

Specials

From the Classroom

Specials classes are those cool opportunities within schools to leave the classroom and go to another space and work on a 'particular set of skills' as Liam Neesen called them. Fun fact, in the first draft of Taken he was talking about preschool PE.

Just kidding.

When I say Specials classes I'm referring to PE, Music, Art, and Library. Your school might not have all of these or might have some other ones, like a world language.

As a Specials teacher you see every child in the school which as the detective Monk used to say "is a blessing and a curse". It's wonderful to see every child in the school and build those relationships but the flip side of that is that you don't see students for that long or at as high of a frequency.

In this chapter, we're going to look at each Specials class and some of the unique, predictable barriers that come with that Special. We will also look at a few of the universal barriers that all specialist teachers face.

Predicting Barriers

So many aspects of being a specialist teacher is about yin and yang. For example, as a specialist teacher, you only see students once or twice a week, but you might work with them the entirety of their school experience.

You work with every student in the school in short intervals so building relationships will take longer but you work with their sisters, brothers, cousins, neighbors, maybe even other generations so that relationship once established can be deeper.

There is a degree of patience and methodical planning with the end in mind that is required as a specialist teacher for that reason. You have short bursts of contact with students over a longer period of time. PE teachers might see students more frequently but face their own yin and yang like more contact time but sometimes more than one class at a time.

Universal Barriers

- Specialists teachers might only see their students in small intervals like once or twice a week or cycle
- Specialist teachers have much less contact time with students over the course of the year
- Specials classes might take place in the afternoon and students might lack the stamina or executive skills

- PE teachers may see students more frequently but manage larger groups or multiple classes simultaneously

Universal Strategies for Specialists

No matter what specialist class you walk into, there are some predictable truths about our youngest learners that will shape everything we do. Each of these spaces have their own vocabulary, expectations, procedures and routines, whether that's the language of music or art, the target language in a world language class, or the rules of a game and the language of teamwork in PE. These expectations need to be supported with materials, resources and scaffolds. In addition, our littlest learners might not yet be readers so words alone won't support them sufficiently and alongside that they are still developing their language skills so supporting their expression will be important too. From time to time, in these spaces they will be asked to work with others and will need to solve problems and in some spaces like PE that collaboration and problem solving is woven into nearly every lesson. We can support our students through all of these predictable challenges with intentional, proactive planning and strategies we will explore below with one goal, that every learner has multiple pathways to enter, engage with, and express themselves in your space so they can learn and thrive there.

Codesign Structures and Routines

The expansion of chain stores everywhere we go isn't always a good thing but I do love that when I walk in a CVS I know where the kids tylenol is. That makes it really easy when you are on vacation and someone spikes a fever. Conversely, it's super hard if I walk into Vincent's Drug Emporium and have to wander all the aisles to find what I am looking for and they only carry the generic brands whose box looks different than I was expecting. That commonality of experience puts me at ease when I walk in. I know what to expect. We can do the same thing for our students with some intentional planning and conversations.

As a specialist teacher you routinely bounce from one grade level to another and know how to seamlessly switch from the needs of a 5-year-old to that of a 10-year-old. Along the way you learn the little nuances that each class brings as they walk into your space and your unique voice permeates the school in the same way. Wouldn't it be awesome if every space a child or an adult walked into in your school felt like I did walk into a CVS in a city or town I'd never been in before? There was a sense of ease and comfort because I knew what to expect. Your experience with the entire school gives you a unique window to see what routines work really well both in your space and from your colleagues. Find time a couple times a year to co-create routines with the homeroom teachers. By codesigning everyone can bring their expertise to the table and create routines and expectations that work for all students and adults in all spaces.

From there, besides lining up expectations, are there sentence stems, nonverbal cues or gestures, or choices that you could use in your space? How does various classroom in your

school get kids' attention? Do you have something you use that you could adapt? Could they adapt? No reason to reinvent the wheel! If you don't have time for common planning time with those colleagues, can you pop into their room, with or without kids to see what's on the walls? What could you copy or recreate and just keep the same.

