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HAMMILL INSTITUTE ON DISABILITIES

The Journal of Special Education
1–10
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DOI: 10.1177/0022466914554296
journalofspecialeducation.sagepub.com
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The Path to Academic Access for Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Abstract

Federal special education law (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act) guarantees, but does not define, access to the general education curriculum for all students with disabilities. In-depth qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with special educators (n = 33) about their academic decision making for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Findings revealed a distinct path to decision making about academic access, including a context of aloneness, the influence of professionalism, and perceived barriers. As traditional ways of educating students with significant cognitive disabilities are challenged by new expectations, this research provides a glimpse of how teachers struggle to interpret policy and enact access. Understanding access as a conceptual path enables policy, research, and professional development aimed at increasing access to focus on specific points in the decision-making process.

Keywords
access to the general education curriculum, teacher decisions, significant cognitive disabilities

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees, but does not define, access to the general education curriculum for all students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1400(c)(5)(A) [2004]). Therefore, educators must interpret and create access to the general education curriculum in practice. How the meaning of "access" is interpreted is extremely important because historically, students with significant cognitive disabilities were rarely taught content area academics and curriculum was required to have a demonstrable practical application to daily life, for example, reading safety signs or a menu at a fast food restaurant (Browder et al., 2004; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleski, 2002). The special education literature offers various interpretations of the meaning and scope of access to the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Ayres, Douglas, Lowrey, & Sievers, 2011; Browder, 2012; Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012; Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007; Etscheidt, 2011; Hunt, McDonnell, & Crockett, 2012; Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2007; Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008–2009; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007), as well as numerous resources on how to design, modify, and assess academic curriculum (Browder & Spooner, 2011; Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007; Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & Dibiase, 2012; Spooner & Browder, 2006). However, less is known about how special education teachers interpret the meaning of access and make decisions to use the available strategies and options.

Three prior studies specifically investigated teacher perspectives about curricular access for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and findings suggest an evolution from resistance toward acceptance of academic content. The first study discovered teacher ambivalence about the relevance of standards and academic instruction for this population (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). Later, Dymond and her colleagues (2007) found that special educators used academic standards to design instruction, but they reported some ambivalence about the feasibility of academics for their students. Finally, Timberlake's (2014) study generated a theory of access as a largely intuitive process of educators making "cost-benefit" decisions. Special educator participants taught some academic content and skills to students with significant cognitive disabilities but engaged in a process of evaluating what students might gain and lose through participation in academic activities. The highest "cost" was defined as "wasting time," or using limited instructional time for skills deemed unimportant, whereas benefits were activities perceived to have long-term value such as preparing meals (Timberlake, 2014). Teacher perceptions of policy are critical because policy is

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enacted and access to the general education curriculum is realized through teachers' daily work. Despite a focus on teaching content area academics in the field (Browder, 2007; Browder & Spooner, 2011; Copeland & Keefe, 2007; Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013; Jimenez et al., 2012; Jimenez, Lo, & Saunders, 2014), there is little research available on how special educators make choices about academic priorities and the factors that influence these decisions. One early study by Voeltz, Evans, Freedland, and Donellon (1982) found variation in teacher decision making about Individualized Education Program (IEP) priorities despite the similar demographics characteristics and training of the participants. More recently, Jorgensen et al. (2007) found that IEP team members made at least short-term changes in their decision making about students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in a pre–post study of an intervention to increase expectations and academic access. Lowrey, Drasgow, Renzaglia, and Chezan (2007) raised concerns that the alternate assessment might lead IEP teams to change curricular priorities, and although Goldstein and Behuniak (2012) did not investigate teacher decisions about access, their research found teachers rated some students with significant cognitive disabilities as unable to engage with academic content as presented on the state alternate assessment. What remains to be discovered is how teachers use their decision-making authority to prioritize academic skills and design the implementation of access.

Special Educators as Policy Producers

Special educators who support students with significant cognitive disabilities can be considered street-level bureaucrats, a public policy conceptualization of workers who deliver public social services (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky introduced the phrase "street level bureaucracy" in the 1970s to represent the paradox of fairness associated with the consistency and uniformity of bureaucracies, and the simultaneous need for individualized responses to human diversity. Educators face this paradox today because federal law directs teachers to simultaneously (a) align student goals and assess student progress on the same academic standards as their nondisabled peers, and (b) design an individualized program for each student's unique needs (20 U.S.C. § 1400; IDEA, 2004). Teachers must define and create access to the general education curriculum within these dual policy goals of sameness and individuality.

