the door of regular ed" to politely ask to make an accommodation or change in the classroom instruction. The reason for this is that all of the students in the general education classroom, regardless of ability, are participating in research-based, best practice teaching formats that provide multisensory instruction using quick and easy accessible learning tools.

To further foster collaboration, Joanne also actively works with Jack Tibbons, the English Language Learner (ELL) teacher, who has been trained in the framework's foundational principles. In a co-teaching model, with the help of technology - including the new and comprehensive app system for T.H.E. P.A.C.T. - called the iPACT™ - this kindergarten class learned about different countries throughout the entire school year. See photo 4.

In sum, Joanne Sullivan's kindergarten classroom is one of the many real-life success stories of bridging the gap between general education and special education in southern New Hampshire. And, just a few miles across town is Fuller Elementary School, in this same SAU, where Cindie Bunn, first grade teacher, has mastered making her curriculum planning easier, while also provid-

ing meaningful inclusion.

From science to social studies, Cindie creatively, yet methodically, teaches her curriculum content in "Learn About, Read About, Write About and Talk About" skill-building lessons. Each student is equally included in this first grade learning community – from learners who are gifted, to those on the autism spectrum. Cindie not only completes joint planning with her special educator and instructional support staff, but also has regular dialogue with the intensive needs facilitator of the Communication Disorders Collaborative housed in this school.

This is not because Cindie has lots of time



Photo 4: The Delivery System of Direct Alignment to the Common Core



Photo 5: Increasing Learner Engagement with the iPACT App System



Photo 6: Using the Talk About Module to Determine Baseline Knowledge

of her choice to her system of instruction, they are kept in the loop as it relates to module assignment. From hands-on projects to iPad lessons using the iPACT, the level of learner engagement and interest is high in

these “connect-the-dots” skill-building lessons - not only between the teaching staff and students, but also between the students themselves! See photo 5.

Another aspect of Cindie’s creative teaching involves how she gains baseline information about what her students know about a curriculum topic prior to teaching the unit. At the start of each topic, this first grade teacher conducts baseline exercises in a kickoff “Talk About” lesson prior to diving into the teaching of the Learn About and Read About Modules to build comprehension. One baseline example uses a Talk About Bag, filled with curriculum images, and the classroom Talk About Board, containing the students’ photos with corresponding speech bubbles.

In this assessment, students pull an image out of the bag and share what they “know” about the vocabulary item. Their sharing information is then entered into their speech bubble on the Talk About Board. Next, Cindie has the student place the vocabulary item on the classroom Learn About Board, as she labels it, while stating something like, “\_\_\_\_\_ is a vocabulary word you are going to learn more about on our topic of \_\_\_\_\_.” Upon completion of the Learn About, Read About and Write About modules in the instructional unit, the Talk About sharing activity is then repeated to serve as a compare and contrast of knowledge acquisition in her classroom. See photo 6.

Another school in SAU 29 in Keene, New Hampshire, is Wheelock School, where teachers are drawing a line from the Common Core Standards to each module of T.H.E. P.A.C.T. in their classroom instructional delivery. The principal, Gwen Mitchell, shared that her goal is to use the framework school-wide, K through 5, in a multi-year plan, because it is “so easy to wrap your head around” when meeting the needs of all learners in the classroom.

This principal’s desire is to expand the number of classroom teachers and special education staff that are currently using the framework in this “Year-One” initiative, and reports that many of her staff are, on district-wide early release days, incorporating the four-module approach as an overall structure for their district-wide Common Core projects. See photo 7.

Principal Mitchell reports that both kindergartens, the third grade classroom, fourth grade settings and two fifth grade classrooms are, as part of this “Year-One” initiative, currently implementing this structured teaching framework within their own teaching styles in general education. In ad-

