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Providing Access to the General Education Curriculum for Students with Disabilities

This paper was published by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), as shown below. It is useful as a stimulus for generally considering the adequacy of preservice courses and practica in preparing graduates who are effective in providing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. For trainees themselves, it offers an overview of universal design and other factors involved in equal access to the general curriculum.

Office of Special Education Programs. (1999). Providing access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities (pp. I-12 through I-32). *21st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

THE PASSAGE OF PUBLIC LAW 94-142 in 1975 focused the attention of educators on policy and practice related to the access of students with disabilities to an education -- an individually designed, free, appropriate, public education provided in the least restrictive environment. This focus on access has provided a generation of children with disabilities with the initial preparation needed for successful adult life in the community and workforce.

However, for a growing number of students with disabilities, special education today is not preparing them for increasingly rigorous graduation requirements and career skills that are based on problem solving, collaboration, and technology. Why is this? Special education has typically been viewed as an intervention of remediation. As students with disabilities demonstrate difficulty in academic skills, they are provide intensive instruction on the basic foundation skills which are considered to be prerequisites to higher-level, abstract reasoning and problem-solving skills. While they receive remediation intervention, their peers without disabilities refine their foundation skills through application in more complex activities (Gersten, 1998).

The gap between students with and without disabilities continues to widen. Students in special education have lower school completion rates than their nondisabled peers; as adults, they are the largest unemployed group of Americans; they experience higher arrest rates; they are less likely to live independently in the community (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). As we approach the 21st century, the challenge for educators is to provide students with disabilities meaningful access to instruction that is aligned with high-level standards and supported by special education interventions. This module presents Federal legislation related to providing access to the general education curriculum and discusses difficulties involved in doing so. The module also presents strategies for enhancing access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ACCESS THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM?

Perhaps the first question to ask is: What is the general education curriculum? On first glance, the answer is clear: It is the curriculum designed to prepare students for adult life and, more specifically, for the high school diploma. Frequently, the general education curriculum contains both academic (e.g., literacy, science, math, social studies) and nonacademic (e.g., career/ vocational, arts, healthful living, practical living skills, citizenship) domains. However, student performance is assessed primarily in academics. As pressures mount for teachers to cover the content of the assessed curriculum, less attention and instructional time are devoted to the non-assessed areas. Thus, it is not uncommon for portions of the general education curriculum to receive limited attention -- or to not be addressed at all (Warren, 1997). The result is a lack of consistency in how the general education curriculum is defined and taught.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION RELATING TO PROVIDING ACCESS TO THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

This lack of consistency is not limited to special education. In its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education called for the adoption of "more rigorous and measurable standards . . ." (p. 27) which will require ". . . more effective use of the existing school day" (p. 29). This bold recommendation has resulted in the current focus on standards-based education and, more specifically, on issues of equity: ensuring that all students have equal access to common standards, challenging assessments, and enhanced accountability for student performance (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). Such issues have been addressed in recent Federal legislation (e.g., the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the Improving America's Schools Act, and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act). Each of these laws contains provisions requiring the development of challenging common standards and the reporting of *all* students' performance on progress in meeting the standards. Together, these are intended to satisfy the national need to produce highly skilled graduates to maintain this country's place in a technological, sophisticated, global market place.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 contain several provisions directed at providing students with disabilities greater access to the general education curriculum. This concept of access is addressed in several areas of the legislation via policy, planning, student instruction, and evaluation.

State Performance Goals

Each State wishing to receive IDEA Part B funds must identify goals for the performance of students with disabilities. To the maximum extent possible, State goals are to be consistent with other goals and standards for all children educated by the State, including those established under Federal programs.

State Improvement Plans

Developed through broad-based stakeholder input, the State Improvement Grant is to identify critical aspects of early intervention, general education, and special education programs that must be improved to meet the performance goals the State has identified for Part B. One of the indicators that must be considered is the performance (including performance on State assessment) and participation (including dropout and graduation rates) of students with disabilities.

Program Funding

Coordination between special education and other Federal resources (e.g., schoolwide Title I projects) is encouraged. Additionally, Part B special education funds and related services may be used in general education classrooms to support children with disabilities while providing nondisabled students with incidental benefits from these supports. Funds can be used to increase the skills of general educators to facilitate enhanced participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Individualized Education Programs

The general education curriculum is to be considered throughout the development and implementation of the individualized education program (IEP). Initial assessments and development of the student's Present Level of Performance are to reflect the student's ability to access instruction aligned with the general education curriculum and standards. General educators are to participate in IEP meetings and provide strategies for aligning IEP goals with standards. Aids and supports are to be provided to facilitate instruction in the general education environment. Parents are to receive regular reports on their child's progress in meeting IEP goals.

Assessing Student Performance

All students with disabilities are to be included in State and district assessment systems. To the greatest extent possible, students with disabilities are to participate in the large-scale assessments that are aligned with the general education curriculum and standards. Individual accommodations are to be identified and implemented during instruction and assessment activities. Alternate assessments are to be administered to those students who cannot participate in state- and district-wide assessment programs.