Street-level bureaucracy theory posits that workers develop patterns of behavior that allow them to manage competing demands on their time, high levels of client need, limited resources, and ambiguous policy goals (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Although it is unlikely that special educators would refer to themselves as "bureaucrats," their jobs require continual decisions about communication, social, sensory, behavioral, and other student needs within a prescribed school schedule and environment. Street-level bureaucrats typically work in situations that are complex and often require them to make difficult choices about serving individual needs—and these choices produce expected and unanticipated policy outcomes (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005).

A key component of street-level bureaucracy theory is professional discretion, defined as an array of choices or decisions within set parameters, and as the ability for teachers to weigh options and act on professional judgments (Boote, 2006; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). The use of discretion and the influence of professional ideology on service delivery in other professions suggest that applying a street-level perspective to teachers' choices and decision making will provide insights into the implementation of academic access. Prior studies have found discretion was influenced by multiple factors including worker personality, professionalism, values such as empathy and compassion, and demographic characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and years on the job (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, 2012; Meyers, Glaser, & Donald, 1998; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Evans (2011) found social workers referred to their professional identities as the guide for how to make difficult decisions, whereas Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) found that professional norms may be so ingrained in the workplace that workers are often unable to explicitly articulate the individual factors that influence their daily decisions. This investigation of special educators' academic decision making is part of a larger study of special education teachers' policy interpretation and academic priorities for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The research question here was how particular aspects of street-level bureaucracy theory (autonomy and discretion) could provide new ways to understand special educators' interpretation and implementation of academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Method

Participants

In early 2012, special educators in one Northeastern U.S. state were invited to participate in interviews about how they chose academic priorities for students considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. Participants met study inclusion criteria if they were (a) teaching for at least 2 years, (b) teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities (defined as at least two students participating in the state alternate assessment), and (c) teaching in a public school (e.g., volunteers from special purpose schools without access to general education classes and colleagues were

Table 1. Selected Participant Interview Questions.

Conceptual area	Defining access	Planning	Decision making
Interview question	What does the phrase "access to the general education curriculum" mean to you?	Could you walk me through your planning process?	Who decides (i.e., do you have the authority to decide) if your students go into general education classes?
Probes for deeper explanation	How would you define or explain the meaning of "access to the general education curriculum" to a new teacher or a parent?	How do you decide what the most important academic content is for your students?	What factors go into these decisions?
Probes for clarification	Can you give me an example of what I would see if I observed your students having access to the general education curriculum?	What influences your decisions?	What role does the IEP team play? How much do you feel parents rely on your expertise?

Note. Entire interview guide is available on request.

not eligible). The final analytic sample ($N = 33$) included 14 elementary, 7 middle level, and 12 high school teachers.

The participants had from 2 to 38 years of teaching experience, with a mean of 19 years for the elementary participants, 14 years for the middle level, and 18 years for the high school teachers. The participants were spread geographically between rural and heavily populated areas. Twenty participants had graduate degrees and six were enrolled in a master's program. Participants teaching grades 6 to 8 are referred to as "middle level" because no obvious differences were noted in responses from those in middle or junior high buildings. The caseload distribution at all three grade spans (elementary, middle, high school) consisted of one or two of the teachers supporting students with autism only, approximately half of the teachers supporting only students with severe disabilities, and the remaining teachers responsible for a diverse array of students including those needing less intensive behavioral and academic supports in addition to students with significant cognitive disabilities. The majority of participants were female, and because gender did not appear significant in the data analysis, the pronoun *she* is used in reporting the findings to protect confidentiality.

Materials

A semi-structured interview guide that integrated the special education and policy implementation research literature was created and approved by the author's university Institutional Review Board (IRB). The same interview guide was used for teachers at all grade levels and the telephone interviews lasted approximately 1 hr. Open-ended interview questions included what teachers chose for academic content and how these decisions were made; the amount of control and discretion teachers felt; and how decisions to include students in general education classes for academics were made. Selected questions are shown in Table 1 and the entire interview guide is available on request.