The ability to have these conversations isn't all on you the specialist teacher and it becomes more challenging when you are teaching students so that the grade level team can meet. If you need to, advocate for these conversations at an upcoming staff meeting or PLC.

Designing for All Learners in Your Space

The time our specialists' teachers see students is spread out over the course of the year.

For those teachers that meet with students once or twice a week, a typical 36-week school year, for 30-40 minutes each time they will see their students about 1440 minutes or the equivalent of 24 school days or close to 5 weeks of school.

Typically, as the school year is starting, we say to teachers take the full six weeks of school to establish the routines, procedures, and expectations you will use for the entire year but a Music, Art, or Librarian ONLY sees students for about 5 weeks across the whole school year.

The flip side of that is that these same teachers will work with those students for 5+ years depending on the set up of your school so the approach has to be that of a long game.

PE teachers often see students more frequently, sometimes daily or several times a week, which changes the math considerably. But the tradeoff is larger groups and sometimes multiple classes at once. More time with students doesn't always mean more time with each student.

In the homeroom classroom, we might plan with the end in mind. What do we want our students to be able to do by the end of the year? For our specialists, we will do that as well but given the amount of contact time over the course of their school experience we will also think about, what do I want them to be able to do when they are 4th, 5th, 6th graders or at the end of their experience in my class or in our school.

I mention the amount of contact time because that is a predictable barrier for our specialists' teachers. They have limited time each session to establish those relationships, the routines and procedures, and the expectations. Layer on to that the fact that each of these teachers may work with the whole school that relationship building is going to take longer.

This is the reality teachers of specials areas face but those realities don't have to confine us from being able to meet the needs of all our learners and achieving the goals we want. We just

need to be more intentional about our planning and preparation. That intentionality is what UDL is all about!

Support with Visuals

Each specialist's space has its own vocabulary. This is the language of music, of art, and of the library. If you are world language teacher that's the bulk of the gig! In PE it might be what a skill looks like at each stage or the rules and steps to a game or activity. In all of these spaces we need ways to surround students with visuals that support their acquisition of that new vocabulary, create independence and understanding.

We all think we have terrific athletic form whether that's how we throw, run, or our golf swing. I personally thought my golf swing had the grace and power of a young Ken Griffey Jr. I swing it from the left side, I can rock a backwards cap and finish with flare but no. Turns out, my swing does not resemble a young Ken Griffey Jr or even an old Ken Griffey Jr. It only was from video that I was able to see my form. The same is true for our students. They need to see what the skill looks like, not just hear about it. And that principle doesn't stop at the gym door. In every specialist space, making the invisible visible through images, models, and visual references helps students know what they are working toward.

Whatever your unit, find ways to surround your student with visuals of what the skills should look like. It would be cool if there were photos of how to throw or kick with actual students from your school posted around the gym. In the art room that might be photos of each stage of a technique, in music it might be a visual of a rhythm pattern, and in the library that might be the steps to check out a book. Bonus points if you can turn them into posters but it would also make a great bulletin board. Point out in those visuals the elements of the form you want to see, shoulders pointed at the target, weight on both feet, etc. Imagine a photo of your student at three stages of throwing a frisbee with arrows pointing to parts you want to celebrate. Now students have something work towards.

You can support the acquisition of vocabulary and key concepts for all learners by combining those words or concepts with visuals and having them accessible to students whenever they need them. **Visual Word Walls** are a great way to achieve this goal. Find a place where you can build together a bank of vocabulary words that are supported by visuals. This could be a dedicated bulletin board, a notebook of terms or a slide. Recognizing one of the challenges with this strategy is that there will be limited wall space and several grade levels of vocabulary words to display and support our students with. Ideally, each grade level would have some wall space where these words can be displayed. The nice thing about that is that all the learners that enter the space are exposed to those words.

If you are a specialist teacher who travels from room to room and do not have a space of your own, can you have a slice of wall in each of the rooms you travel to?

