

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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lack of access. One explanation is the field lacks a clear and formal definition of access to the general education curriculum. Although IDEA mandates that access needs to happen, it does not provide crucial details about what, where, and how it should happen (Dymond & Orelove, 2001; Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007; Spooner et al., 2006; Timberlake, 2014).

Individuals in various positions within the educational system may interpret access to the general education curriculum differently; therefore, the way access is constructed and implemented varies widely (Ryndak et al., 2008-2009). For example, in two seminal studies, researchers examined teachers' definitions, beliefs, practices, and related issues around access to the general education curriculum (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Dymond et al., 2007). Findings from these studies indicate teachers may not believe access to the general education curriculum is a top priority for students with severe disabilities. Agran et al. (2002) concluded that teachers may have a limited and narrow understanding of access including how to provide it and the benefits it offers students. Moreover, 53% of special education teachers indicated their district lacked a well-defined plan for providing access (Agran et al., 2002). Dymond et al. (2007) found that general and special education teachers struggled to define access to the general education curriculum and defined access in different ways. One similar component of their definitions, however, was that it should occur in general education contexts. 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

Wehmeyer et al., Soukup and colleagues concluded that the general education classroom is the context in which students will have greater access to the general education curriculum.

Although the benefits of accessing the general education curriculum in inclusive settings are documented, little is known about how educational personnel in various positions, who have succeeded in making inclusive education a reality for students with severe disabilities, define and provide access to the general education curriculum. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to help facilitate knowledge of and about access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities by studying a school identified as an exemplar of inclusive education. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following research question:

Research Question 1: How do multiple educational personnel in a middle school identified as an exemplar of inclusive education define and provide access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities?

Method

Qualitative methods were used to explore details about how multiple educational personnel define and provide access to the general education curriculum. Specifically, an instrumental case study was conducted with the intent that this study's findings could serve as a model for other individuals (Stake, 2000). The first author led data collection and analysis in consultation with the other members of the research team.

Setting

A specific case was purposefully sampled to provide insightful answers to the research question (Patton, 2002). Ridgeview Middle School is part of a suburban school district in a Midwestern state and was a recipient of the TASH June Downing Breakthroughs in Inclusive Education Award—a prestigious award with the purpose “to honor the important and courageous contributions of individuals and school districts in advancing inclusive education and equitable opportunities for students pre-school through grade 12, particularly those with the most significant disabilities and support needs” (TASH, n.d.). To be considered for the June Downing Award, individuals nominate districts/schools that are carrying out work that is aligned with TASH's mission. For districts and schools, information is requested on the number of students with IEPs served and the amount of time that students with severe disabilities spend in general education classrooms. In addition, nominators are asked to write a narrative describing why the district/school should be recognized. A committee of three to five representatives from TASH reviews the nomination materials and selects the award recipient. Within the award-winning district, a secondary school was purposefully selected as the instrumental case, because students with severe disabilities often spend less time in general education classrooms in secondary settings (Carter & Hughes, 2006) and there is less extant research on inclusive practices at the secondary level (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). The case was bound to this one school and the educational personnel who were involved in providing students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum. The service delivery model at Ridgeview Middle School is inclusion to the maximum extent possible, though substantial changes had to occur to make this a reality.

Administrators, faculty, and staff at Ridgeview Middle School led a major school transformation that started in 2003. The change began when the state identified an overrepresentation of students labeled with disabilities in the district. To facilitate change toward more inclusive practices, Ridgeview personnel followed recommendations outlined by Capper, Frattura, and Keyes (2000), which describe a socially just way of conceptualizing education called Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS). In ICS, students of all abilities have access to integrated settings and are educated in heterogeneous learning environments where they are active members of learning communities. The ICS framework stipulates that segregated learning contexts be abolished (Frattura & Capper, 2007). In accordance with an ICS framework, Ridgeview educational personnel eliminated pull-out classrooms and other segregated environments to the maximum extent possible. Changes in Ridgeview's service delivery model have been sustained over a number of years in

large part because of strong leadership and education personnel committed to upholding the school's mission of inclusive practices. Ridgeview educational personnel believe that the change process and resulting new practices positively benefit *all* students.