Procedure

Special educator participants were recruited via four sources. The invitation and study description were posted on the alternate assessment list serve maintained by the state Department of Education, distributed to the special education administrators' state organization and the state principals' association with the request that they forward to their teachers, and advertised in the newsletter of a state teacher professional development organization. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the start of each call and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Transcripts and written notes made during interviews were verified for accuracy and organized in ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software package. Although the research was premised on the assumption that special educators functioned as street-level bureaucrats, the first round of coding deliberately set aside this expectation and open coded each line so that no information would be inadvertently overlooked (Charmaz, 2006). Next, deductive analysis based on researcher experience, the special education research literature, and the components of street-level bureaucracy was used to provide context and look for what might define and explain the creation of access. Transcripts were reviewed for expressions of discretion, autonomy, statements of philosophy such as "I believe . . ." and "students need . . .," and assertive statements about the value of academics and the meaning of access. Matrices and visual mapping were used to locate patterns and identify similarities and differences between participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One matrix listed each participant with corresponding quotes about her curricular decisions and perceptions of autonomy. Each participant was given an informal rating based on how she described her decision-making authority. A scatterplot was created to give the researcher a visual of the participants as a group, and confirmed the appropriateness of using street-level bureaucracy as the theoretical lens. Other matrices compared participants who expressed the most confidence and autonomy with what they reported about specific academic instruction.

Next, transcripts were reviewed again and different sections were labeled with the emerging categories to judge the order and significance of the findings as a picture of teacher discretion became more clear (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Early memos about the amount and type of discretion in the data led to later advanced memos (Charmaz, 2006) explicating the categories within discretion, factors associated with academic decisions, and descriptions of dilemmas and conflicts about what was "best" for students. The emergence of professionalism and teacher isolation across categories informed the proposed relationship between teacher interpretation of access and teachers' role as street-level bureaucrats.

Trustworthiness

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked whether they were willing to be contacted for further questions and were invited to contact the researcher if they wished to add to their responses after reflecting on the interview. Four respondents subsequently emailed additional information about their academic planning. Steps taken during data analysis to ensure interpretative rigor included comparing responses and seeking disagreements among participants about their level of decision-making authority, seeking explanations for differences, and comparing responses about teacher autonomy with corresponding responses about curricular access and academics.

Preliminary findings were provided to participants and they were invited to review the researcher's conclusions and provide feedback on the accuracy and theoretical relevance of initial findings (Patton, 2002). Seven participants (three elementary, two middle, and two high school) responded, confirmed the accuracy of the findings, and elaborated on the specifics of their decision making.

Results

Participants perceived themselves to have a high level of discretion over academic choices and therefore, utilizing street-level bureaucracy theory enabled new insights into special educators' thinking regarding the implementation of academic access. Key themes emerged to illustrate deeper dimensions of discretion and the context within which curricular access decisions were made. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual path to academic access generated by this research. It shows how aloneness was the overarching context within which these special educators exercised professional discretion whereas the elements of power and professionalism represent the strong ideological commitments that the participants shared and that shaped academic decisions. Decision-making power encountered two boundaries: local graduation credit requirements and the state Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards (AA-AAS). Diploma requirements were perceived as permeable whereas the AA-AAS was a firm and nonnegotiable barrier that constrained and directed teacher decision making about academics. Curricular access as a process of weighing costs and benefits was derived from these data and detailed elsewhere (Timberlake, 2014). The relationship of each theme to decisions about academic access is explained in detail below.

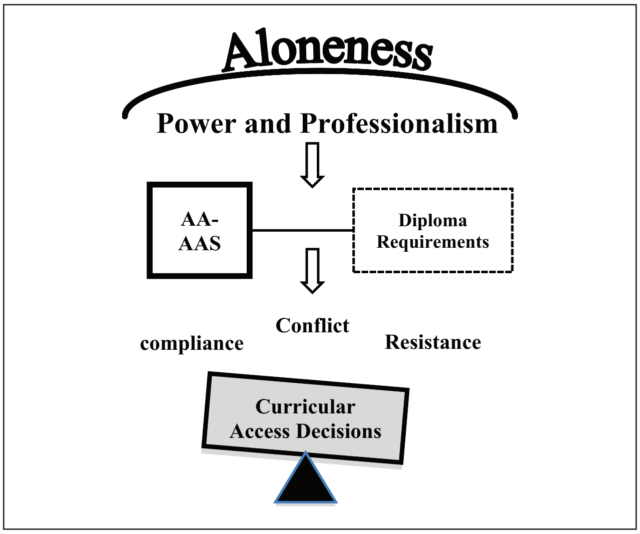

Figure 1. The path of teacher discretion toward academic access.
Note. AA-AAS = Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards.