If you can't create wall space for each grade level then try one of the other options, students could have **interactive notebooks** in which they enter new words as they learn them, define

Let's explore what an anchor chart combined with modeling could look like to tackle a predictable problem like solving a disagreement. We can predict that from time to time there might be a disagreement in your space. Imagine an anchor chart like How We Solve Problems. For early childhood students we need to keep it simple, repeatable, and doable so the anchor chart might say

1. Pause
2. Talk
3. Try

We might have a scenario like students disagree about whose turn it is next. We'd teach them to:

Step in the Process	What the teacher might say	What the student might say
Pause	I'm noticing people sound upset. Let's pause. What is the problem that keeps happening?	"It's not his turn!"
Talk	What could you say to your friend?	"Jeff, it's my turn. Can I please go next?"
Try	What can we try so this doesn't keep happening?	"Stay in line order"

This is just one example but having a concrete strategy for solving problems that you can teach and then rely on will help those predictable problems be solved easier. When students are a little bit older teaching them to solve disagreements like this with Rock, Paper, Scissors is another great strategy that they can use on their own.

Pick one or two predictable problems that come up often in your classroom, document your technique in an anchor chart and then use that to model from.

Support Directions and Procedures

Our students are walking into your classrooms fairly infrequently and we need to support them so that they can meet our expectations and complete the routines and procedures as independently as possible. For that to happen, they need resources they can refer back to, resources that you can refer back to.

One of the most helpful things you can do is map out the key moments in a typical class period and ask yourself, do students know what to do here and can they do it independently? Those moments might look something like this across any specialist space:

- Arrival
- Warm Up
- Instruction
- Clean Up
- Cool Down
-
- Transitions with a Lesson
- Solving a Conflict or Addressing a Problem
- Managing an injury (especially in PE)
- Ending a Game & Managing Winning and Losing (Especially in PE)

Each of these predictable moments provide us the opportunity to teach the routine thoroughly, document it well, and support it with visuals so students can complete the routines independently. The work we do with our youngest students will serve as the backbone for what they are able to do in your spaces as they progress through their school experience.

So what are those routines and procedures that every child needs to be able to do? In library, that might be things like select a book from a basket or shelf or even check out a book. What visual supports could be created to help our students do that work independently? Could the routine be documented in photos as a step-by-step guide placed at the checkout station or by the baskets and shelves? Could there be a bigger anchor chart with visuals of the process that you could revisit before they independently set off to work?

What about in Music? World Language or the other spaces our students go to. Think about the fundamental routines and procedures that you will ask students to complete most often and start there. What visuals need to be in place to support the directions? Can you draw them or capture them in photos? Could students draw them? Where could it live? On the wall? At their tables or seats? In folders or buckets? In PE these same anchor charts can be laminated and nested with equipment so they are right where students need them.

A fun way to do this with students is to have a chant or song for those repeatable activities supported with hand gestures. In PE a musical cue like a song you play or a chant can achieve the same goal transitioning from warm up to instruction or cleaning up materials.

In addition to those repeatable routines that students might take part in frequently we also have to support those day-to-day tasks with visuals. As you prepare your next lesson make sure you are not only giving directions orally but supporting those directions with visuals on the slides or on the board and/or with gestures so they have multiple ways to take in the information.

Teacher Spotlight: Angie Neuffer

Angie is an Art teacher at Angie Grant Elementary in Benton, Arkansas and she uses videos

to act as a second teacher in the classroom. This practice started in Covid but she found it so helpful she continued. She makes short videos of her instructions and shows them on the big screen during class. She noted how this allows her to have that video as a resource students can access which allows her to work with other students in the classroom on their technique or next steps rather than reviewing the instructions.

It's brilliant because so often in specialist areas the teacher is without an aide or other support so strategies like this allow Angie to basically clone herself and support more than one student at a time.

These videos are short, concise, and have her signature style. If you want to embark on this journey pick one unit, for one class and start making the videos. They don't have to be fancy. They could be just a screencast recording of your document camera and you explaining each step. They could even be accomplished without words. Try it out for one class and one project and see what you learn!