At the time of the study, Ridgeview served 673 students with the majority (89.2%) being White and 26.4% identified as economically disadvantaged. Of the 54 (8%) students with a disability, three were identified with a severe cognitive disability. Individuals with severe cognitive disabilities have intellectual/developmental disability and "require extensive, ongoing, support in more than one major life activity in order to participate in integrated community settings and enjoy a quality of life that is available to citizens with fewer or no disabilities" (TASH, 1991, p. 19). The three students with severe cognitive disabilities were all eighth graders who took the state alternate assessment. The students had a range in communication skills and all were ambulatory.

Participants

To secure the sample, targeted recruitment and snowball sampling techniques were utilized (Patton, 2002). First, the district director of student services and the Ridgeview Middle School principal were invited to participate in the study. Then, the principal sent informed consent documents to the parents of all three students with severe disabilities. Parents were asked to give consent for the research team to access their child's IEP and school schedule and work with the staff that supported their student throughout the day. All three parents gave their consent. As our investigative lens was focused at the personnel level as opposed to student level, IEPs and student schedules were only analyzed for purposes of sampling and recruiting participants who worked with students during the year of the study or during the previous year to provide access to the general education curriculum. The district director and principal were asked to recommend additional people who were currently involved or had been involved in recent years in providing access to the general education curriculum for the target students with severe disabilities. In total, 42 people were invited to participate, and 12 people ultimately consented including two administrators, six general education teachers, one inclusion support teacher, two learning strategists, and one educational assistant (see Table 1 for each participant's role and the scope of data sources). At Ridgeview, inclusion support teachers are responsible for supporting a variety of educational personnel in providing instruction to all students in general education classrooms; learning strategists are special education teachers.

Data Collection

Data from a variety of sources, including a questionnaire, interviews, classroom observations, participant reflections, and document reviews were collected over a 5-month period during one school year. Interview questions and items on the observation and reflection forms were developed based on the extant literature, the four cornerstones of ICS (Frattura & Capper, 2007), and definitions of access to the general education curriculum gleaned from the literature. The second author reviewed the data collection instruments to confirm connection and support of the research questions, and the interview protocol was piloted with a graduate student, who was a former special education teacher, to evaluate the clarity of the questions. Some interview questions were reworded or deleted based on the feedback that resulted from piloting the interview protocol.

The questionnaire served as the initial form of data collection. Participants responded to an open-ended question that asked them to write their definition of access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities. During the initial interview with each participant, the first author asked follow-up questions to clarify definitions around who provided access, and how and where access was provided.

Educational personnel were interviewed 1 to 3 times by the first author. Interviews were conducted over the telephone or in a location in the school district, at a time determined by the first author and the participant. Participants were interviewed individually with the exception of the two learning strategists who asked to be interviewed together. Interviews lasted approximately 30 min, were audio recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semi-structured with a focus on how participants perceived they were providing access (see Table 2). Follow-up questions unique to each individual and his or her role (e.g.,

Table 1. Participant Information and Scope of Data Sources.

Participant	Position	No. of interviews (total minutes)	No. of observations (total minutes)	No. of participant reflections	Pages of documents reviewed
Patrick	Director of student services	2 (70)	1 (65)	1	—
Tammy	Principal	3 (87)	1 (65)	—	1
Aubrey	Inclusion support teacher	2 (82)	1 (150)	—	29
Travis	Physical education teacher	1 (32)	1 (55)	1	—
Joel	Learning strategist	2 (55)		1	—
Allison	Learning strategist	2 (55)			27
Rachel	Language arts teacher	2 (25)			—
Tyler	Science teacher	3 (48)	2 (104)	2	3
Mariah	Science teacher	3 (30)	2 (104)	1	5
Carl	Business education teacher	2 (31)			5
Evan	Music teacher	2 (28)			—
Leah	Educational assistant	2 (51)	1 (45)	1	—
Total		26 (594)	9 (588)	6	70

Note. Cells with dashes (—) indicate that data were requested but not obtained.

Table 2. Interview Questions Across All Participants.