Discretion and Sense of Aloneness

Many teachers reported a high level of social and physical isolation within their buildings, in addition to a high degree of autonomy over student programs. Participants referred to their ability to make decisions about student learning as "freedom" and "a luxury," as well as a solitary endeavor. Despite references to team decisions, 29 of the 33 participants said they made most academic decisions, and that parents and other IEP team members expected them to do so. An elementary educator explained, "We develop the plan as a team, but I'm pretty much the one that decides the goals," whereas a high school teacher reported,

> Well, I do it [choose curricular priorities] through the IEP team, but I do not kid myself that depending on the parents, sometimes that decision is almost exclusively mine because sometimes the parents—they leave it up to you.

Four teachers used the expression "I'm on my own" to describe their approach to designing academic access and one educator called herself "an island" referring to a lack of peers or colleagues to talk with about academic choices. Only two participants (both elementary educators) expressed a different view, describing making decisions collaboratively with related service providers.

Descriptions of ownership and autonomy over special education programs suggested that participants' relative isolation in the school was welcome or at least was not a cause for concern. Only one participant said she wished for more collaborative curricular and instructional decision making and attributed her isolation to the characteristics of her students:

> When you're working with autism, the other people in the building aren't doing the same thing . . . the other teachers don't understand what I do, or how I do it, or why my kids are acting up, so I can't lean on them for support.

It is not clear whether other special educators received more support in their buildings or whether they were more satisfied with their status, but few reported desiring additional support. Most participants described their aloneness as a routine part of the job. A middle level teacher said,

> I have what I call "out of sight, out of mind." I'm in a far corner of the building, and I have my kids all day. The regular classroom teachers, even my administration, they don't even know what I'm doing. I'm lucky in that respect that I am free to do what I feel is best for these students.

The perception that her isolation (and that of her students) made them "lucky" is notable and was shared by other interviewees. In fact, a few participants expressed strong opinions that their aloneness was necessary to provide the specialized instruction they perceived to be in their students' best interest. A middle school teacher said,

> Their core subjects are reading and math, and are in here with me because that's where we can get the most benefit from the time that we're putting in with it. If they go in a [general education] classroom, it's wasting everybody's time.

The freedom to define and create what was "best" was another dimension of solitary decision making. Participants repeatedly used the phrase "I'm able to do what I think is best," and an elementary teacher explained, "I decide what the best possible world is for the kids." However, teachers reported that the responsibility to choose wisely accompanied this freedom. Teachers described spending time individually with students, creating materials to assess their interests and prior knowledge, and designing environments that the teachers considered safe and productive. Elementary teachers were most likely to describe teaching parallel academic content in a special education setting as best, whereas middle and high school teachers defined functional activities as best.

Perceptions of Power and Professionalism

The second theme that emerged from the data was related to the power of decision making. Participants reported (a) embracing and enjoying their power of decision making, (b) feeling apprehensive about the responsibilities of this decision-making power, and (c) feeling that decision-making power was earned through hard work and good performance. The categories were not mutually exclusive; for example, several teachers reported both enjoyment of and qualms about the enormity of designing students' academic exposure.

Participants appreciated their discretionary power because it allowed them to enact their professional values, and the most frequent reason given for enjoying discretion was the almost daily requirement for creative problem solving and thinking "outside the box." Participants reported relishing the stimulation of continually constructing new plans, ideas, and strategies. One teacher explained that she had remained in her position for so long because of the variety of students and the intellectual stimulation of figuring out how to design their educational programs, whereas another said, "I've been teaching 35 years, but you can always get new ideas." Two teachers referred to their jobs as "an adventure," and "coordinated chaos" as they explained how they thrived on the stimulation.

The second perception of decision-making power involved expressions of caution, an awareness of the enormity of teacher responsibility for students' lives, and acknowledgment that there may be different "right" answers. An elementary teacher summed up the theme of confidence within uncertainty when she said, "I've been teaching for 25 years . . . I'm confident in what I do and that I'm making good choices for these kids but who's to say for sure if I really am?" Another participant reported, "I'm sometimes not sure if there is a 'right' decision or not . . . to be honest, sometimes it's a guess—my best guess at the time."

