



Amanda Ramoutar

## A Framework to Guide

# Special Education Practice in Small Schools



Special education is an approach to providing equitable learning for students with identified disabilities through specially designed instruction.<sup>1</sup> The approach is often criticized for demanding too many resources, including specially trained teachers, dedicated settings, and specialized equipment.<sup>2</sup> As such, small schools may typically appear less than capable of implementing special education practices. These schools are characterized by a small student population, few staff members, and multigrade classrooms.

Often, teachers working in small private schools raise concerns about what constitutes special education practice, what types of evidence count as such practice, and the practical ways these can be identified. Classroom teachers working in small private schools can implement special education pedagogical practices and meet the individual needs of learners in a myriad of ways, even within the confines of limited resources. The framework shared below can help capture evidence of special education in action. This tool is theoretically informed and can be used to fit the context of small schools.

### The Teacher's Dilemma: Examples From Small Schools

Leanna<sup>3</sup> is a 3rd- and 4th-grade teacher of all subjects except music and physical education. Despite being in her eighth year of teaching, she feels unprepared with knowledge in special education other than having taken one class for her undergraduate degree. She has a strong desire to learn all that she can to gain better tools to help her students succeed. She has recognized over the years that she continues to face more and more students with special needs.

Peter has taught kindergarten through 2nd grade and 5th through 8th grade over the past 15 years. At his small school, he is often called upon to take on a variety of roles when issues arise. For example, he is the resident mediator and is often called upon to help de-escalate classroom disruptions, some of which are triggered by a student's needs not being met. Sometimes he serves as a counselor, providing a listening ear to peers unsure of how to meet the needs of learners. As a result, he has felt frustration and helplessness as he watched students in lower grades with emerging special needs but not knowing exactly what to do or when to begin interventions.

Bridget works at an early-childhood education through 8th-grade school where she teaches English as a second language, Spanish, and music to approximately 140 students. She has noted that through the past decade, more and more students have been struggling to connect or process the information she teaches. She wants to find ways for her classroom to be a safe environment for students, and she wants them to enjoy their experiences in her classroom.

All of the three teachers in the examples above have experienced being unable to successfully meet their learners' needs as they would have liked. Research suggests that while there continues to be a level of concern related to the increased workload that results from responding to the needs of students with special needs in classrooms, generally, teachers working in small schools are in support of accepting students with mild disabilities into their setting. Still, teachers desire validation that they are indeed using the right kinds of strategies and other instructional resources.<sup>4</sup> It is evident that few small schools have clearly defined procedures for assisting students with special educational needs.

### **What Counts as Evidence of Special Education in Small Schools?**

In the United States, some private schools benefit from collaborative partnerships for special education services provision with public school districts due to the intentional efforts of school administrators who have worked to develop this relationship. However, services for students placed in private schools by parents are not legally guaranteed. In public schools, however, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)<sup>5</sup> mandates the supports and services that must be offered in order to ensure that the needs of learners with disabilities are met. Upon recognizing that a student is not responding to instruction successfully, the teacher can initiate a referral, after which the school district intervenes to have the child evaluated. If he or she is deemed eligible for special education, an entire multidisciplinary

team is involved in creating and implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the student to receive services (where necessary) and tailored instruction. All of this includes parental involvement and is provided at no cost to the families because of the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) principle of IDEA. (See Sidebar.)

Unlike structured systems in public schools, small private schools are often challenged by an overwhel-

### **Sidebar. Essential Facts About Special Education**

**S**pecial education should be recognized as a service and not as a place, such as a specific classroom or with a specific teacher. There are 13 disability categories identified by the U.S. Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Research indicates that of the 13 disability categories recognized by the IDEA, learning disabilities are most prevalent in classrooms across the United States when compared to the other categories. These categories alert educators that special education services should be provided for students whose educational performance is impacted as a result of their disability. Disabilities can range in severity from mild to profound, and the categories are: (1) emotional disturbance, also known as emotional/behavioral disorders, (2) deaf-blindness, (3) autism spectrum disorder, (4) hearing impairment, (5) visual impairment, (6) multiple disabilities, (7) intellectual disability, (8) other health impairment, (9) specific learning disability, (10) speech or language impairment, (11) traumatic brain injury, (12) orthopedic impairment, and (13) developmental delay. Special education services are also provided for students identified as being gifted/talented in some states. Learn more about IDEA and types of special-needs students may be diagnosed with from the U.S. Department of Education by visiting <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>.