Interview Questions
How do you provide students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum?
Where do you provide access?
When do you provide access?
What is your role in providing access?
How does collaboration play a role in how you provide access to the general education curriculum?
With whom do you collaborate?
When and how does collaboration take place?
How does the leadership support access?
How does the school mission support access to the general education curriculum?
How are learning environments structured?
How do students with severe disabilities have learning and social opportunities equal to that of their peers without disabilities?
What strategies do you use to provide access to the general education curriculum to students with severe disabilities?
How do you plan for providing access to the general education curriculum? How is the IEP team involved with this?

Note. IEP = individualized education program.

features of their curriculum, instruction, and planning) were also asked. Additional interviews were conducted to complete the interview protocol and discuss details of the observations. Interviews with individual participants concluded when the research team determined interview data for particular educational personnel had reached saturation.

In addition to interviews, educational personnel identified once or twice in the school day when providing access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities was a central focus of the activity or meeting. The first author conducted nine observations during these specified times. Observations afforded the opportunity to observe individuals providing students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum in various ways, to confirm or disconfirm information learned in interviews, and to examine the extent to which the access provided was in alignment with participants' definitions. Observations occurred during instruction of students with severe disabilities, administrative

meetings, and professional development and were documented using an observation protocol. Data were recorded about how access was provided, discussed, and planned, including specifics about the environment, who was present, what was taught, how it was taught, and what participants were doing based on their definition of access to the general education curriculum. After each classroom observation, participants completed a reflection form on which they were asked how they provided access to the general education curriculum, including decisions they made during the process.

The first author conducted document reviews of curriculum planning tools, instructional materials, and professional development materials over the course of the study. Such documents served as sources for the triangulation of data and tools for individualizing interview questions based on participants' role.

Data Analysis

Each individual participant and his or her data sources were analyzed to understand how he or she provided access to the general education curriculum and how multiple educational personnel worked together across the school. The qualitative software program, NVIVO, was used to organize and code all data sources. In all phases of data analysis, the first author completed an initial round of coding that was shared with other members of the research team. The research team members then engaged in peer debriefing until they reached consensus about the selection, number, and organization of codes.

First, a priori codes from the research and interview questions, the ICS framework (Frattura & Capper, 2007), and the literature on definitions of access to the general education curriculum were accumulated. Examples of such codes included *context*, *content*, and *providers of access*. The first author then applied these a priori codes to the data sources. In the second round of coding, the first author engaged in subcoding (Saldaña, 2013) whereby new codes emerged based on reading through the data and were placed under the a priori codes or newly created codes if no relevant a priori codes existed. For example, under the *content* a priori code, subcodes *academic content*, *individualization*, and *IEP goals* were created. In coding the a priori code *how educational personnel provided access*, subcodes such as *based on the individual*, *modifying*, *providing curriculum in a variety of forms*, and *utilizing peers* were derived.

As data were analyzed, codes were grouped into categories and were eventually placed under broad themes. During this process, the research team looked for prominent themes within and across participants' definitions and practices. The first author coded data multiple times to ensure important evidence was not overlooked and data were coded and categorized in ways that made sense, and were accurate to participants' experiences. This included creating new codes, categories, and rearranging data excerpts as needed. Memos written during data collection about big ideas were verified with evidence during data analyses.

Positionality

Researchers should be aware of and acknowledge their experiences and different roles in the research process as this promotes trustworthiness and credibility (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2008). The research team had no relationship with participants prior to the study. We entered the Ridgeview school community as outsiders interested in learning more about effective practices for students with severe disabilities. As teacher educators, researchers, and former special education classroom teachers, we acknowledge our prior experiences and current roles comprise important lenses through which we collected and interpreted the data. Most importantly, we believe the different components that comprise a definition of access to the general education curriculum are the context, what content is being taught, and how it is taught. We also believe in the positive role inclusive classrooms play in providing access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities.

Promoting Trustworthiness and Credibility

Several processes were employed to promote trustworthiness and credibility. First, data source triangulation was used by collecting data in various forms (i.e., questionnaire, interviews, observations, observation

reflections, document analysis) from the same participant. The scope of the data set was also large, which can help promote trustworthiness and credibility (see Table 1). As recommended by Brantlinger et al. (2005), member checks were used to ensure the accuracy of data collection and our interpretations of the data. Member checks happened (a) after observations when the first author talked with participants about what was observed compared with what they identified in their observation reflections and (b) when participants were given summaries of the initial analyses of their data as an opportunity to check interpretations, make revisions, or provide clarification. All participants concurred with the interpretations and themes with the exception of one participant who clarified a minor point. Finally, peer debriefing sessions took place as data were analyzed and the results were prepared for dissemination.