The third perception of professional discretion was that decision-making power was the result of hard work and professional growth. Participants credited internal (personal) or external (outside) professionalism for their power to make curricular decisions. Internal professionalism involved reflection, self-evaluation, and convictions that discretion was a natural result of commitment to children and the inner drive to continually improve their teaching. An elementary teacher shared how her experience gave her the wisdom to evaluate options: "I have enough experience at this point to know it doesn't have to be the latest thing, it just has to be a good idea." However, responses attributed to external professionalism were more frequent and included the perception that other people, particularly administrators and parents conferred discretion after observing the teachers' behavior. Multiple teachers used the words "credibility," "history," "results," and "trust" to explain that their capacity to make decisions was not simply handed to them, but was earned through an established record of exemplary performance. As an elementary educator explained, "I don't want to sound like 'oh they just let me do what I want' because it's not like that. It's been earned . . . we show results and progress." A middle level teacher explained that her years of experience earned the respect of her administration, "I've got the credibility that nobody questions me, everybody feels I'm doing the right thing."

Boundaries to Discretion

The AA-AAS and local graduation requirements were both perceived as boundaries to teachers' discretion and academic decision-making authority. The same AA-AAS is required statewide, whereas graduation requirements are locally determined and vary by district. Although both were described as interfering with decision-making authority, diploma requirements were permeable whereas the AA-AAS was solid and unyielding. The real significance of both perceived barriers however is more than simply representing limits to decision-making power—the AA-AAS was perceived as a barrier to enacting professionalism and being able to do what is "best" for students. Because doing what is best was deeply meaningful to teachers, many reported experiencing internal conflict and resistance when policy compliance required them to take actions they viewed as inappropriate. Teachers were often able to resolve their discomfort by asserting their professional priorities while also complying with policy. For example, high school participants reported teaching courses with the designated name (e.g., math) but creating functional skills and community activities for their students. Four different teachers described scenarios that illustrated the fact that isolation and professional values enabled them to make decisions to reconcile their belief that functional skills were important with their local graduation requirements. One participant said, "I have social studies because we *have* to have a social studies class . . . so we go over safety signs and I'm loosely saying that's geography" whereas another shared, "If somebody questions it, I say this is a math class . . . we run a cafe for the staff here at the school and I'm calling that math . . . I feel very strongly that all my students graduate with a diploma." A third said,

> So for a science class, we work on "what kind of clothes do you wear during this weather?" But I don't have guidelines saying what I have to teach—I just have to make sure that there is a class labeled science and then they get the credit for that.

A teacher who called her community outings "English," summed up her discretion by saying, "I can call it [curricular decisions] by whatever academic vernacular is required."

Even reluctant compliance with graduation requirements still allowed participants to teach what they deemed valuable but this was not so easily accomplished with the AA-AAS. Compliance with the AA-AAS (reluctant or enthusiastic) shaped participants' interpretation of what constitutes "academics" and changed their curricular and instructional decisions. For example, two middle school teachers said they wrote IEP goals directly from the alternate assessment tasks, and an elementary teacher said, "What I'm teaching day in and day out is what's on the alternate." Another elementary educator reported using the alternate "religiously" to write every IEP goal and objective. Many teachers across the grade spans said they were "teaching to the test" although they had different opinions about whether this was a good idea. One teacher remarked that she was doing exactly what general education was doing—teaching to the test—she was simply using a different assessment. Other teachers indicated that they did not find the alternate particularly useful for informing instruction, but were philosophical about the requirement to use it for that purpose. For example, one teacher said,

> You definitely spend time teaching something that you may not have taught otherwise. I don't know that it's a bad thing but you're definitely teaching things that they'll never have to know. So it doesn't hurt . . . it just doesn't help.

Another teacher explained the influence of the alternate on her curricular choices as "I have to teach it [math] in a way that fits the alternate . . . are they ever going need to use it? Hard to say, but I don't have a big problem with it." One teacher however was not only frustrated about complying with a policy she found objectionable, but frustrated with herself for her own quiet compliance: "If someone complains, they should get involved and do more, and I don't . . . so I shouldn't complain."