For students with diagnosed special needs, consideration is usually given to a continuum of options for educational placement, ranging from the least-restrictive environment (general education classroom) to most-restrictive environment (residential care/treatment facility). A significant guideline of IDEA is that learners with identified disabilities should be included in general education classes along with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

Students with severe and profound disabilities are often not served in the general education setting because their needs cannot be met satisfactorily there. Educators working in small, private schools should note that students with mild high-incidence needs such as high-functioning autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disability, emotional/behavioral disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (classified under other health impairments), and mild intellectual disability may be included for learning in their classrooms. Learn more at <https://www.ncl.org/news/newsroom/the-state-of-ld-understanding-the-1-in-5/> and <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>.

ming lack of resources, so enacting such a multi-faceted response may be difficult. This by no means suggests that small schools cannot or should not respond. So, how can special education be done in small private schools? Special education in action is about good teaching, and good teaching is based on instructional best practices. Therefore, any teacher willing to enact best practices for the delivery of instruction will be providing special education for his or her students. Best practices are most often applied after engaging in specialized teacher preparation training or professional development related to special education. Such opportunities for training are available through university degree programs and short courses. For teachers with little time and financial resources to invest in ongoing development, options such as online learning, open-access courses, and scholarship opportunities may be explored.

As educators in small schools consider distinctive teaching and learning decisions, they make in support of their commitment to “work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord . . . ,”<sup>6</sup> the Special Education in Action Framework presented on page 51 can be used.

### **Framework to Evidence Special Education Practice**

The Special Education In Action Framework is a tool for analysis that permits teachers to move past a description of theoretical ideas toward a deeper understanding of the practical ways they can implement special-education pedagogy. With the knowledge that small schools and multigrade classrooms are powerful and productive starting points for providing high-quality instruction,<sup>7</sup> this framework links evidence-based best practices to the features of classrooms and observable teaching practices.

Furthermore, the framework

documents the link between theory and practice. Using the framework, teachers can show how they are responsive to identified needs and provide specially designed instruction. As can be seen, the framework links classroom practices that are within reach of any teacher, even those with limited financial and human resources, with the assumptions that underpin them based on the ethos of education. These are aligned with concepts that are relevant to best practices in education and challenges believed to inhibit the provision of special education.



## The Special Education in Action Framework

Assumption	Related Concept	Key Challenge	Classroom Practice Evidence
1. Each student is of inestimable value.	Human-rights conventions proposed by the United Nations detail that everyone has the right to education, should be treated with dignity, and that education should prepare students for life. <sup>8</sup>	Giving focus to personnel and infrastructural limitations.	<p>The teacher creates a classroom environment that encourages a sense of belonging, highlights students' strengths, and provides meaningful opportunities for students to improve on identified weaknesses.</p> <p>The teacher does not complain to students about how difficult teaching them is or that he or she lacks the necessary support and services.</p> <p>The teacher sets high yet reasonable expectations for students to allow them to maximize their potential.</p>
2. The teacher frequently assesses learning and is aware of each student's progress or lack thereof.	Response to Intervention (RTI) uses a teach-and-assess approach in the general education classroom to document progressively intensive interventions or strategies that have been used with the student. <sup>9</sup>	Lack of knowledge about what to do when a student is not showing progress.	<p>The teacher keeps a log of each student's performance after an assessment is given. This data is used to determine if concepts must be retaught.</p> <p>When concepts are retaught, the teacher researches another method to get the concepts across to the students, understanding that the original approach was ineffective. This is repeated multiple times until progress is achieved.</p> <p>The teacher provides clear demonstrations of skills and examples of concepts and provides students with multiple opportunities to practice what they have learned.</p>
3. Lesson planning occurs with students' needs in mind.	Differentiated instruction (DI) is based on equity pedagogy and is a response to diverse learner needs through the provision of accommodations and modifications. <sup>10</sup>	Aiming to cover curricular content and insufficiently adapting instruction to student differences.	<p>The teacher gives accommodations to students who require them.</p> <p>The teacher makes modifications to lesson outcome expectations for learners with identified needs.</p> <p>The teacher measures students' success based on predetermined individualized expectations and not in comparison to peers.</p>
4. Others are willing to help.	Collaborative consultation is an ongoing process and is interactive in such that expertise, knowledge, and experience are shared voluntarily for the purpose of problem-solving. <sup>11</sup>	Making the right connections with those who can help.	<p>The teacher brainstorms about effective instructional approaches with other educators. On-location and remote consultations are utilized as necessary.</p> <p>The teacher makes use of technological and pedagogical resources accessible through the World Wide Web.</p> <p>The teacher seeks out professional-development opportunities to further build instructional competencies.</p>
5. Families are willing to partner with the school.	Family-school partnership involves collaboration to support and improve the learning and development of the student. <sup>12</sup>	Parents and other family members defer to the school or are unengaged.	<p>The teacher communicates regularly with parents about the student's progress and alerts them to what instructional goals are being worked on.</p> <p>The teacher empowers families to support the learner by providing strategies they can utilize at home.</p> <p>The teacher advocates for the child by making recommendations of external service providers that families can access to further support the learner's development.</p>



