Supporting the Unique Needs of Special Education Classrooms

AT PRINCETON HOUSE CHARTER SCHOOL

Teachers Pay Teachers
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INTRODUCTION

Teaching Special Education at Princeton House Charter School

At Princeton House Charter School (PHCS), a K-5 public charter school serving students with Autism in Orlando, Florida, every teacher is familiar with the unique joys of leading a classroom of exceptional students. Led by Principal Kim Gelalia and Assistant Principal Melissa Jones, PHCS is a school that aims to develop their students to be independent and self-sufficient, and every one of the school’s caring and talented teachers is dedicated to this pursuit.

However, the special education classroom is a unique environment that presents unique challenges. A teacher of exceptional learners must be prepared, flexible, creative, and collaborative in order to support the many abilities, behaviors, and communication styles in their classroom. Consequently, the support and resources a special education teacher has access to play a crucial role in the success of their classroom. With this in mind, PHCS school leaders chose to bring TpT School Access to their campus.

TpT School Access is a new, school-wide subscription from Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT) that gives teachers immediate access to a library of over 3 million engaging, standards-aligned resources, including a vast selection of resources for special education. Read on to discover what the TpT research team learned about the challenges special education teachers face and the role TpT School Access plays in helping to solve them.

PRINCETON HOUSE CHARTER SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orlando, FL</td>
<td>K-5 public charter serving students with Autism</td>
<td>15 teachers plus therapists, teaching assistants, and other support staff</td>
<td>131 students</td>
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Research Methods

The research team at TpT conducted a qualitative case study to understand the unique challenges teachers at PHCS face when leading special education classrooms. The research team sought to understand how teachers plan, how they use the instructional materials they’re provided, and how materials from TpT fit into their practice. The team conducted eight hours of interviews with teachers and school leaders (n=7). They also spent a total of four hours observing a variety of classrooms and after-school instructional planning. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and observational data was analyzed to uncover the themes shared in this case.

THE CHALLENGE

The Need for Additional Planning and Materials to Support a Diverse Student Population

What makes the role of a special educator particularly challenging is the number and diversity of needs in a classroom of exceptional children. Special education teachers must support not only their students’ academic needs, but also their behavioral, communication, physical needs and more. However, even though they have many additional needs to accommodate in their classrooms, special educators must often operate without adequate materials that are suited to these needs. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), over two-thirds of teachers of students with exceptionalities modify their curriculum to support their individual student’s needs either most of the time or always.¹

Fig. 1

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Similar to other teachers of exceptional students, PHCS teachers were modifying and supplementing their materials in order to help their students make progress. PHCS teachers are provided the same curricular materials as the general education teachers in their district, but these materials often don’t suit their students’ different abilities, communication styles, IEP goals, and behaviors. As Assistant Principal Jones states, “Given all the needs of our students, I don’t think traditional curriculum can meet all those needs.”

As a result, despite having several hours of planning built into their school weeks, most teachers at PHCS cited that planning for their students was their biggest classroom challenge. When asked about the challenges she faces leading her classroom, Ms. U responded, “We have the readers, the non-readers, the in-between readers. [...] Those three groups [...] are doing three different things. So it’s like teaching three different classes at all times, and that’s tough. Planning for that is really hard."

To meet the many needs in their classrooms, teachers must devote significant amounts of time to tailoring lessons and materials to their students. PHCS teacher Ms. S confirms this, stating, “I would have to make my own things, and it would take a really long time. I would have to work at least 10, 15, 20 extra hours sometimes.” In the special education community broadly, the CEC reports that 79% of special education teachers cite having no time or insufficient time to plan and collaborate with their teaching teams.² Given the diverse student population they work with, having insufficient materials places a significant extra burden on teachers of exceptional students.


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MELISSA JONES
Assistant Principal

Fig. 2

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Teacher-Created Resources for Special Education

To manage the need for additional materials, many special education teachers turn to resources from TpT. Special education has always been an important part of the fabric of TpT, from when the first special education resource was published in 2006 to today, where in 2019, over 17 million special education resources were downloaded and over 270,000 special educators have accessed resources from the site. Teachers of exceptional students have found TpT to be a reliable source for instructional materials that will meet their students’ needs.

