

Supporting Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

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Abstract

Inclusion for students with disabilities have become more prevalent in school districts throughout the United States. However, students with more significant needs and disabilities continues to be a controversial topic among educators and policymakers. This article discusses the support of inclusion for students with more severe needs by discussing the unreasonable expectations for students with severe disabilities within an inclusion classroom, the relevance of content, the availability of a more functional curriculum, and a safety. A review of the literature was done through Google Scholar, ProQuest, and ERIC and discovered a number of scholarly articles. To a degree, students with more significant disabilities deserve to be educated with their non-disabled peers in a safe environment that can provide a functional and academic curriculum.

Keywords: inclusion, special education, curriculum, policy

Supporting the Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

Before 2001, students with disabilities were offered inadequate admittance in state schools and were often left out of education achievements. That omission was rectified with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001), which reauthorized No Child Left Behind, and mandated that schools be held accountable for assessing the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 along with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 2001 promoted the increase in consideration for students with disabilities to participate in general education settings or inclusion classrooms. The intent of IDEA was to provide a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE), as well as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to all students with and without disabilities and provide a platform for determining meaningful outcomes for students (IDEA, 2004). FAPE means that all eligible students of special education are provided with a free education that is appropriate for the individual student in public education as outlined in their IEP. LRE is a principle that guides the education of students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities, and indicates that students should be provided with the appropriate education with their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004). One commonality between FAPE and LRE is an appropriate education for students with disabilities, but IDEA does not define “appropriate” education, only states that students with disabilities be provided free and appropriate education (FAPE) with a required individual education plan (IEP) in the LRE. It is up to an IEP committee to determine the LRE based on criteria provided by IDEA, which can lead to misinterpretations (DeMatthews, 2015).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) stated there had been an increase in reports of children ages 3 -21 with disabilities from 8.3% in the late '70s to 12.9% in 2013-2014. This increase in the percentage of students with disabilities includes those with severe disabilities, who must also be integrated into the classroom with non-disabled students. IDEA (2004) defines 13 categories of disabilities (34 CFR 300.8) but does not define severe disabilities

(Snell & Brown, 2011). IDEA also states that within these 13 categories students that have autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury can be considered to have severe disabilities (Snell & Brown, 2011). Kurth et al. (2015) for the purpose of their research defined students with severe disabilities as a student with extensive needs that participated in an alternate assessment but also successful in the general education classroom. IDEA does not define inclusion but states that students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). Inclusion is often confused with the definition of LRE, and at this time there is no federal mandate that requires inclusion in a general education classroom (DeMatthews, 2015).

The inclusion of students with severe disabilities continues to be a controversial topic among educators and policymakers. Huberman, Navo, and Parrish (2012) discussed the difficulties associated with the practice of inclusion, which requires access to the general education curriculum and in concert with the provision of special education services in the general education classroom. Students with severe disabilities require on-going and extensive supports to participate in functional and general education academics and may have considerable limitations in mobility, speech, sensory issues, and behaviors. The special education services typically provided to students with severe disabilities are defined by the functional curriculum, which focuses on independent living skills, social skills, and is directed at learning an activity needed to live and work in a community. While inclusion is gaining popularity, there are still concerns regarding the feasibility of inclusion with respect to the education of students with severe disabilities. Other concerns include the unreasonable expectations for students with severe disabilities within an inclusion classroom, the relevance of content, and a safe environment (Timberlake, 2014). Other educators have expressed concerns about the lack of resources necessary, teacher training in regards to how to teach students with severe disabilities, the lack of professional learning communities (PLC) that include both the general education and the special

education teachers, and the need for more collaboration with parents (Kozleski et al., 2015; Petersen, 2016). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) discussed the broad description by IDEA on the meaning of inclusion.

The continued goal of educating students with severe disabilities in the inclusive general education classroom is to provide instruction that will increase the student's academic success. The purpose of this literature review is to review policies and procedures that define the instruction of students with disabilities, identify the current challenges and benefits to including students with severe disabilities in the academic and functional curricula, and identify the instructional practices that are the most effective in ensuring the effective inclusion of students with severe disabilities.