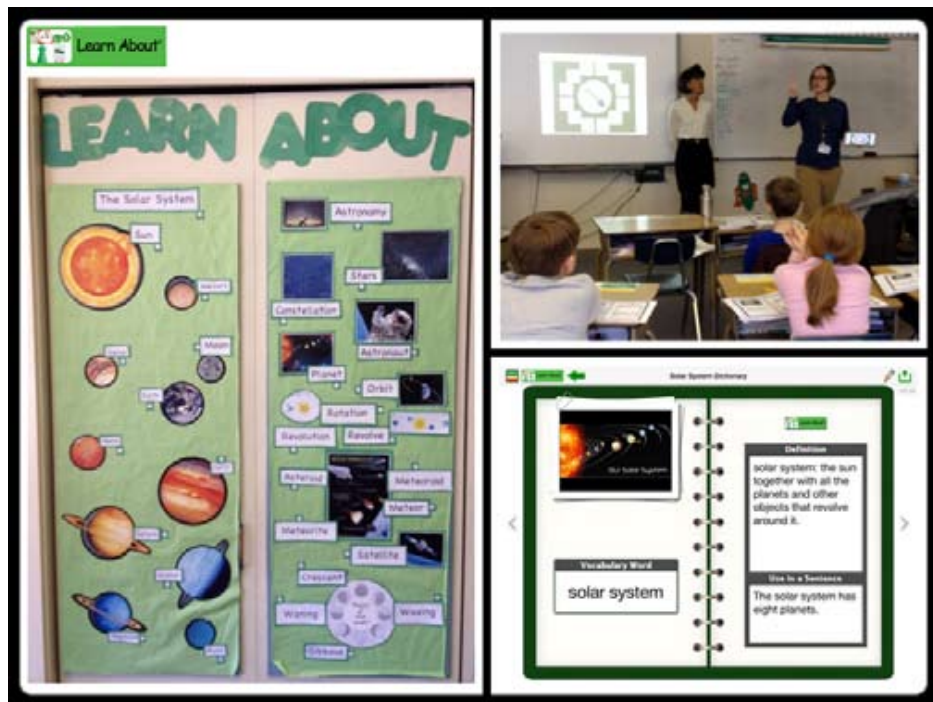


Photo 7: Kristy Symonds, Third Grade Teacher, Uses Accessible Learning Boards and the iPACT to Assure Universal Design for Learning



Photo 8: Students of All Abilities Succeed in Morris Kimura's, Fifth Grade Classroom



dition, speech-language services are having a greater presence in classrooms, as well as special education instructional support

staff aligning their small group instruction to the framework's principles of systemized teaching. See photo 8.

## THE DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORTS THE RESULTS

To further explain the impact of this broad-based initiative in southern New Hampshire, Catherine Woods, Director of Special Education in SAU 29, sat down with me to answer key questions:



### Question:

**Can you please describe the differences you have seen in your multi-district school administrative unit as it relates to “Pre-PACT” and “Post-PACT” outcomes for your student population?**

“Prior to using T.H.E. P.A.C.T. – “Pre-PACT” – the instructional lessons did not connect as well as they could have and were sometimes disjointed. Staff would jump in with great content; however, it was almost as if the instruction started in the middle of what they should be teaching and did not include an adequate amount of time teaching strong vocabulary skills.

“Our “Post-PACT” is a totally different story. Students of all abilities now have a richer understanding of the content they are learning because of this scaffolded teaching model. The lessons in both general education and specialized instruction are better planned, flow in an engaging way and have meaningful closure.

“The ‘Post-PACT’ performance of our students is showing that their confidence level is very high due to their increased comprehension of the content. Also, their overall participation in the classroom has significantly improved.

“Our students are not simply answering memorized responses to learned questions. We are not ‘teaching to the test’ here. Our students have successful ‘strategies’ to use for any topic of instruction to help them succeed.”

### Question:

**I know that you have worked on deploying a multi-year, SAU-wide plan - K through 12 - and are continuing to expand this initiative. Now this expansion includes transitioning students into the workplace. Could you please share how T.H.E. P.A.C.T. framework has changed the planning time and delivery of instruction for both special education and regular education settings in your SAU to date?**

“The immediate result of using T.H.E. P.A.C.T. framework is true collaboration between general education and special education. This framework initiative has increased co-teaching across our entire district, which has lead to more meaningful inclusion of our learners receiving specialized instruction in the general education classroom.

“Our staff are working more effectively because they are working ‘smarter, not harder’ – utilizing time-efficient planning using the framework’s principles of incorporating consistent teaching formats and joint lesson planning to foster collaboration.

“Any teacher can have good curriculum content, but this does not necessarily assure thorough instruction. And this definitely does not guarantee Universal Design for Learning in the regular ed classroom setting.

“To sum it all up, because of T.H.E. P.A.C.T., our staff members are now having results-oriented conversations with each other about sound instruction.”

## RESOURCE INFORMATION:

iPACT™ App System: iTunes App Store. Available in June 2014. For more information, go to: [theiPACT.com](http://theiPACT.com)

Development Team: Mark Larson, Fio Quinn, and Phyl T. Macomber

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