Middle and high school participants were more likely than elementary teachers to express the perception that the alternate "forced" them to compromise their values by "requiring" them to replace some functional skill instruction with more traditional academics. As a middle level teacher explained, "Unfortunately, I have to [use the alternate to guide curricular choices] but the reality is it has nothing to do with real life." Although not all teachers agreed with the emphasis of the alternate or copied assessment tasks directly into lesson plans, there was agreement that compliance was required and that compliance meant compromise.

Discussion

Although teachers do not create all the conditions within which policy is enacted and are not solely responsible for students' academic exposure, special educators give meaning to the policy language. Using a street-level theoretical lens illumined special educators' decision making about academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Understanding more about aloneness, professionalism and barriers on the path to curricular access are crucial to ensuring students attain the benefits of access such as exposure to content and classmates, increased expectations of competency, and measurable progress and achievement (Ryndak et al., 2008–2009; Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006).

The ubiquity of aloneness is complex and concerning. Outside of references to IEP team meetings, there was little mention of team planning and collaboration. Participants' ambivalence about general education classrooms was detailed elsewhere (Timberlake, 2014) but these data also show that aloneness was seen as a nod to teacher expertise, a recognition of their professional status, and a demonstration of trust in their abilities. Aloneness as credibility is a powerful misperception that affects what is possible for access.

Another consequence of aloneness that potentially affected the path to access is related to professional development. Concrete guidance on implementing academic access was likely not reaching these educators and/or the information they received maintained the ambiguity of the term "access." Prior public policy researchers have questioned how professionals come to understand what a new or revised policy requires, and found that specific guidelines and direction for implementation were often missing (Hill, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). When queried about how they "stay current" and learn about developments in the field, just over 60% of the teachers cited their special education administrators as their sole source for updates and information. For example, "Our special ed director gives us copies of the table of contents in journals so we can see what's out there to keep up on," and "Our director sends us photocopies of the table of contents of like . . . five different journals each month." Although research continues to extend the boundaries of what students with significant cognitive disabilities can academically attain, access may not mean meaningful curricular and social connections for students when the context of aloneness is so pervasive and not wholly unwelcome.

Next, the finding that teachers' decisions about access to the general education curriculum were motivated by concern for students' success and well-being, and a commitment to what was "meaningful" and relevant, was consistent with prior research on teacher perceptions (Agran et al., 2002; Dymond et al., 2007). In addition, the findings that special educators were aware of their power, were mindful of the importance of their decisions to peoples' (students) lives, and were influenced by deeply held values and norms of their profession are consistent with previous research on street-level bureaucrats in other occupations (Evans, 2010, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). The norms of the profession for these special educator participants included commitments to specialized instruction and functional activities, protection and care for students, creativity and expertise, and the credibility gained from experience. Teachers used these professional norms and values as the guide for how to resist, adapt, and/or accept academic policy requirements within the limits of their decision-making power. Teacher perceptions of power and professionalism were consistent with other research findings that workers in social service professions cared deeply, and were motivated by values, but tempered their idealism with what was "realistic," or in this case, "functional" (Evans, 2004; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Unlike prior studies of street-level bureaucrats in large agencies and organizations, however, these findings are characterized by the special educators' solitary status despite teaching in public school buildings. Although peers reportedly had some influence on other street-level workers' decision making, these special educators did not report any challenges to or critical feedback regarding their decisions (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005). The path to access generated by this research is more solitary than would be expected given the emphasis in special education on IEP team planning, integrating related services, designing instructional supports, and collaboratively developing learning outcomes (Giangreco, 2011).

It is important to observe the influence of professional values and ideology on the path to access (see Figure 1). Compliance with the AA-AAS helped define access at the "street level" but participants revealed compromises and resistance as strong values about what was best for students directed how discretion was used.

There are two particularly significant points. First, unlike surveys of teacher opinions about the AA-AAS, these teachers were asked about their academic priorities, not what they think about the AA-AAS (Restorff, Sharpe, Abery, Rodriguez, & Kim, 2012). The role of the AA-AAS in curriculum emerged as participants explained their academic planning. Second and most significantly, these teachers did not express opposition to academic curriculum and instruction per se, but to the AA-AAS as essentially required curriculum, a perception that was widely shared.