Support Language with Sentence Stems and Nonverbals

No matter where our students go they are continually working on their ability to express themselves. Layer on to that the fact that their familiarity with you the teacher and the subject matter will vary wildly. Supporting those students' language will be crucial. Here are some ways to do that. And while the PE classroom isn't typically a place where there are long whole group discussions, students are still communicating with each other. Sentence stems and nonverbal gestures can help our students communicate their needs. Here are some ways to do that.

Sentence stems are an extremely powerful support that are easy to create and are very versatile. Think about the conversations you have routinely in your classroom. For language teachers that might be those simple language patterns in that language that you want to work on. In the Music classroom that might be things like I hear..., I feel..., That makes me think of... In PE or any space where students are working together using the language of cooperation, collaboration, and problem solving.

Whatever those common conversations are, think about what a good full sentence response would be and create 2 or 3 sentence stems you can use from class to class. Put those stems on some sentence strips and post them for all to see. In PE providing our students with sentence stems placed strategically around the PE area and modeled by the adults in the space could be a crucial tool to help students cooperate, collaborate, and solve problems.

If you have a lesson in which you ask more specific questions than the general stems will cover, get in the habit of adding sentence stems to each of your slides when you ask a question. This is a small shift that can have big dividends.

The other way to support students' ability to communicate their understanding or their needs is with nonverbals. Create a set of nonverbals, like the ones in the image below, you can use with all of your classes that you can teach to your youngest learners and use for the rest of their school experience. I worked with a PE teacher who was excellent at this. One way this showed

up was a **nonverbal**. When a student got hurt everyone paused the game and got down on one knee. This paused showed that person everyone cared what happened, kept everyone else safe and let the teacher check on the student. Then, when the injured student was able to walk away, which they often did, the students applauded. This was something he slowly worked on when they were little to be expected when they were in third grade on up.

Other nonverbals that you could teach and use across specialist areas could be around things like getting a drink or using the bathroom. Other key nonverbals will be thumbs up or down for students to share if they understand directions. The teacher might use nonverbals to signal to students when they need to pause or nonverbals to indicate when they need to watch something. The idea with nonverbals is to allow students multiple ways to communicate with us and multiple ways to comprehend what we are communicating. Keep that in mind as you design nonverbal gestures that you can use in your space.

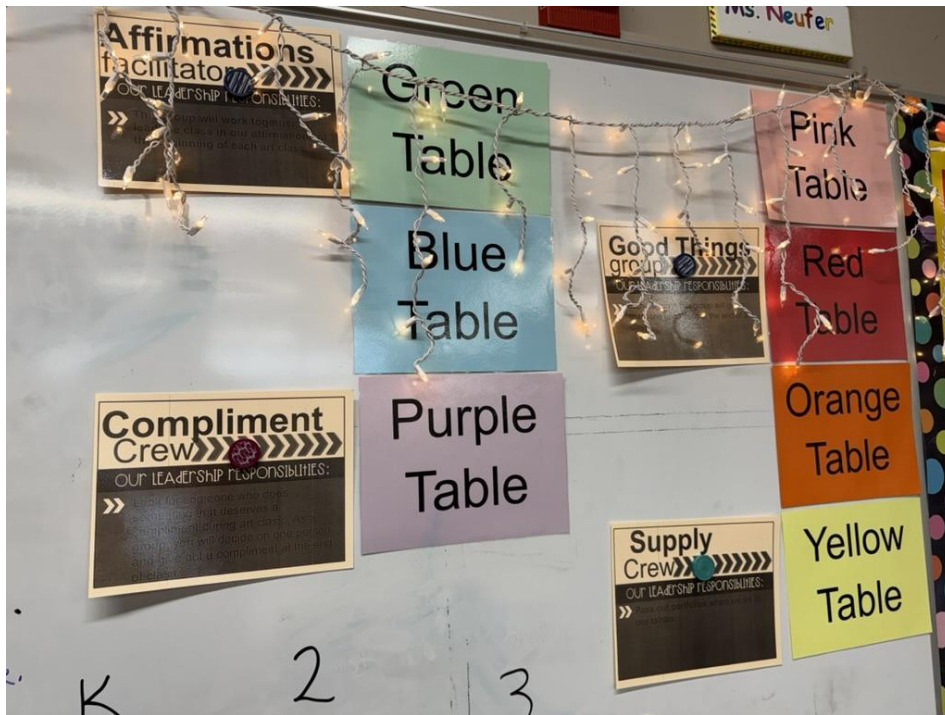
Cooperation and Collaboration	Problem Solving
"I think we should..."	"Let's try..."
"What if we..."	"Can we..."
"Can I have a turn next?"	"Next time..."
"That's a great idea because..."	