Findings

The educational personnel at Ridgeview emphasized the following components in their definition and description of how they provided access to the general education curriculum: (a) instructional and social contexts, (b) curriculum, (c) instruction, and (d) collaboration. A key finding is across these components, providing access was not just the responsibility of learning strategists; rather, it was shared across educational personnel, including general education teachers.

Instructional and Social Contexts

At Ridgeview Middle School, educational personnel believed that general education settings were the most appropriate and preferred context for providing access to the general education curriculum. During observations, educational personnel directly provided access to the general education curriculum in general education classrooms or settings. Students with severe disabilities were consistently observed accessing the same content and learning materials as students without disabilities. This included an inclusive science lab in which students with severe disabilities completed the same activities as students without disabilities. In another instance, students with severe disabilities were observed cross-country skiing with their peers outside during P.E. Tammy, the school principal, however, indicated sometimes contexts needed “to be more specialized.” Participants noted needing to work in an environment with less stimulation and the need for a separate area to have a test read aloud as reasons for selecting more restrictive settings. Observations also confirmed the multiple “opportunities” that students with severe disabilities had to learn from general education teachers and peers of all abilities. Tyler, a science teacher, expressed, “they [students with severe disabilities] have as much right to be there as anyone else does.”

The idea of “opportunities” was an important component in several participants’ definitions. Opportunities included the chance to (a) learn and make progress in academics, (b) socialize with peers, and (c) build relationships. Thus, participants believed that access to the general education curriculum encompassed more than just opportunities for academic growth; it meant opportunities for social growth as well. Moreover, the participants emphasized the idea of “equal opportunity” meaning that students with severe disabilities were given access to any and all activities offered to same-age peers without disabilities. This included activities like academic classes, science lab work, school assemblies, team sports, and school dances, among others. Rachel, a language arts teacher, stated students with severe disabilities are “fully included.” The result of being “fully included” was a school culture in which students with disabilities were active members of their school community and viewed positively by their peers without disabilities. Leah, an educational assistant, stated, “they [peers] all treat them [students with severe disabilities] as an equal because I see that all the time, kids trying to help them and talking to them and being friendly and playing with them.” Evan, a music teacher, also echoed this notion by stating,

I’ve been in other schools and it has always seemed like there was a divide between the students with significant disabilities and the students without disabilities, and I don’t see that divide here . . . I think it’s really authentic good social interaction.

Inclusive contexts were a foundational piece in how Ridgeview staff facilitated equitable learning and social opportunities for students with severe disabilities.

Curriculum

What students with severe disabilities were taught (i.e., the curriculum content) was another major theme that emerged in participants' definitions of access. Joel, a learning strategist, defined access to the general curriculum as "providing an opportunity for students with significant disabilities to study, experiment, and learn the material that their same age peers are while in the general ed setting." There was a consistent focus on academic content and activities in participants' definitions and descriptions of how access was provided. Moreover, several definitions of access to the general education curriculum moved beyond simple access and included authentic learning, making gains, and progress toward goals. Decisions about what content would be accessed by particular students were guided by two factors—the needs of individual students and grade-level expectations.

At Ridgeview, general education teachers took an active role in making curriculum accessible before and during instruction by implementing accommodations, adaptations, and modifications based on students' needs. Such accommodations, adaptations, and modifications were observed across multiple subject areas. As the language arts teacher, Rachel stated, "I would constantly be thinking about the students that were in my classroom and what I was going to do to help them get through the lesson and how they were going to access it." In determining how to modify or differentiate the curriculum for students with severe disabilities, Ridgeview staff took several factors into consideration including looking at the students' learning level, learning style, skills, needs, and demands of the content. In her definition of access, Mariah, a science teacher, specifically listed reading aloud, color-coded notes, and working one-on-one with students as strategies for facilitating access. A modified exam Mariah provided included pictures, options to circle or shade in, and blanks to fill in as means of accommodation. Mariah stated that she identified essential points for learning and worked to present these points in language that was accessible by the student. In discussing how she made science concepts accessible, Mariah shared, "when I talked about function I would say 'what is its job?' . . . So rather than use that science term of function, we broke it down into it has a job to do." In the careers course, Carl, a business education teacher, shared a research sheet that students used whereby they could circle information about specific careers.

