

People Are Not Supports: Understanding the difference between supports, strategies, and resources in educational contexts

By Dr. Shelley Moore

What are Supports?


In many educational conversations, the term "support" has evolved into a multifaceted concept that is often misused and misunderstood. This is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the role of Educational Assistants (EAs) or paraprofessionals. While many educators, families, and students advocate for increased support through the hiring of EAs, it is essential to clarify that EAs themselves are not the support; rather, they can be supportive agents within the educational framework (Bennett et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2015). This distinction is crucial for understanding how to effectively address the needs of students in inclusive education settings.

To unpack this notion, January 2025's Five Moore Minutes episode targets four key terms: [needs](#), [supports](#), [strategies](#), and [resources](#). Each of these components play an important role in shaping the educational experiences of students, particularly those with disabilities. Understanding these terms also supports advocacy efforts to create a more inclusive environment that fosters independence, agency, and self-determination among students (Chiedu, 2024).

Understanding Key Terms

Needs refer to the inherent difficulties that individuals may face in as they navigate learning. Each student possesses unique needs that can influence their educational experiences and are impacted by the environments that they are learning in. Students with executive functioning needs, for example, may struggle with organization, time management, and memory. This need, although inherent, may be exacerbated by barriers or, may feel less limiting when barriers are reduced or eliminated, within the learning context.


Part of understanding needs-based planning, however, is considering that student needs are not merely obstacles to be removed, barriers in the environment are. Instead, needs are considered integral aspects of the individual that must be supported within the educational and learning environment (Shogren et al., 2016).



The recognition of student needs is important in developing effective support systems that empower students rather than merely trying to fix their deficits or eliminate their needs (D'Intino, 2022). As seen in this month's Five Moore Minute video, Dr. Shelley Moore, shares personal anecdotes related to her own executive functioning needs, such as misplacing keys or forgetting appointments. These experiences highlight the broader need for support systems that can assist individuals in navigating their environments, or enable them, rather than viewing executive functioning as an impairment that requires fixing within the individual (Rivera-Urbina et al., 2023). The acknowledgment of these needs is the first step toward creating an inclusive educational environment that respects and accommodates individual differences (Wehmeyer et al., 2021) and needs as a part of their unique identity (Rivera-Urbina et al., 2023).

Supports are the tools that help individuals in managing their needs effectively. For instance, Dr. Moore shared how she uses a visual checklist placed by her door to remind her of essential items before leaving the house. This simple tool enhances her independence and helps her to navigate her executive functioning needs, not remove them. Similarly, in educational contexts, supports can take various forms, including technology, visual and hearing aids, checklists, graphic organizers, and other organizational and instructional tools that can facilitate learning (Akintayo, 2024; Cho et al., 2012). A key idea in needs-based planning, is understanding that the effectiveness of these supports relies on how well they are aligned to specific needs of the students they are designed to assist. Moreover, the instruction of the supports or tools, and when to use them, is key, so they can be most effectively used by a student (Akintayo, 2024; Cano et al., 2022)

Strategies are the proactive actions taken to utilize supports that aim to address needs. For example, a strategy or action that Dr. Moore shares, is to leave home earlier than necessary to ensure she catches the ferry on time. This approach not only alleviates stress but also promotes independence and agency (Licardo & Schmidt, 2016). In educational settings, strategies can include problem-solving techniques that empower students to take charge of their learning experiences like knowing when to take a break, using decoding strategies, asking questions, making connections, using an agenda or calendar, setting timers, sketching out ideas, making a list, or activating prior knowledge to name a few.




The distinction between supports and strategies is critical; while supports provide the necessary tools, strategies represent the actions taken to utilize those tools effectively (Cano et al., 2022; Chuang, 2014; Ulmane-Ozolins, 2015). This differentiation emphasizes the importance of teaching self-regulation skills rather than fostering dependency on external individuals (Chao & Chou, 2017). Similarly to supports, instruction must focus on teaching students how and when to use strategies to help them navigate their needs and enable their independence.