Jobs and Roles

Creating a student-centered classroom isn't confined to the homeroom classrooms our children reside in most of their day but the specialists' classes they go to as well. In fact, it can be a design necessity. As students flow in and out of your classes at varying levels of frequency or try to address the reality that with snow days, days off school, and breaks you haven't seen this particular class in a month, jobs and roles can ground the class in routines and expectations and relieve some of the burden of running the classroom from you, the teacher. If you haven't already, flip back to the community chapter where we unpack jobs and roles more deeply. Here we'll look at what they can look like specifically in your specialist space.

The idea is to support routine, responsibility, and community. Our students should be doing a lot of the work in our space, they are capable! Below is a picture of the jobs and roles in an art classroom. These really encompass some big themes we might want to address regardless of the subject area.



When thinking about what jobs and roles could look like in your space here is a menu to start from. Some of these are about running the space and some are about being a good community member or teammate.

- Equipment or Materials Manager - rotating job where students help set up and put away materials or equipment for the day's activity. Works in every specialist space.
- Warm Up or Activation Leader - this student chooses from a menu and leads the class. In PE that might be a fitness warm up, in Music a rhythm warm up, in Art a quick observation activity.
- Scout - the scout looks for students demonstrating positive qualities like effort, kindness, and sportsmanship or using a skill or strategy you've been working on.
- Affirmations Leader - this student leads the class in revisiting expectations or affirmations at the start of class. Especially helpful when you haven't seen a class in a while.
- Coach - in pairs or small groups this student looks for their partner applying the skill or strategy you are teaching. They could use sentence starters like I see you... or Next time try...
- Encourager - this student focuses on being that supportive teammate we all want behind us. They could use sentence starters like Nice try, You got this, I like how you...

- Compliment or Good Things - at the end of the time together this student reflects on the lesson or activity and compliments their table mates or teammates.

Whatever roles and jobs you choose, think intentionally about what they are teaching. What routines could be reinforced by giving students ownership over them? What responsibilities would make your classroom run more smoothly while also building student skills and community? Start small, pick one or two jobs, try them in a few classes, and see what you learn.

Create Multiple Pathways

If we can create lessons for our students that allow multiple pathways we can meet the needs of more learners, so how do we do that in classes like Art, Music, Library or other specials? Your school may have other specialist spaces like STEAM, Drama, or Technology and the same principles apply there too. Put another way, every student in your classroom should be working towards the same goal but have the flexibility to do so in different ways. These different ways are intentionally designed to eliminate barriers.

The multiple pathways we create work best when they're supported by visuals and scaffolds, we discussed above. In the table below you'll see a common goal and multiple ways that goal could be met across various disciplines.