Instruction

Most often Ridgeview staff reported using a variety of learning arrangements including independent work, one-on-one support from an educational assistant, instruction based on team teaching, cooperative peer groups, and large group instruction. Factors associated with the selection of learning arrangements included (a) needs of the individual student, (b) individual teacher styles, (c) demands of the curriculum, and (d) peer participation.

Learning environments and instruction were based on the individual student. This included considering data on the student's present level of performance, determining individual goals and how to implement them, and outlining necessary supports. For example, during an observation of the fields of vision color and reading lab, Tyler, a science teacher, observed that a student kept saying his favorite color for the answer. In the observation reflection, Tyler reflected,

After getting started on the lab I realized the boys needed to review their colors in order to identify the correct color cards when they were tested for their color vision field of view test (yellow, orange, red, blue, green).

Tyler took the lead in this process as the educational assistant observed and then implemented the changes. This example illustrates how one general education teacher problem solved and worked to make the general education curriculum accessible *in the moment* so that students with severe disabilities could successfully participate in the instructional experience.

Peers were integral to supporting students with severe disabilities both academically and behaviorally. Support and inclusion from peers is something that happened naturally as well as with some informal encouragement from adults. Tyler, a science teacher, described how during Smartboard activities, peers prompted and encouraged students with severe disabilities to find the correct answer:

So the kids [peers] just absolutely buy into and love helping the kids [with severe disabilities] learn like that. And it's just another neat way for them to learn . . . using the Smartboard but the kids just . . . jump right in and it is heartwarming to see when that happens.

Mariah, a science teacher, shared that a specific student with a severe disability is more likely to complete a task when asked by a peer. Following an observation, Mariah wrote on her reflection form that at times when a peer worked with a student with a severe disability to complete a task, he or she “seemed to be more focused.” Although it was clear the majority of students without disabilities needed little prompting or instruction in how to serve as natural supports for students with severe disabilities, occasionally some students struggled. Travis, a physical education teacher, reflected on how the acceptance of individuals with severe disabilities has greatly increased over the past few decades, but acknowledged that a small percentage of students without disabilities are not naturally accepting of students with severe disabilities. In these cases, adults have to play a more explicit and directed role in encouraging students without disabilities to be accepting of students with severe disabilities.

Peers were part of facilitating access to the general education curriculum at Ridgeview even beyond academic instruction. Allison, a learning strategist, stated, “they just have been with them for so long. That they just know the right things to say.” Allison further explained, “sometimes when a student is having a meltdown, I can't even help them, a kid will come up and take him away and be like I got it.” In addition to behavioral support, peers facilitated social involvement. Allison explained how a student with a severe disability joined in a volleyball event:

. . . and no one like even had to set that up. They just asked him and they made him a shirt and he was so excited. So it's like good to see that it started and that you can step back.

Similarly, Joel described students as leaders who “go out of their way to make them [students with severe disabilities] feel involved and part of the group.” As illustrated by these examples, peers have been natural supports for students with severe disabilities even taking adults out of the situation. Allison highlighted the importance of peers saying, “Sometimes I think they [students with severe disabilities] learn more from their peers than they do from us because they're the same age, it's easier to listen to them, they want to listen to their friends.” At Ridgeview, it is not just the adults who provide access to the general education curriculum but also peers who take on that role.

Collaboration

Collaboration was an essential component in providing access to the general education curriculum and appeared in multiple participants' definitions. Collaboration occurred among individuals in various roles including general education teachers, learning strategists, educational assistants, the special education chair, district staff, inclusion support teachers, the principal, students' parents, and outside stakeholders. Collaboration also took place within teams, such as teaching teams, problem-solving teams, and a leadership team. Patrick, director of student services, described the middle school structure as each grade having two teams with general education teachers and a learning strategist on each team. In addition, educational personnel collaborated across grade levels and schools.