Policies and Procedures that Define the Provision of Special Education

Legislation such as No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA) have a significant impact on the placement for students with disabilities (Ayers et al., 2011). NCLB is a revised version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), that requires school accountability for the academic progress of all students in Pre-K – high school, regardless of students' disability status. NCLB aimed to close the achievement gap between groups of students that historically have performed lower than their peers and ensured the availability of accommodations and reasonable adaptations for students with disabilities. NCLB increased the focus on the academic progress of students with disabilities, English Language Learners (ELL), and minority children that were below achievement.

Similarly, IDEA (2004) requires public school systems to provide FAPE with the provision of special education services to students with disabilities as well as access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to meet developmental goals of all students with disabilities. All students are unique and learn in their way. However,

students with severe disabilities will need additional help and support throughout the day. These supports can include the use of communication devices, adapted materials and lessons, switches to indicate responses and preferences, audiobooks for students that cannot read, and verbal and picture schedules throughout the school day using communication devices (Ruppar et al., 2015).

There are two reasons why students with severe disabilities should be given access to the general education curriculum and included in the LRE according to IDEA mandates. One reason is that students should not be removed from a general education environment unless the disability is severe enough where the student's needs cannot be met and the other to consider the advantages of the student with severe disabilities being included in the general education setting such as opportunities to learn for their non-disabled peers who provide natural supports and the expertise of a teacher in the core content area (Klienert et al., 2015). NCLB (2002) also mandates the development of achievement standards, participation in state assessments, and progress in the general education curriculum for students with disabilities (Lynch & Adams, 2008; Ryndak et al., (2014). For example, Hunt, McDonnell and Crockett (2012) also examined the emphasis with NCLB and IDEA on the participation and improvement in the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities such as meaningful, individualized outcomes in foundation skills, skills that are related to both academic content and daily life, and embedded academic instruction in activities. Lynch and Adams (2008) examined appropriately developed IEP goals that relate to individual need as well as general curriculum standards, while Ryndak et al., (2014) discussed issues such as perceptions of inappropriate grade-level standards, the opinion that functional skills are necessary for students with severe disabilities, and the attitudes that assessments should be performed within a special education setting.

These policies mandate that each state develops achievement standards and that all students, including students with severe disabilities, are included in the state accountability system. Policy and procedure regarding NCLB and IDEA differ from state to state based on

academic content and state standardized testing. The IDEA 2004 Amendment and the requirement for states to align key elements with NCLB allows states to develop, maintain, and incorporate content, standards, and assessments for all students including students with severe disabilities. Additionally, the alignment indicates a requirement to provide students with disabilities an individualized education plan (IEP), that determines how students with disabilities will participate in the general education curriculum. Policies and legislation play a significant role in defining the placement and instruction of a student with disabilities by mandating the LRE, which can incorporate inclusion, state assessments, and the accountability of students (Hunt, McDonnell & Crockett, 2012). Identifying current challenges and benefits in providing access to both general education and the functional curriculum is a major step in the process for educators to provide inclusion for students with severe disabilities (Ryndak et al., 2014). There is also a continued need for additional research on the new legislation; Every Student Succeeds Act, just passed in 2015. With new laws continuing to be provided it is likely that the investigation will be available to determine more information on the benefits, successes, and contributions of inclusion for students with severe disabilities.

Benefits of the Functional and Academic Curricula

The functional curriculum focuses on independent living and social skills and is directed at learning an activity needed to live and work in a community and prepares students with severe disabilities for adult life. The functional curriculum can be taught in both a special education classroom as well as a general education class (Bouck, 2012; Miller, 2012). Students with severe disabilities also need exposure to functional or life skills curriculum to learn daily living skills such as hygiene, vocational, independent living, social skills, and relationship skills (Bouck and Satsangi, 2014) but the functional curriculum can also be included in the academic curriculum where the student receives meaningful learning in both areas (Miller, 2012). For example, Miller argued that the science curriculum can provide useful instruction in oral hygiene by exploring the

investigation of other materials such as types of foods that impact the teeth also providing instruction in language arts by participating in group discussions and expressing ideas.

