

Dr. Nuala McGann Drescher Award Proposal

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The goal of my project is to generate new knowledge about the critically important issue of how students with significant cognitive impairments gain access to academic instruction in this era of high stakes testing, a system of Regents Exams and more recently, Common Core State Standards. Although the federal special education law *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) guarantees access to the general education curriculum for all students the law does not define access and there is no consensus on a definition of “access” in the special education literature. How the meaning of “access” is interpreted is extremely important because there is a history of segregation, low expectations, and limited academic instruction for these students. I investigated teacher perceptions of the federal policy provision of access to academic content for students considered to have significant intellectual and developmental disabilities for my dissertation. The Drescher Award will provide an extraordinary opportunity for me to build on my dissertation research without delay by investigating how educational services are organized in NY, and how decisions about educating children with the most complex disabilities are made at the local and state levels. The invisibility of children and youth with “severe” disabilities in my visits to area schools and classrooms has shown me that this topic is very relevant to NY state. NY is currently implementing the Common Core State Standards and encouraging districts to use the Engage NY modules. The issues of curriculum are front and center and the application of these curricular materials to the least visible and arguably most vulnerable children is critical to explore. Although I have a few years before my continuing appointment deadline this is precisely the right time to launch this study and build a long-term program for productive disability research and educational policy scholarship at SUNY Cortland.

At the conclusion of this award period I plan to have [1] one independent study underway and one collaborative study in the exploration and preparation stage (2) one paper under review at a peer-reviewed academic journal and (3) created a visual representation of the network of disability policymakers and the system of educational and social service providers in New York state for my own use in research and teaching.

In addition to my intellectual goal of advancing knowledge related to academic achievement and students with significant cognitive disabilities, my personal goals for this project are related to addressing the historically low expectations and segregated status of students considered to have the most complex disabilities. I have witnessed changes in special education philosophy, practice, and policy since my first teaching job more than twenty-five years ago. I have watched individuals with disabilities move out of institutions, and children move out of self-contained settings and into inclusive classrooms. More recently, I have watched segregation regain legitimacy and a deficit-based orientation to teaching regain prominence. The choice of academic access as my research problem was (and continues to be) based on my dismay at the prevalence of segregation in policy and practice, and my concern for the well-being of individuals whose communication, sensory needs, and/or behavior make them vulnerable to being misunderstood and underestimated.

My specific objectives for this award period are listed below. Each objective contributes to my overall goal to develop a strong scholarly agenda while also creating more personalized course content for students and increasing the visibility of SUNY Cortland through continued publications and research partnerships.

1. Initiate a new study extending my dissertation research on teacher perceptions of academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

- a. Recruit a sample of teachers across NY state (n=+/-25) for in depth interviews.
- b. Develop an interview guide designed to deepen and extend my prior findings while generating new information. Academic peer-reviewed articles written from my dissertation data have been accepted for publication in *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* (2014¹) and the *Journal of Special Education* – accepted, forthcoming 2015). My 2014 paper “Weighing Costs and Benefits” proposed a theory of access as an intuitive process of teachers weighing what they believed would be gained and lost through students’ participation in skills, activities and learning environments. Does the theory generated previously apply here in NY? What are the relevant variables in creating access that may have been overlooked and remain undiscovered from my prior study?
- c. The interview guide will contain some of the same questions asked of my prior study participants to enable a comparison of teacher policy interpretation between ME, NY and potentially MA. Newly developed questions will be added to explore how New York’s model of Alternate Assessment and BOCES organizational structure may influence teacher interpretation of their responsibility to create academic access.
- d. Begin data collection by mid February and analysis by early April 2015.

2. Prepare papers for submission peer-reviewed publications

- a. Prepare one paper for a special education- centered journal (target -International Journal of Inclusive Education) using my existing data. The Drescher award will enable me to take advantage of the data I already have while it is still timely.
- b. Prepare a new paper from emerging study findings during June-July 2015.

3. Develop strong networks within the education and disability service system in NY state.

- a. Contact and schedule informational interviews with state Alternate Assessment (AA-AAS) personnel in Albany. The state Alternate Assessment personnel in ME allowed me to recruit my previous study participants via their list serve and my objective is to do the same here in NY. All students with significant cognitive

¹ Doi: 10.1177/1540796914544547.

disabilities must participate in the AA-AAS so it is likely that the population of teachers I want to recruit is accessible through this type of state list.