Collaboration among education personnel happened in several ways, including planning for instruction, providing support to teachers, and team teaching. Leah, an educational assistant, described a team approach to share ideas, problem solve, and figure out what worked for a particular student. For Tyler, a science teacher, collaboration with the educational assistant included the assistant being a communication link

between himself and the learning strategist. A business education teacher, Carl, indicated he team-taught one of the careers courses.

IEP teams worked together to develop student goals and strategies to facilitate student progress toward those goals. Allison, a learning strategist, expressed the importance of parents' involvement:

We really want the parents to help us figure out what do you want your child to learn before they leave middle school you know? And the teachers are in that team too so they're a part of the role of helping us too.

The above quote highlights the importance of various team members in not only planning for the student's current education but also looking toward the future. Further illustrating this point, Travis, a physical education teacher, shared "they (learning strategists) always invite us and actually tell us it's important to be there."

Teaching teams also planned for providing access. Specifically during weekly team meetings, teachers were provided time to focus on student needs, progress toward IEP goals, curriculum, and sharing ideas. These collaborative structures reinforced the notion of a shared responsibility for providing access. Joel, a learning strategist, emphasized the value and need for other individuals' expertise:

I think a lot of the ideas too came from the regular ed teachers, you know they're experts in that field, that area, so I mean they have a lot of great ideas on how we can kind of maneuver some of the curriculum to work for a variety of different kids.

At Ridgeview, planning for and implementing access to the general education curriculum involved considering multiple components and perspectives and then melding those pieces together to provide access. Educational assistants' perspectives were of particular value to general education teachers and learning strategists. A language arts teacher, Rachel, indicated she collaborated with the educational assistant to learn about strategies that were effective with particular students. In addition, Carl, a business education teacher, indicated the importance of educational assistants stating, "the educational assistants are integral to being able to make sure . . . students have access and can do the work. They may provide that one-on-one attention that I'm not always able to give." Leah, an educational assistant, talked about collaboration for consistency around a specific student stating, "it's very important that we are all in the same boat."

It is important to note that not all of the educational personnel planned for access to the general education curriculum in the same way. There was a range in which individuals communicated and planned together. Some individuals collaborated more frequently or widely than others. This could be attributed to teachers not always being able to attend common planning time due to scheduling difficulties or learning strategists teaching more in general education language arts and mathematics classes as opposed to other content areas. To provide students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum in inclusive classrooms required more than one individual or approach to collaboration, hence Ridgeview educational personnel's strong belief in shared responsibility.

Discussion

This study's findings indicate Ridgeview educational personnel constructed multi-dimensional definitions of access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities. This, in turn, has resulted in educational practices that are complex and implemented by multiple individuals working together across several educational levels and roles. The notion of "shared responsibility" was perhaps the most compelling finding.

At Ridgeview, the priority is for students with severe disabilities to learn and socialize alongside their same-age peers. Educational personnel in this study believed that general education classrooms are the places in which students with severe disabilities can best access the general education curriculum, a finding that is supported by many experts in the field (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Jackson et al., 2008-2009; Soukup et al., 2007). Furthermore, findings from previous research indicate that students with severe disabilities can make progress in the general curriculum when it is promoted in the general

education classroom (Agran, Wehmeyer, Cavin, & Palmer, 2010; Cosier et al., 2013; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Hudson, Browder, & Wood, 2013; Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010). Unlike findings from previous studies of practitioners, the educational personnel who participated in this study indicated general education contexts as the best location for access. A benefit of general education settings and classrooms is that students with severe disabilities are able to learn from general education teachers who are considered content experts (Ryndak et al., 2008-2009), which is what occurred at Ridgeview. To maintain their vision of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities, general education teachers had to move beyond the typical role of curriculum and content expert and learn how to perform many tasks traditionally completed by special educators. At Ridgeview, it was unfeasible for special educators to provide direct support services in every general education classroom throughout the school day. This meant general educators and educational assistants had to take on more responsibility. Simply changing the location of access broadened definitions around who provided access. Educational assistants were not merely following students and providing one-on-one support; they were an important source of information about individual students for general educators.