Goal	Art	Music	Library	World Language	PE
Following directions for a project, activity, or game	Step by step visual directions posted at each table, a short video loop showing each stage of the project, a physical example of each stage displayed	Visual sequence of the song or activity on the board, recorded demonstration students can watch again, picture supported direction cards	Step by step visual checkout procedure posted at student eye level, picture supported rules for library behavior, a video loop showing what the library looks and sounds like	Visual schedule of the lesson on the board, picture supported instructions, modeled demonstration of the task before students try	Visual sequence of the activity or game rules posted in the space, laminated anchor charts nested with equipment, photos of students demonstrating each stage of a skill with key form elements, thumbs up or down to

					check for understanding before students begin
Working on a skill or technique	Choice of materials that offer different levels of challenge, option to work independently or alongside a peer, teacher small group for students needing more support	Choice of instrument or movement, option to hum or clap rather than sing, small group with teacher for students needing more repetition	Choice of browsing independently, selecting from a curated basket, or using a book match card with a librarian	Choice of practicing with a partner, independently, with manipulatives or picture cards, or in a small group with the teacher	Choice of equipment that offers different levels of challenge like a beach ball, foam ball, or soccer ball, option to practice independently, with a partner, or in a small group, teacher circulates and challenges students to move to the next level of challenge as they are ready

Demonstrating understanding or mastery	Drawing and labeling or explaining to a partner	Moving, singing, playing, drawing, pointing to a visual, or using a nonverbal gesture	Pointing to a picture, acting it out, drawing, telling a partner, checking out a book on the topic	Pointing, gesturing, drawing, using the target language word or phrase, responding with a sentence stem in the target language	Moving to different parts of the room to indicate answers, acting out a skill or strategy, using a nonverbal gesture, showing form to a partner, taking on the coach role to identify the skill in someone else
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Multiple Pathways in Action

Perhaps you are working on some gross motor skill like using feet to dribble. We know that our students are coming into PE with a wide range of skills and I can predict that our students will need different supports to meet them where they are and allow them to get the most out of the lesson.

In this scenario students could dribble a beach ball, which is big and much less sensitive to big kicks, a soft foam ball or a soccer ball. These three balls offer differing levels of challenge while allowing all students to work on the same goal. You could have the choice of balls laid out and allow students to choose the ball they'd like to start with, or you could have everyone start with the beach ball and as you walk around and assess and support you can challenge students to move to another type of ball.

The same thinking can be applied to how you design a game. Fitness ball is like dodgeball, students are split into two teams and throw foam balls at each other from different ends of the gym. If they get hit, they run a lap around the space and return to the game. Within the game itself there are opportunities to participate differently while still working on the fitness and throwing. Some students might be always on attack, throwing balls at the opposing team from the center line. Other students might like to collect the balls and throw them to their teammates. This game is flexible, gets kids moving and allows students to participate in lots of ways.

Now think about your space. What is the equivalent of three different balls? What choices could you build into your next lesson or activity that would allow all students to work toward the same goal in a way that meets them where they are?

Sidebar: With and Without UDL

Without UDL

The music teacher welcomes the preschool class and asks them to sit in a circle on the floor. She introduces a new song about animals and sings it through once. She then asks the class to sing it back with her. She calls on students who raise their hand to name the animals in the song. At the end she asks students to share their favorite part and calls on a few students to answer in a full sentence.

With UDL

The music teacher welcomes the preschool class and as they enter there are pictures of the animals from the song posted at their eye level around the room. The teacher also has some animal cards in her hand. Students can choose to sit on the floor, on a wobble cushion, or on a chair. She introduces the song by pointing to each animal picture as she sings it through once. The second time through she invites students to join in however they are ready, some sing the words, some hum, some just clap along. She pauses at key moments and points to an animal picture asking students to respond, some call out the name, some point to the cards around the room. As students get comfortable she adds simple movements to each animal. At the end she asks students to show her their favorite animal, some point to an animal card, some make the animal's sound, some say its name, and some show her with a movement.

What differences do you notice?
Where do you see your own practice?

Movement as Part of the Learning

I like to think about movement as a part of the learning rather than incorporating it as a break from the learning. There's a strong likelihood that when our students get to their specials class they've just been sitting for a long period of time. They might be hyped to be in your class, to leave their classroom, or might be at that time of the day that they are needing stimulation. For those reasons and more it will be important that they have opportunities to move in your classroom. So how can we intentionally design our lessons and activities so that the movement is designed to solidify the learning or be a choice in the learning?