Reporting Student Performance

The performance of students with disabilities is to be publicly reported in the same frequency and detail as the performance of nondisabled students. Such reporting is to reflect performance on large-scale assessments as well as alternate assessments.

TENSIONS INVOLVED IN PROVIDING ACCESS TO THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Virtually every State has developed standards in at least one academic content area; however, there is no "standard" for the State standards (McDonnell et al., 1997). They differ in what they are called (e.g., goals, benchmarks, expectations, frameworks), as well as in subject areas and levels of specificity. While there are variations in levels of expectation for student demonstration of proficiency, there is an increasing trend to assess the student's ability to apply or demonstrate the use of skills in higher order thinking or problem-solving activities. As noted earlier, academic standards are typically included in large-scale assessments, while non-academic standards are rarely included.

Another tension involves the balance between academic and vocational education. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) suggests that students with disabilities who had paid employment experience in high school were more likely to stay in high school and graduate with an employment outcome. How will the increased emphasis on academics balance with effective vocational and other non-academic educational strategies?

Special educators are rarely involved in the development of the general education curricular standards. Instead, they are typically called upon to identify instructional strategies or curriculum modifications (Goertz & Friedman, 1996). However, these adaptations are typically focused on groups of students and rarely on the specific needs of individual students in the class (Vaughn & Schumm, as cited in Orkwis & McLane, 1998). This means that general and special educators are forced to decide when to modify a standard, when to provide instructional accommodations, how and when to plan collaboratively, and how to find instructional time to cover the content (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim, 1997). The need to develop curricular frameworks that are relevant to all students and to identify effective strategies that support access to the curriculum is common throughout elementary and secondary schools. Our challenge is to strike a balance between emphasizing the potential and performance of each individual student and ability to provide individual resources to facilitate full participation of all students (Benz & Kochhar, 1996). The concept of universal design is one strategy that offers promising solutions to this dilemma.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN OF CURRICULAR FRAMEWORKS

To increase access to the general education curriculum, needs of all students must be considered when curricula and standards are developed. This is known as universal design, which is based on the premise that curricula and standards are flexible in order to include students with a wide variety of cultural, linguistic, and learning styles -- including students with disabilities (Orkwis & McLane, 1998). Ideally, effective universal design does not result in lowered expectations or watered-down instruction. Rather, it calls for multiple ways of expressing competency in regard to a given standard.

Universal design also results in blending of four different types of standards. It allows students who are working toward mastery of the basic of foundation skills to apply their existing knowledge across multiple environments or to engage in complex applications. This requires teachers to integrate standards from multiple grade levels in order to facilitate access to a variety of educational opportunities. Such experiences will enhance the participation of students who typically are exempted from large-scale assessments that require collaborative and/or higher level analysis.

Because most districts or States already have curricula in place, the effectiveness and accessibility of those frameworks should be evaluated. It is important to consider a number of questions when evaluating the effectiveness of existing curricula:

1. Is a wide range of parents and other communities involved in the review of the curriculum?
2. What is the approved curriculum? Does it include examples of adaptations that may be used with students with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities?
3. Are instructional methods and materials used that are responsive to the needs of a heterogeneous student population? What types of instructional priorities and goals have been established to support the progress of all students in meeting the standards?
4. Are standards broad or do they reflect only academic outcomes?
5. Are performance standards appropriate for students with disabilities? Can they be demonstrated in a variety of ways? (Jorgensen, 1997)

While these are important considerations for curriculum developers at district and State levels, most general and special educators are not involved in curriculum development on a regular basis. However, they are regularly involved in committees charged with the selection of curricula for implementation throughout the district or school. Three considerations can guide the selection of curricula:

Does the curriculum provide multiple means of presentation of content?

A universally designed curriculum will offer a variety of presentation modes, including text at multiple reading levels, auditory versions, and digital formats (allowing transformation from one presentation mode to another).

Does the curriculum provide multiple and flexible means of student engagement or participation?

Aligning instruction with student learning styles will facilitate understanding of the content. Aspects to consider include finding the right balance between supporting and challenging a student, basing instruction on familiar versus novel concepts, and expanding concepts to reflect a variety of developmental and cultural interests.

Does the curriculum provide multiple means of student response?

Students should be offered flexibility in their choice of response modes. Such flexibility should be based on their preferred communication mode and on technological supports needed (Orkwis & McLane, 1998).

STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT ACCESS TO THE CURRICULUM

Effective access to the general education curriculum requires more than common standards and universal design. It is also dependent on pedagogically skilled educators, instructional materials that are accessible to students, and effective instructional strategies.

Pedagogically Skilled Educators

All too often, students with disabilities receive their instruction in a given academic content area from special educators who have not been trained in that content area. If students are to have increased access, then all of their teachers must possess content expertise and pedagogically sound instructional skills. Preservice and professional development for general

and special educators need to address content knowledge, universal design principles, and pedagogical skills to become proficient in a given content area. Support for this is being provided by the OSEP-funded project INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium), which is developing standards for general and special educators to promote cohesiveness in licensure and preparation, clarifying distinctions in teacher responsibilities, and developing common policies for licensing for general and special educators.