Authentic inclusion transcends mere physical presence in general education contexts, requiring educational personnel to consider how students with severe disabilities are accessing the content, being held accountable for what they are learning, and participating in classroom and school communities. There was a resounding focus on “all learners” and multiple “opportunities” at Ridgeview. Students with severe disabilities were educated in general education classrooms where they could be full members of the school community. These findings are supported by experts who believe general education classrooms are contexts in which students with disabilities can be a valued part of the learning and social community (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). In fact, Ridgeview educational personnel did not include separate educational settings in their definitions of access, which differs from previous studies (e.g., Dymond et al., 2007) in which separate settings were considered locations for access. Because students with severe disabilities accessed the general education curriculum in inclusive settings, the context itself provided multiple academic and social opportunities that may not be readily available in self-contained settings.

At Ridgeview when educational personnel talked about what curriculum students were accessing, they described identifying and preparing curriculum to meet the individual needs of students through differentiation, accommodations, and modifications. This process of curriculum identification is well supported in the extant literature (Dymond et al., 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Lee et al., 2010; Soukup et al., 2007). Similar to participants in Dymond et al.'s (2007) study, participants in this study identified content and materials as essential components of their definitions. A difference, however, is that at Ridgeview there was more *academic* focus across educational personnel compared with findings from previous studies (Agran et al., 2002; Dymond et al., 2007) that explored educators' definitions and how they provided access. Furthermore, unlike some of the findings from Agran et al. (2002) and Dymond et al. (2007), no participants in the current study expressed that it was inappropriate for students with severe disabilities to access the same curriculum as their peers without disabilities. Moreover, Ridgeview educational personnel believed that it was essential for students with severe disabilities to access the same academic curriculum as their peers without disabilities. This included incorporating grade-level standards to the maximum extent possible—one essential component of access to the general education curriculum (Browder, 2015; Copeland & Cosbey, 2008-2009; Hudson et al., 2013; Spooner et al., 2006).

To determine what academic content was appropriate for individual students, Ridgeview staff used several decision-making processes and incorporated input from several sources. First and foremost was the IEP team. In planning for access, IEP teams take on an essential role (Copeland & Cosbey, 2008-2009). Illustrating this essential role, educational personnel in this study discussed how they worked with parents and IEP team members to determine curricular goals and discuss how to implement access. Furthermore, educational personnel across a variety of roles expressed the importance and value of each other's attendance and input at meetings, which is supported by Rupp and Gaffney's (2011) assertion that IEP team members should feel like they are a part of the meeting, including making contributions and decisions.

Aligned with the work of Dymond et al. (2007), participants in this study identified multiple individuals as providers of access including teachers, teaching assistants, and related service providers. A highlight from this study was general education teachers took active roles in providing access, thereby reinforcing the prominent notion of shared responsibility. This aligns with the extant literature that general and special education teachers can take on essential roles in providing access (Delano, Keefe, & Perner, 2008-2009; Lee et al., 2010). Educational personnel not only prepared in advance for providing access but also made “in the moment” decisions to help facilitate access. We also learned that to provide authentic inclusive education for students with severe disabilities required ownership and strong leadership by administrators. Administrators had to communicate a clear, cohesive vision of inclusive education and then support this vision by creating a strong infrastructure. This included prioritizing inclusive education in budgetary decisions, transition planning, scheduling, and district policy.

Although educational assistants can provide access to the general education curriculum (Carter & Kennedy, 2006), questions remain about the appropriateness of using them as one-on-one aides for the entire school day (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Chung, Carter, & Sisco, 2012; Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006). At Ridgeview, multiple educational personnel described the critical role that educational assistants played in providing students with severe disabilities access to the general curriculum. Their role was more than just one of support. Educational assistants at Ridgeview were viewed as essential contributors to the process of preparing for and providing access, and as a link between other educational personnel.

Aligned with previous research (e.g., Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & Dibiase, 2012), peers provided both academic and behavioral support in accessing the general education curriculum. In this case, peers demonstrated that they could step up and provide support to students with severe disabilities without formal training. According to Fisher and Frey (2001), natural supports from peers are one way for students with severe disabilities to access the general education curriculum, and this was seen in a variety of situations at Ridgeview.