Finally, **resources** encompass the people, time, and funding necessary to access supports and implement strategies effectively. In educational contexts, resources are often misallocated, with a focus on attempting to "fix" a students' deficit area rather than equipping them with the tools to manage their needs and navigate their environments (Chen, 2017). The allocation of resources should prioritize the development of self-determination and agency among students, enabling them to advocate for themselves and navigate their unique needs effectively.

This utilization of resources is paramount for fostering an inclusive educational environment. Educators must assess how resources are allocated and ensure that they are directed toward needs-based planning that empowers students rather than attempting to change their intrinsic characteristics (Tindall et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2022). This approach aligns with the goal of creating inclusive and diverse communities where every student can belong without the expectation to assimilate into a dominate group. This involves creating individual and classroom support plans that address specific needs, and articulate the supports and strategies required to be taught that can promote independence among students.

The Role of the Educational Assistant

While EAs can provide valuable support to students, their presence, should not be misconstrued as the support itself. EAs can be useful figures who facilitate the use of supports and strategies, but when we rely on EAs as the tool, we risk diminishing student independence and self-determination, increase feelings of isolation, and reduce academic achievement for students, particularly those with disabilities (Doležalová, 2012; Devecchi et al., 2018).




Biggs et al. emphasize that the complexity of how we allocate and rely on educational assistants requires a clear understanding of their roles and the creation of guidelines for their effective use in educational settings (Biggs et al., 2016). Similarly, Carter et al. highlight the importance of training and guiding paraprofessionals within a structured support system, rather than relying solely on the presence of EAs in classrooms (Carter et al., 2015). This perspective is further supported by findings from Brock and Carter, who assert that the mere presence of paraprofessionals in general education settings does not guarantee improved outcomes for students with disabilities (Brock & Carter, 2015). All of this suggests that while EAs are important, they should be viewed as part of a broader system of supports rather than as the primary solution to inclusive education (Carter et al., 2015).

Moving Forward

Effective educational planning requires a clear understanding of students' needs and the development needs-based support plans for individual students and inclusive classrooms. Without a comprehensive plan, resources may be misused or fail to address the specific needs of students, ultimately hindering their independence and success. It is crucial to ensure that resources are allocated in ways that promote self-determination and agency rather than dependency.

So, what can we do? Here are four actions that stakeholders can reflect on to assist in their advocacy:

- **Needs-Based Planning:** Use resources to develop individualized and classroom support plans that articulate and prioritize specific needs of students and outline the supports and strategies required to address them in universal and layered ways.
- **Self-Determination & Agency:** Use resources to teach students what their needs are, and what supports and strategies can help them to navigate their needs in different contexts, fostering independence, self-determination and agency.
- **Critical Evaluation of Resource Allocation:** Assess how resources are currently being used, and advocate for changes that prioritize inclusion, needs-based support, and teacher and EA professional development opportunities that highlight inclusive practices.

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- **Collaboration and Communication:** Use resources to engage in ongoing dialogue with students, families, and educational professionals to ensure that resource allocation aligns with the goal of fostering student independence and inclusion. Additionally, provide collaborative opportunities for teachers and EAs to learn and work together to plan for and implement needs-based supports and strategies in classrooms and schools.

Understanding the distinctions between needs, supports, strategies, and resources is vital for advancing inclusive education. As we engage in discussions about educational support, we must continually ask ourselves how we can advocate for resources while ensuring they are used to empower students and enhance their learning experiences (Shogren et al., 2015). By focusing on using resources to empower individuals rather than merely providing additional personnel or funding, we can create environments that foster independence and self-determination. The challenge lies in ensuring that our advocacy efforts align with these principles, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for all students. As we navigate the complexities of educational support, it is crucial to maintain a clear focus on the ultimate goal: to create inclusive and supportive learning environments that respect and accommodate the diverse needs of all students.



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