In addition, some OSEP-funded State Improvement Grants (SIGs) seek ways to provide general and special educators with the competencies needed to effectively address the educational needs of all students.

Instructional Materials

Typically, instructional materials are aligned with curricular standards and intended for use by students with corresponding reading and comprehension skills. If a student lacks the requisite literacy skills, the instructional materials will be inaccessible and so too the curriculum. Once again, universal design is a critical factor in accessibility. Similarly, instructional materials should be available in a variety of formats. For example, video presentations need to be supplemented by video descriptions and captioning if they are to be accessible to students with hearing impairments or to English-language learners.

However, alternative presentation modes may not be sufficient for students with cognitive impairments. For these students, multiple presentation modes should be supplemented with alternative (i.e., less abstract) descriptions, special instructions, or organizational tips for approaching an activity or problem.

Instructional Strategies

While universally designed curricula and instructional materials are critical for the successful access of a curriculum, students with disabilities also require access to instruction that is individually referenced, intense, frequent, and explicit.

Individually Referenced Instruction. Effective instruction is premised on instructional decision-making that is individually referenced. The IDEA amendments of 1997 are clear in the intent for IEP goals to be aligned with the general education curriculum. At the same time, the amendments continue the commitment to individually referenced planning and instruction. The thoughtful identification and implementation of individually focused instructional accommodations facilitate instruction that is both aligned with the general education curriculum and relevant to the individual students' needs.

Intense and Frequent Instruction. Students with disabilities require intense and frequent instruction of basic and higher-level concepts. Although it may include one-on-one instruction, intense instruction refers to a broader set of features, including careful matching of instruction with student skill levels; frequent opportunities for student responses; instructional cues, prompts, and fading to facilitate correct responses; and detailed task-focused feedback.

Explicit Instruction. An increasing body of evidence supports the need for students with disabilities to be directly taught the processes and concepts that nondisabled children tend to learn naturally through experiences. Gersten (1998) has identified five principles of explicit instruction:

1. Providing students with an adequate range of examples to exemplify a concept or problem-solving strategy.
2. Providing models of proficient performance, including step-by-step strategies (as needed) or broad, generic questions and guidelines that focus attention and prompt deep processing.
3. Providing experiences where students explain how and why they make decisions.
4. Providing frequent feedback on quality of performance and support so that students persist in activities.
5. Providing adequate practice and activities that are interesting and engaging.

While a variety of approaches to explicit instruction exist, they all have a similar focus: directly teaching thinking and problem-solving strategies to students who have difficulty acquiring such skills in a seemingly natural manner. One of the most common strategies is the use of scaffolding, which entails the teacher's presentation of a series of frameworks (e.g., questions and outlines) that facilitate a student's study of the instructional content (Harris & Pressley, 1991, as cited in Gersten, 1998; MacArthur, Schwartz, Graham, Molloy, & Harris, as cited in Gersten, 1998). As students become familiar with the frameworks, they are encouraged to adapt the specific components to support their review of the material.

Another example of explicit instruction is anchored instruction (Bottge & Hasselbring, 1993; Hollingsworth & Woodward, 1993). In this practice, students are taught key vocabulary, measurements, procedures, or concepts prior to the introduction of a problem-solving activity. As a result, their ability to participate in the analysis is enhanced through the initial instruction, which serves as an anchor for the more complex activities. Additional strategies that strengthen this approach include decreases in writing demands (e.g., completing sentences rather than writing short essays) and memory demands (e.g., following written procedures rather than relying on memory) (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Chung, 1997).

Students appear to benefit from instruction in its component parts (e.g., phonological awareness, word recognition, written expression) when instruction is hierarchical, with an initial focus on basic skills as a prerequisite for higher-order, problem-solving applications. However, care must be taken to ensure that students are not placed in a long-term status of "not yet ready" for higher-order activities. Instead, their educational experiences need to include a blend of experiences so they are able to demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways (Orkwis & McLane, 1998).

SUMMARY

Federal education policy is clear in its intent for all students to be active participants in the general education curriculum. The IDEA amendments of 1997 call for a broader focus on educational planning. The reference point for IEP development is now the student's participation in the general education curriculum and the supports needed to accomplish this goal.

Although this is uncharted territory, students can benefit from an emerging body of research that emphasizes the importance of universal design of curricula and instructional materials and of strategies that support access to the general education curriculum. Special educators must possess content knowledge necessary for delivering instruction; students need access to instruction that is individually referenced, intense, frequent, and explicit.

Enhancing access to the general education curriculum requires a new approach to collaboration between general and special education. Joint participation and leadership in curriculum and standards development, professional development, resource allocation, and instruction are critical factors in helping students with disabilities access the general education curriculum and acquire skills that will better prepare them for life after school.

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