Included among the special educators who use TpT are PHCS teachers. They report that they’re able to trust the materials on TpT because they’re created by educators like them. Says Ms. H about the resources she finds on TpT, “You know it’s created by teachers for teachers [...] by people who understand the needs of a diverse student population.” Not only do PHCS teachers trust the materials on TpT, they’re able to find a wealth of resources that are appropriate for special education classrooms. “I definitely think TpT is great for special educators. A lot of times it’s hard to find things that are modified, and you can actually find things that are [on TpT],” says Ms. S.

Recognizing that their teachers were already turning to TpT for instructional materials, PHCS school leaders adopted TpT School Access to help their teachers meet the diverse needs of their students. Says Principal Kim Gelalia about the decision to bring TpT School Access to their school, “I knew that teachers would really utilize [TpT School Access] and it would be a great support system for them.” The experience of PHCS teachers and the impact they’ve seen in their classrooms demonstrates just that: TpT School Access is a vital support.
The School-Wide Impact of TpT School Access

At PHCS, TpT School Access has provided a much needed support to teachers. Specifically, in our conversations with educators throughout the school about the impact TpT School Access has had in their classrooms, two themes emerged. First, using their subscription, teachers have been able to access resources suited to their students’ needs, allowing teachers to deliver individualized instruction to their students. Second, their subscription has opened up new ways for them to partner with their colleagues for inspiration and support.

Providing Resources to Meet the Unique Needs of Exceptional Students

At PHCS, TpT School Access provides teachers with a wide array of materials at a variety of levels so that they can support the diverse student needs in their classrooms. Using their subscription, teachers are able to supplement, and occasionally replace, the limited materials they’ve received from their school. Say Assistant Principal Jones, “I think our teachers find TpT School Access helpful because all of our teaching has to be individualized, so we need a lot more materials. [...] Having all those different types of materials in one space and having access to them at any time you want, I think, is really helpful to them.”

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The value of additional materials that are suited to the needs of a special education classroom cannot be understated. In fact, the CEC found that teachers of exceptional students rank adequate resources to meet IEP requirements as the most important criteria for their success. They ranked it as more important than smaller class sizes, professional development, access to technology, and more.³ When observing classrooms across PHCS, the value of additional materials is apparent. In Ms. S’s class, for instance, as her students sat at three stations around the room, she and her two teaching assistants rotated between the tables carrying plastic document boxes with the materials they needed for each activity. Within the stations, instruction was differentiated. At one station, for example, each student completed a different version of the same writing activity, with one student using an assistive device while doing so. To support this level of differentiation, access to adequate resources is imperative.

“Visuals are important for our students because, a lot of times, some of our students can’t read words, or they have difficulties with sight words [...] or sometimes their attention is more grasped towards a picture.” In Ms. H’s classroom, visual resources, and specifically those from TpT, have also been beneficial to her students. Her class had been learning about pronouns, and after completing worksheets provided in her standard curriculum, her students needed additional support to master the concepts. She stated, “My students still needed a little bit more help with it, and something that’s a little more visual, and something that holds their attention better.” She was able to find an interactive activity from TpT that met that need and engaged her students in their learning.

As special education teachers seek to meet the specific needs of their students, they need access to a vast array of resources that are appropriate for their classrooms in order to accomplish this goal. While many teachers of exceptional students are operating without adequate resources, PHCS teachers are demonstrating what’s possible when this reality is changed. As a result of their TpT School Access subscription and the resources it provides, PHCS teachers are better able to differentiate and tailor their instruction to their students’ specific needs.

Supporting Collaboration and Connection Among Educators

In addition to providing special education teachers with resources that are suitable for their students, PHCS teachers have found that their TpT School Access subscription has provided them with additional opportunities to connect with their colleagues and administration for support.