Policies and standards require that all students have access to the general education curriculum, but it does not mandate that teachers integrate functional content into the general education instruction and teachers are often faced with difficulties linking state standards with individual needs (Lynch & Adams, 2008). The functional curriculum can have many benefits but also has various challenges. The advantages of providing a functional curriculum include providing education to students with severe disabilities in the area of daily living skills, vocational skills, and relationship skills that assist the student in adult life outside of high school. A challenge in providing functional curriculum includes the ability of teachers to make academic curriculum functional and the capability to find the function in the academic standards (Miller, 2012). Yet there is not enough current and viable research conducted on the advantages of teaching the functional curriculum solely in a special education setting to determine the success of this practice, which indicates the need for additional research on the benefits of delivering functional curriculum in special education settings as opposed to the inclusive general education classroom.

General education curriculum as previously defined relates to lessons and academic content in areas such as Math, Science, English, and History that are state mandated. Academic success in the inclusive general education setting for students with severe disabilities is still a goal, but difficulties in the practice of inclusion which require access to the general education curriculum remain prevalent. Although access to the general education curriculum is a requirement of NCLB and IDEA, the context of the curriculum has not been provided and functional curriculum is not mandated by current law (Olson et al., 2016). The significance of providing access to the general education curriculum is often a struggle among teachers (Lynch & Adams, 2008). Peterson (2016) discussed how access to the general education curriculum is

commonly understood as engagement and progress, but teachers are still confused about how to implement such access successfully. The general education curriculum is recognized but how to apply the access is not as easily understood. Researchers have identified several themes such as student skills and abilities, professional beliefs and values, and the dilemma with general education (Timberlake, 2014) as well as access to the core curriculum, continued need for assessment, professional development, and direct instruction (Huberman, Navo & Parrish, 2012), the confusion on curriculum access including logistics of accessing the curriculum and the need for more collaboration and communication among teachers (Petersen, 2016; Timberlake, 2014).

Olson et al. (2016) examined the reasons for including students with disabilities, such as increased expectations for student learning, the ability of the student to develop both academically and functionally, and how access provides students with disabilities the chance to join in activities with their non-disabled peers. They discovered that the educational staff at Ridgeview had multiple definitions of access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities, which resulted in shared responsibilities to tackle complex education practices (Olson et al., 2012). Teachers indicated that access to the general education curriculum was defined as participation in the alternate assessment (Petersen, 2016) and opportunity to learn the same content as their non-disabled peers in which students at Ridgeview Middle school actively participated in an inclusive science lab lesson and completed the same activities (Olson et al., 2016). The benefits of including students with severe disabilities into the general education curriculum include increased student expectation for learning, allows the student to develop socially, academically, and functionally, and offers students with severe disabilities to participate in activities with their non-disabled peers (Olson et al., 2016). These benefits do not mean that students with severe disabilities cannot learn the curriculum, social skills, and functional skills in a special education classroom but the individual needs of a student with severe disabilities need to be taken into consideration when defining placement and setting. In an inclusion classroom,

students with severe disabilities get to participate in an environment with their non-disabled peers and this participation can provide valuable social skills that are not provided solely in a special education setting.

Best Practices in Supporting the Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

The recognition of best practices to ensure the inclusion of students with severe disabilities is another factor in supporting the inclusion of students. Researchers discuss concepts such as beliefs regarding students' ability, expectations of self-efficacy, and teaching and learning as practices they consider when ensuring students with severe disabilities are provided the appropriate education (Ruppar et al., 2015). Timberlake (2014) also studied teachers' beliefs about inclusion and found that teachers felt the need to know their students to ensure they were providing a safe environment. These instructional practices play a significant role in matching students with the curriculum and how it is taught. Teacher beliefs and expectations are influenced by their beliefs and their beliefs regarding their students' abilities. Some teachers offer individualized lessons based on student needs (Olson et al., 2016), while other teachers struggle with how students with severe disabilities can access the general education curriculum based on IEP's, core content, and assessment needs (Petersen, 2016).

Instructional practices such as recognizing the importance of building communication into lessons provide educators with a functional aspect of the curriculum as well as academics. As a best practice, communication is essential in a student's environment, during instructional activities discussion provides strong social skills with same age peers during adolescence (Pennington et al., 2016; Feldman et al., 2015). These instructional strategies also allow for higher expectations for both students and teachers in the learning environment. Promotion of literacy is another instructional practice among educators that through a variety of activities within a day can address literacy. Ruppar et al., (2015) discussed concepts as being important in the promotion of literacy throughout the day.