For PE teachers' movement is the medium, not just a strategy, so much of this section will speak more directly to your colleagues in Art, Music, Library, and World Language. That said, the idea of designing movement to solidify learning rather than using it as a break from learning is a principle that lives in every specialist space

In the table below we explore a few different parts of a typical lesson and how to make movement a part of the learning across disciplines.

Goal	Art	Music	Library	WorldLanguage
Learning Content Through Movement	Gallery walk to observe and respond to examples of technique or artist work, students move between stations to work on different parts of a project	Clapping, stomping, or moving to internalize rhythm, using body movement to represent the mood or tempo of a piece, acting out the story of a song This example by @the_crafter_teacher is wonderful as are the examples on @losrobleschildrenschoir.	Book shopping where students browse and select independently, moving between sections or baskets to find books by genre, author, or topic	Total physical response activities where students act out vocabulary words or commands, moving to different parts of the room to indicate answers
Transitions and Procedures	Moving to supply stations to collect materials, rotating between technique stations	Moving to instruments, transitioning between circle and seat with a rhythmic cue	Moving through checkout procedure, transitioning between read aloud and independent browsing	Moving between partner or group work stations, transitioning with a call and response in the target language
Warm up and Activation	Gesture based observation of artwork, sketching while standing at a wall or easel	Call and response rhythm warm ups, mirroring movements to music	Stretch and settle routine before read aloud, movement-based prediction activity before a book	Call and response in the target language, gesture-based vocabulary review
Cool down and Closure	Slow observation walks around the	Slow clap or hum to bring energy down, mirroring slow	Quiet book browsing or reading to close, returning books	Slow gesture review of vocabulary from the lesson,

Commented [1]: it would be great if you could link to content creators who really embody this work for each discipline

Commented [2]: links to reels?

	room to notice peers' work, cleaning up and moving with a clean-up song	movements to a quiet piece of music, freeze and reflect	to shelves as a settling transition	partner share in the target language before lining up
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For more strategies on incorporating movement into your intentional lesson design, we cover a bunch that you can apply to your classroom in the Emotional Literacy chapter in the section on built ins. Flip over to that chapter now for strategies, protocols, routines, and more that you could integrate into your lessons.

Ask Yourself

1. **Contact Time and Routines:** Think about the amount of contact time you have with your students over the course of a year. How does that reality shape the way you plan and what does it mean for how you establish routines and procedures that stick across long gaps between sessions?
2. **Audit Your Space:** Look around your specialist space and think about a student who struggles there. What visuals exist to support students who aren't yet readers or who are still developing language? Where are the gaps? What predictable barriers does that student face and what is one proactive design decision you could make before they walk through your door?
3. **Multiple Pathways and Colleague Connections:** Think about a lesson you taught recently. Where did students have multiple pathways to access content, demonstrate understanding, or engage with the material, and where were they limited to one pathway? How are you currently building on the work of colleagues in your building, and what routines, nonverbals, or expectations could you adopt or share to create more consistency for students across their school day?

Activities

1. **Audit Your Reality:** Do the math for your own context and figure out how many minutes you will see each class this year. Write down three things you want students to be able to do independently by the end of their time with you and work backwards from there. Then walk through your space as if you are a student arriving for the first time. What can you figure out on your own? What would confuse you? List three barriers you could proactively address before your next unit begins.
2. **Redesign One Lesson and One Moment:** Take one upcoming lesson and map it against the three goals in the multiple pathways table, following directions, working on a

skill, and demonstrating understanding. For each goal identify where students currently have only one pathway and design one additional option. Then look at your next week of lessons and identify one moment in each class where a student job or role could replace something you are currently doing yourself. Design the job, create a simple visual to support it, and try it with one class first.

3. **Connect with a Colleague:** Identify one grade level team you haven't connected with yet this year. Find fifteen minutes to pop into a classroom or have a conversation to identify one routine, nonverbal, or expectation you could align with or borrow. Bring one thing from your space to share in return.