- b. Seek to become a visible presence representing SUNY Cortland on the AA-AAS or other NY state assessment committee. I was on the Advisory Board for the state AA-AAS in ME and conducted a pilot study of teacher implementation of the state assessment. The study report was disseminated to the committee and the Department of Education. [a summary of finding was also published in a state education journal². Developing a relationship with the state education department in NY will facilitate both recruiting and the dissemination of my findings.
- c. Introduce myself to teachers and administrators at regional BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services), observe in classrooms and connect with providers. The BOCES structure is unique to NY and learning the administrative, financial and educational structure as well as relationships between BOCES and local schools is essential to understanding how students with disabilities are educated in NY state. There are 37 BOCES, I'll use the time granted through the Drescher award to travel to six surrounding SUNY Cortland and use this new network to locate and recruit potential study participants. [Onondaga-Cortland-Madison (serves 23 local school districts), Tompkins -Seneca-Tioga (serves 9 districts), Greater Southern Tier (serves 21 districts), Broome-Tioga (serves 15 districts) Delaware- Chenango-Otsego (serves 16 districts), and Wayne-Finger Lakes (serves 25 school districts)]. * I'll also travel to 2 BOCES on Long Island as a majority of the student in my undergraduate courses are from this area and plan to return as special educators.
- d. Incorporate new knowledge acquired during these research activities into course content by creating case studies based on real NY students and policy situations for pedagogy classes FSA 210 and FSA 600. By visiting area schools, agencies and service providers I will not only increase the accuracy and relevance of my research but also the relevancy of my course content by discerning the curriculum, services and supports being provided. I used my relationships in my previous home state to collect examples of educational and medical reports, lesson plans, and other "real-life" documents and materials that I brought into my courses to enhance student learning. This award will enable me to provide that for my students at SUNY Cortland as well.

4. Explore additional collaborative research opportunities with faculty who have similar interests and publications in my area.

- a. Dr. Katherine Trela, Marist College and Dr. Stacy Dymond from the University of Illinois-Urbana -Champaign have expressed interest in collaborating in some way.

² Policy Fact and Policy Fiction: Assessment, Accountability and Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Maine Education*. xxvii, 31-33.

A letter from Dr. Trela expressing her commitment to developing a collaborative research project is included here as an attachment.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to apply for the Drescher award at this key point in my academic career. As a transplant to New York I do not have the network of professional colleagues that I had previously (Maine and Massachusetts). Another outcome of this opportunity will be learning the positions, agencies and procedures for state education, early education and transition for young people with disabilities. New York has some similarities to other states but also great differences in the roles and responsibilities of state agencies, concentration of personnel, higher population and geographic area, more county-based organizational structure, new political alliances and more. Learning how my new home state works is an essential step in crafting a productive research agenda at SUNY Cortland.

Maxwell³ proposed that qualitative researchers design studies based on personal, intellectual and practical goals. My reasons for joining the faculty in the Foundations & Social Advocacy Department in January 2013 and seeking a Drescher award for January 2015 may best be understood using that same reasoning. My application may be “early” in that spring 2015 is the beginning of my third year as an assistant professor. However, I obtained my PhD and became a faculty member somewhat “late” after a career as a special education teacher, consultant and adjunct instructor in Maine and Massachusetts. When my son left for college in 2008, I did the same, and now have the time, energy and opportunity to focus on the next stage in my evolving academic career. I am an experienced teacher and find teaching at SUNY Cortland very fulfilling. However, I am at an earlier stage in my role as a researcher and this award will be instrumental in helping me build a long-term program for productive disability research and educational policy scholarship at SUNY Cortland.

Thank you for considering my application for the Drescher award. My goals may be ambitious but this award will make my vision for scholarship and social change a reality far more quickly and comprehensively than I could accomplish alone. Your investment in my application will create a research plan that will jump start in 2015 and maintain slower yet steady progress in the years to come. I will honor your investment in me as a researcher and SUNY system colleague by working to bring personal, intellectual and practical benefit to my SUNY campus as well.

Sincerely,

Maria Timberlake, PhD

³ Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design An interactive approach* 2nd ed. Thousand Oakes CA: SAGE Publications.