It is important to remember that while all the combined evidence outlined in on page 51 represents special education provisions, even when enacted in part, they still make a significant difference to the quality of instruction students receive. Simple actions on the part of the classroom teacher that serve to provide special education are a step in the right direction of meeting the needs of students.

Note also that some suggestions listed as classroom practice evidence may not directly solve the problems of lack of support, services, and personnel but are designed to not exacerbate the learning situation. The aim should be to respond to identified needs in the best possible way.

There are two main ways teachers in small schools can identify a student's educational needs. The first is through informal teacher observation during the delivery of instruction. The second is through formal, comprehensive evaluation reports, which can be accessed privately and paid for by parents, and the results can be shared with the school. In addition, a teacher may be able to identify which consultants might be helpful by reaching out to their public school district or completing an Internet search for resources available in their area. Educators in both large and small schools should also seek to develop professional-learning communities, which can serve as a resource for information sharing.

The variety of differences among learners—those considered nondisabled and those with mild disabilities in general education classrooms—begs consideration for making sure that responding to these differences becomes a regular part of classroom practice. Even in small private schools, each student should be given an equitable opportunity to achieve his or her full potential and not experience exclusion from participation. Remember that research-based strategies for working with learners in the classroom constitute special education practice. Also, note that any actions a teacher takes in the classroom to respond to identified needs count as evidence of special education practice. Additionally, a practical starting point for engaging in special education practice is that teachers should perform their duties from the viewpoint that each student is valuable; that students' progress should be monitored; that planning is needed to meet any student's needs; that others may be willing to help; and that families should be seen as partners in this work. ✍

---

*This resource article has been peer reviewed.*

---

**Amanda Ramoutar, MEd, MSc, CDP** is an Assistant Professor of Education and Psychology at Walla Walla University, College Place, Washington, U.S.A. She holds a BEd in Special Needs Education from the University of Trinidad and Tobago (Wallerfield, Trinidad), an MEd in inclusive and special education from the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad; and an MSc in psychology from the University of South Wales (Newport, Wales, U.K.). She is currently a PhD candidate in inclusive education at The University of the West Indies.

---

#### Recommended citation:

**Amanda Ramoutar**, "A Framework to Guide Special Education Practice in Small Schools," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 84:3 (2022): 48-52.

---

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. There are several definitions of special education that focus on meeting the identified individual needs of learners with disabilities. These include labels such as specific learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and emotional and behavioral disorder. Typically, students receive special-education support and services when their needs impact their educational performance.

2. James M. Kauffman et al., *Special Education: What It Is and Why We Need It* (London: Routledge, 2018).

3. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

4. Marcel A. A. Sargeant and Donna Berkner, "Seventh-day Adventist Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusion Classrooms and Identification of Challenges to Their Implementation," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 24:3 (2015): 224-251.

5. U.S. Department of Education, "Individuals With Disabilities Act" (2022): <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>.

6. Colossians 3:23, 24 Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

7. Jerome Thayer, Martha Havens, and Elissa Kido, "Small Schools: How Effective Are the Academics?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 77:3 (February/March 2015): 15: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201577031505.pdf>.

8. Mike Cole, ed., *Education, Equality and Human Rights: Issues of Gender, Race, Sexuality, Disability and Social Class* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022).

9. Debi Gartland and Roberta Strosnider, "The Use of Response to Intervention to Inform Special Education Eligibility Decisions for Students With Specific Learning Disabilities," *Learning Disability Quarterly* 43:4 (2020): 195-200.

10. Marieke van Geel et al., "Capturing the Complexity of Differentiated Instruction," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 30:1 (2019): 51-67.

11. Sylvia Rosenfield, *Instructional Consultation* (London: Routledge, 2013).

12. The IRIS Center, "Family Engagement: Collaborating With Families of Students With Disabilities" (2022): <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/fam/#content>.