Another important aspect of best practices in supporting the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in family communication (Kozleski et al., 2015). Parents offer valuable information in regards to the needs of their student which provides teachers with the necessary information to provide instruction. Kozleski et al. (2015) provided an example of a parents' communication when the student had a bad dream which allowed the teacher to check in on the student and their learning. This type of open communication can be valuable for both parents and educators by providing a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere.

Shogren et al. (2015) elaborated on communication and collaboration in regards to the time demands on both parents and teachers but also discussed the importance of cooperation in the best interest of the student. Olson et al. (2016) also discussed the importance of collaboration but more in collaboration amongst teachers and the valuable information each service provider offered. Collaboration is detailed in a variety of ways including planned learning communities (PLC), team teaching, planning and implements access to the general education curriculum among all staff, and developing goals as an IEP team. Collaboration between special education and general education teachers is discussed as a means to support student needs in accessing curriculum but also providing valuable open communication between educators.

Obiakor et al. (2012) reviewed five different evidence-based teaching practices to differentiate instruction for student success. These teaching models which all are beneficial in an inclusion model included co-teach, one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching. In the one teaching model, one teacher provides the instruction to all students while the other teacher assists students that need additional support. This model is a beneficial best practice because it provides support to all students. Station teaching takes a different instructional approach by splitting students into small groups and having them work in locations. The stations provide valuable peer interaction for students with severe disabilities. Parallel teaching allows for collaboration among educators so they can provide the same lessons

but split into two groups. This model is also beneficial for all students including students with severe disabilities because it also provides instruction in small groups which allow the teacher to focus more on the individual needs of the students. In support of inclusion, team teaching promotes access to both teachers within the general education setting allowing all students to benefit from both teachers (Obiakor et al., 2012). Like a functional curriculum, instructional practices are another entity that requires additional research to provide more information regarding benefits in determining inclusion for students with significant disabilities.

Conclusion

Inclusion for students with severe disabilities continues to be a topic that is in need of continued research to identify best practices for teachers to provide access to the general education curriculum as well as provide the functional curriculum. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, students with disabilities, including those with multiple disabilities, who spent 80% or more of their time educated in the general education increased from 33% in the 1990s to 62 % in 2013-2014. Within this statistic, 13.3 % of students classified with multiple disabilities in 2013-2014 spent 80% of more of their time being educated in the general education classroom. Recent legislation encourages support of the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum which presents significant challenges with respect to the provision of FAPE as required by IDEA (2004), increase in the number of students that are being served in special education including students with severe disabilities necessitates continued research and support for inclusion classrooms.

Access to general education is critical in teaching students with severe disabilities because it provides a social setting with their non-disabled peers as well as access to curriculum in the same setting, increased expectations for student learning, the ability of the student to develop both academically and functionally, and the chance to join in activities with their non-disabled peers (Olson et al., 2016). The functional curriculum is just as important because it

relates to life skills such as social skills, relationship skills, vocational skills, and independent living skills that are needed for adult life outside of high school (Bouck, 2012). However, there is a lack of verifiable and recent research that supports the need for a functional curriculum provided solely in the special education setting (Bouck & Satsangi, 2014).

While inclusion is gaining popularity, there are still concerns regarding this model of teaching including the opportunity for students with severe disabilities to learn and develop some of the necessary life skills needed that are taught using more of a functional curriculum.

Research suggests that the best practice in educating students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities is in inclusion classrooms. Additional educator concerns are the lack of resources needed, teacher training in regards to how to teach students with severe handicaps, the lack of professional learning communities (PLC) to include both the general education and the special education teachers, and the need for more collaboration with parents. Shogren et al. (2015) elaborated on communication and cooperation as a concern because of the lack of time and scheduling conflicts among educators but also regarding the demands of both parents and teachers. The continued goal of educating students with severe disabilities in the inclusion classroom is to provide instruction that will increase the student's academic success.

DeMatthews (2015) discussed the rights of the student to FAPE in the LRE and that the student could not be removed from an educational setting solely based on their disability. Findings from existing research identified current challenges and benefits to including students with severe disabilities in the academic and functional curricula, reviewed and discussed policies and procedures that defined the instruction of students with disabilities, and identified different best instructional practices that are most effective in ensuring the successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities.

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