Being able to connect and collaborate is particularly important for special educators. Fundamentally, managing a special education classroom is team-based work, and a special educator must partner with school psychologists, behavioral therapists, speech language pathologists, and others to meet the needs of their students. By connecting with their colleagues, special educators can support one another in planning effective lessons, navigating documentation, and making use of important tools specific to a special education setting. For example, in her first year of teaching, Ms. D worked with a more experienced teacher to learn how to use the visuals provided in her classroom. Ultimately, this connection allowed her to better communicate with her students who require visual aids. Another teacher at the school, Ms. T, reiterated the need for support from her colleagues. She states, “It’s constant collaboration and reaching out to other people.”

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DID YOU KNOW?

Teachers of exceptional students rank adequate resources to meet IEP requirements as the most important criteria for their success.⁴

TpT School Access promotes connection within a school in two ways. First, principals are able to view the instructional choices teachers are making and offer guidance for those who need it. Second, teachers can see what resources their colleagues are using, allowing them to learn what’s working in other classrooms. Says Mr. W, “It’s been amazing because I can also see what other teachers are downloading in our school [...] I can look and see what other teachers are downloading and think, ‘That’s a really good idea. That’s a great resource. I’ll download that too.’” Ms. S has had a similarly positive experience connecting with her colleagues through TpT School Access. She appreciates that she can see what other teachers at her school have downloaded because, if they’re working on a similar concept, she can find out if there are any resources that are working well for them, and she can use them herself. She states, “With TpT School Access, what’s nice is that we all work together in the school. [...] I can go and see what they downloaded and I can download the same exact thing [...] It’s helpful to see what someone else is using because you know it’s a reliable source.”

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Ms. S
PHCS teacher

Beyond connecting within the walls of their school, TpT School Access connects teachers to the expertise of a broader network of experienced educators. In fact, there are currently 12,590 special education teacher-creators on TpT School Access and over 119,000 special education resources. PHCS teachers express that they benefit from being a part of this wider network. For example, Ms. H explains that seeing the topics and materials that are helping other experienced special education teachers on TpT has provided a means for her to learn more about best practices she could bring to her classroom. “Sometimes I’ll just poke around TpT, and I’ll see what’s trending right now. What are other teachers working on? I use the trending lists to help me,” she says.

For special educators, opportunities to connect with their administration and colleagues are invaluable. The perspectives of educators at PHCS underscore this. In order to support their special education teachers, school leaders must look for opportunities to create connections among the educators at their school so that every educator can receive the support and guidance they need in their career. At PHCS, TpT School Access is helping to create these connections, promoting visibility across the school and allowing teachers to turn to one another for advice and guidance. In a school environment where collaboration is important, it’s a tool that is helping teachers share and connect in a whole new way.

**Currently on TpT School Access:**

- **12,590** special education teacher-creators
- **119,000+** special education resources
Key Takeaways

The diversity of needs in a special education classroom presents a considerable challenge to teachers of exceptional students, especially given that these teachers are often lacking sufficient materials to support these needs. However, at PHCS, because school leaders recognize the importance of providing their teachers with the resources and support they need, they brought TpT School Access to their school to help mitigate these challenges. As a result, PHCS teachers benefit from TpT School Access in the following ways:

- **It provides them with resources that meet the diverse array of needs in a special education classroom.**
  With 12,590 special education teacher-creators and over 3 million classroom materials to choose from, teachers are able to find materials suited to their students’ needs, alleviating the burden of constantly adapting limited materials.

- **It allows them to connect with other educators for expertise and support.**
  Using TpT School Access, teachers are finding more inspiration within their school community, and they’re connecting to the expertise of a broader network of experienced educators.

It’s important for school leaders to recognize the specific challenges special education teachers face and to create opportunities for these educators to receive the support they need. Access to adequate materials is essential for these educators, as is access to a community of other teachers. When we provide these supports to special education teachers, we ultimately ensure that all of our exceptional students thrive.
Want to learn more about TpT School Access?

Visit bit.ly/tptschoolaccess