

lack of access. One explanation is the field of general education curriculum. Although IDEA mandates what, where, and how it should happen (Slagor, 2007; Spooner et al., 2006; Timberlake et al., 2008-2009).

Individuals in various positions within the field of general education curriculum differently; therefore, the work of (Timberlake et al., 2008-2009). For example, in two separate studies, practices, and related issues around access to the general education curriculum (Timberlake, 2002; Dymond et al., 2007). Findings from a study of general education curriculum is a top priority. It is concluded that teachers may have a limited understanding of the benefits it offers students. Moreover, 50% of teachers did not have a well-defined plan for providing access (Aronson et al., 2002). Special education teachers struggled to define access in different ways. One similar component of access to the general education curriculum, however, was that it was not clear how to provide access. To provide access, teachers expressed the need for collaboration, including the need for pooling expertise among teachers. The studies by Agran et al. and Dymond et al. indicate a consensus definition of access to the general education curriculum does not exist, which is further complicated by the lack of a clear vision for how to provide access.

Recent findings by Timberlake (2014) provide evidence to suggest that ambiguity and confusion regarding access to the general education curriculum is still prevalent. According to Timberlake (2014), teachers continually make decisions regarding the level of access to the general education curriculum based on a complex set of factors including the skills and abilities of their students, their personal values regarding inclusion and access, and their evaluation of the long-term benefit of the academic content in their students' post-secondary lives. Timberlake also found that for many teachers, the most influential factor in their decisions of how and when to provide access to the general education curriculum was the use of instructional time. If teachers did not see the long-term benefit of the academic content, they considered it "wasting" valuable instructional time (Timberlake, 2014, p. 89). Unfortunately, teachers also indicated that they did not view instruction in academic content from the general education curriculum as part of their job role, because it was not compatible with the functional content that they typically taught. Such findings suggest that teachers of students with severe disabilities are often more comfortable with their traditional teaching roles of providing individualized instruction in a functional curriculum within a self-contained setting.

A second explanation for why access to the general education curriculum is not occurring in equitable ways for students with severe disabilities is that there are few exemplars to serve as models. Without such models, it is difficult for local education agencies (LEAs) to know how best to restructure existing schools. Although access to the general education curriculum can occur across a variety of service delivery models, research supports the use of inclusive settings for students with severe disabilities (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). In fact, Ryndak et al. (2008-2009) contended that general education contexts are a critical component of access to the general education curriculum.

Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, and Agran (2003) conducted a study on the degree to which access to the general education curriculum occurred in special education and general education classrooms. Specifically, they focused on observing what students with severe disabilities were doing in relation to district standards and IEP goals and the use of accommodations, adaptations, and augmentations. In general education classrooms, students were more likely to be engaged in tasks linked to standards. Hence, the authors indicated that access to the general education curriculum is more likely to occur in general education classrooms.

Similar to Wehmeyer et al. (2003), Soukup et al. (2007) observed students' interactions with standards and IEP goals in general education classrooms. Students with severe disabilities who were in more inclusive groups (i.e., spent 75%-100% of their day in general education classrooms) were more likely to be learning information linked to standards. Students who were in less inclusive groups (i.e., 0%-50% of their day spent in general education classrooms) were more likely to be learning material linked to IEP goals. Aligned with

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Providing Students With Severe Disabilities Access to the General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

This case study explored how multiple educational personnel in a middle school identified as an exemplar of inclusive education defined and provided students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum. Data sources including a questionnaire, interviews, observations, observation reflections, and artifacts were collected from 12 participants who worked as administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, or paraprofessionals. Findings point to educational personnel who are committed to providing access to the general education curriculum in general education classrooms and carry out this mission through shared responsibility, collaboration, peer supports, and multi-faceted learning structures. These findings are discussed in relation to future research and practice in the areas of inclusion and severe disabilities.

Keywords

inclusion, access to the general education curriculum, severe disabilities

A hallmark of contemporary special education is that students with severe disabilities have access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1997) defined the general education curriculum as “the same curriculum for nondisabled children.” Further specifications provided by the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA mandate that all students have the opportunity to learn grade-level content based on grade-level standards, participate in state assessment of those standards, and have individualized education programs (IEPs) that address how students will participate and progress in the general education curriculum. Providing students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum is important because it (a) makes a wide variety of curriculum options available; (b) can increase expectations for what students learn; (c) allows students to develop academic, social, and functional skills; and (d) offers students with disabilities opportunities to participate in activities with peers without disabilities, particularly in inclusive environments (Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006).

Despite the abovementioned benefits, students with severe disabilities are not accessing the general education curriculum in consistent or equitable ways (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Ryndak, Moore, & Orlando, 2008-2009; Spooner et al., 2006), and there are several possible explanations for this

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