The state AA-AAS was piloted in 2000–2001 and implemented statewide in 2002, and although there have been changes in format from a teacher-developed portfolio to standardized test items, and changes in wording (grade level expectations and standards), the requirement is no longer new or novel. Lowrey et al. (2007) predicted and Hunt et al. (2012) summarized concerns that the AA-AAS could be used on IEPs in place of individually determined goals and objectives, and inadvertently create a situation of "teaching to the test." These findings give credence to that concern and are evidence that Hunt et al.'s call to attend to the possible misuse or misunderstanding of the AA-AAS is timely and relevant. The frequency and consistency of this teacher perception suggest the ambiguity and uncertainty about the role of the AA-AAS are also present at the district and state levels. The manual disseminated by the state department of education advises teachers to "embed student work for the AA-AAS in daily instruction throughout the year" and include student work that is a "culmination of instruction leading toward achievement of [state standards]." These data suggest that without more specific examples, and in the absence of a network of support and professional development, many teachers are interpreting these instructions to mean the IEP.

Limitations

These data are based on perception, and participants may have described how they thought they should determine curricular access. Although multiple outreach sources for distribution of the recruitment invitation were used and ample volunteers obtained, it was not possible to measure whether or how individuals who responded to the invitation differed from those who did not respond. The findings are dependent on the procedural and interpretive rigor of a single researcher; however, the researcher's experience as a special education teacher and university instructor provides a historical and conceptual understanding of curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The format of the alternate assessment is unique to the state where the research was conducted; however, educators, researchers, and policymakers in other states may find the results informative because the process of selecting tasks based on grade equivalent alternate achievement standards was modeled on neighboring states and refined through collaboration with national assessment partners.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There is a history of segregation, low expectations, and limited academic instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and this conceptual path to access reveals areas of progress as well as areas for intervention and further research.

First, a main tenet of street-level theory proposes that workers create routines to reduce complexity and mange the multiple competing demands of their work and similarly, that organizations create routines to essentially "get work done" in the face of ambiguity, complexity, and need for action (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). Thus, the prevalence of teacher aloneness in these data could be interpreted through the street-level lens as a means of reducing complexity, managing caseloads efficiently, and getting the most done with limited staff, time, and other resources. Restructuring special educators' roles to increase the time and opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues could decrease the context of aloneness and increase teachers' options for creating access to the general education curriculum. Prior definitions of access as high expectations, standards-based instruction, academic progress and achievement, and general education locations will all be difficult to realize in the context of special educator aloneness. Collaboration and team planning are also likely to remain as policy compliance (i.e., IEP team meetings) rather than substantial changes in practice without shifts in the contexts on this conceptual path to access. Defining special educators' primary responsibility as creating access via general education participation would alter the decision-making context of aloneness and change the choices and priorities available for academic access.

The good news/bad news of such strong teacher professionalism is the second implication. Circumventing boundaries such as graduation credits or teaching academics in perfunctory ways for the AA-AAS can be both admirable and problematic. Special educators were diligent, creative, and strongly motivated by ethical values and doing what is "best." Their perceptions should inform the national conversation because they are showing on a micro level the issues the field is debating at the national level (Ayres et al., 2011; Courtade et al., 2012). These special educators had the power to define meaning and value, such as whether a skill or activity was called an important job or a waste of time and appeared to be doing so in the absence of collegial discussions or peer feedback. Browder (2012) suggested that a set of quality indicators might be helpful for teams as they learn to integrate the multiple expectations of Common Core State Standards, AA-AAS requirements, and individual student priorities. That call is strongly supported by this research.

Future research might build on these findings by investigating how other IEP team members, particularly parents and general educators perceive their role and that of their special educator in choosing and implementing academic standards. Scholars continue to debate and devise how to best utilize academic content standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities so it is conceivable that IEP teams would find it very challenging (Courtade et al., 2011; Hunt et al., 2012). Exploring the perceptions of other team members, particularly parents, will provide additional insights into the curricular access path.

Finally, terms such as "blend" (Courtade et al., 2011), "shift" (Ayres et al., 2011), "reconcile" (Hunt et al., 2012), and "compromise" (Browder, 2012) all refer to the turmoil underway as the field evolves and traditional ways of educating students with significant cognitive disabilities are challenged by new expectations and policies. This research provides a glimpse of how teachers caught in this "blend" or "shift" struggle to enact access. Academic possibilities unimagined when the phrase "access to the general education curriculum" was included in IDEA continue to be revealed. Understanding access as a conceptual path enables policy, research, and professional development aimed at increasing access to focus on specific points in the decision-making process.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Partial support for this research was provided by the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy at Brandeis University.

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