Delano et al. (2008-2009) indicated a variety of individuals can and should work together to provide access to the general education curriculum and inclusive services. The need for collaboration with multiple individuals across roles and grade levels for various components of providing access was a clear finding in this study. Beyond the need for collaboration, educational personnel also expressed how they valued their collaborators' expertise and contributions to access. General educators and learning strategists at Ridgeview emphasized the need for time to collaborate to facilitate access to the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities in inclusive classrooms. It is not enough to simply have *time* to collaborate; as Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, and Bushrow (2007) argued, there is also the need for general and special education teachers to have the *skills* to collaborate. Delano et al. (2008-2009) stressed the importance of general and special education teachers learning collaboration skills, particularly during their preparation programs.

Ridgeview Middle School is providing students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum in ways that are well supported by research and seem to benefit both students with disabilities and their peers. Participants noted that it took a collective effort over multiple years to be able to implement their version of inclusive education. They also reported that their journey is still a work in progress and that they must remain vigilant and constantly reflect on current practices and how they can be improved. Hopefully, their efforts can serve as inspiration and guidance for other schools interested in promoting access to the general education curriculum in inclusive settings for students with severe disabilities at the secondary level.

Limitations

Even though findings from this study contribute to research-based understandings of access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities, this study was limited in several ways. First, this study presented findings from one award-winning middle school case over the course of only 5 months. Engagement in the field for an entire school year could have illuminated additional details specific to critical time points such as the start or end of a school year when issues related to transition are most prevalent.

Second, this study's sample of content area teachers was limited to only general education science teachers, a language arts teacher, and related arts teachers. The fact that 12 out of 42 educational personnel consented means analyses are based on only a subsample of the total educational personnel at Ridgeview and should be interpreted accordingly. Third, to obtain the most representative sample possible, educational personnel participated who had provided access to the general education curriculum to students with severe disabilities in recent years but not at the time of the study. This presented a limitation because these participants' data were based on recollections and could not be triangulated easily. Fourth, the school only served three students with severe disabilities; thus, access may look different in schools that educate larger numbers of students with severe disabilities. Finally, this study is limited because data on student progress and achievement in the general education curriculum were not collected even though progress is an important component in authentic access.

Implications for Future Research

Although findings from this study provide a detailed account of an exemplar of inclusive education, there are several topics worthy of future investigation. Future research should include a broader sample of individuals including other content area teachers, related service personnel, students, and their families to address unanswered questions. For example, in what ways did family members contribute to the inclusive model at Ridgeview? How do students without disabilities construe their role in providing access to the general education curriculum? Of greatest importance would be to listen to the voices of students with severe disabilities themselves and how they describe and interpret their experiences. Future research could also examine other exemplars of inclusive education to document the similarities and differences between them. This would shed light on whether there appear to be common, essential cornerstones of inclusive education regardless of context, or whether the "recipe" for successful inclusion varies widely according to context. Finally, although the purpose of this study was not to investigate the effects of inclusive programming on student outcomes, this is an important next step. For example, to what extent does the service delivery model used by Ridgeview have a positive effect on academic, social, behavioral, and emotional outcomes for students with severe disabilities?

Recommendations for Practice

In completing this study, our goal was to provide a rich account of how multiple educational personnel have provided access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings. As school personnel look for ways to increase access for students with severe disabilities, Ridgeview Middle School's case provides several recommendations for practice. First, educational personnel should consider the multiple benefits and opportunities afforded to students with severe disabilities in accessing the general education curriculum in inclusive settings as compared with self-contained settings. When making decisions about access to the general education curriculum, IEP teams should engage in critical conversations about the contexts in which access can occur with an emphasis on general education classrooms and settings and the affordances they provide. Second, educational personnel, particularly school and district administrators, should adopt and communicate a vision of shared responsibility for access. This means fostering a school culture in which collaboration is grounded in various educational personnel contributing their expertise in ways that are valued by all stakeholders. Even though learning strategists may have deeper knowledge and skills in teaching students with severe disabilities, access to the general education curriculum can and should be facilitated by other educational personnel, such as general education teachers and educational assistants. In fact, this case study of fully inclusive education at the secondary level demonstrated that relying on the contributions of general education teachers, educational assistants, and peers is an important way students with severe disabilities can be included across content and elective coursework. There are simply not enough special educators to provide direct support to every general education teacher. Finally, as seen at Ridgeview, administration needs to be cognizant of the need for building capacity, including ongoing professional development that will support a fully inclusive model.

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