

Perspectives of Special Education Teachers on General Education Curriculum Access: Preliminary Results

Research and Practice for Persons
with Severe Disabilities
2016, Vol. 41(1) 19–35
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DOI: 10.1177/1540796915604835
rps.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This qualitative research study sought to understand the perspectives of teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities regarding general education curriculum access. The participants in this study raised many questions about what general education curriculum access is and how it might be realized. This study illuminated the need for inclusive education reform to assist general and special educators in the logistics of ensuring general education curriculum access. Continued professional development and support for decision making relating to what to teach, how to prioritize instruction, and alignment among a student's individualized education plan, alternate assessment, and curriculum are also discussed.

Keywords

curriculum access, general education curriculum access, low-incidence disability, cognitive disability, professional development, inclusive education

How academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities is conceived and enacted has emerged as one of the most important questions for the field of low-incidence disability. When the standards movement emerged in the late 1990s, the learning outcomes and academic expectations of students with significant cognitive disabilities were not initially considered within the broader conversation (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006). Only within the last decade, with the passing and reauthorization of key legislation, has the question of academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities become relevant. The 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) increasingly emphasized the importance of access to academic content for students with disabilities. Further solidifying these amendments, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002) required educators to consider how a student with a disability would access and participate in general education curriculum and statewide accountability systems. The subsequent reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, now the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, further raised expectations with an emphasis on student outcomes, particularly for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008-2009). To this end, expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities and their

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teachers increased (Browder et al., 2006; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009; Sailor, 2008-2009; Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006; Ward, 2008-2009).

The shift to an emphasis on general education curriculum access including academic progress resulted in significant change in expectations of teachers of students with significant disabilities (Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2012). Although a number of scholars and researchers have provided meaningful insight into how teachers might achieve general education curriculum access (Browder et al., 2006; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009; Ward, 2008-2009; Wehmeyer, 2006), several important questions remain. For example, how do we teach and assess students with significant cognitive disabilities within the same educational framework of possibility, opportunity, and expectation that informs our instruction and assessment practices of “typical students?” Affirming the significance of this question, Smith (2006) stated,

How we configure and deliver educational services to create increased access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities and how these efforts become part of a larger movement toward achieving educational excellence and equity for students who are not considered part of the mainstream student population are important . . . (p. 331)

Thus, although NCLB (2002) and the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) are now more than a decade old, the question of how to ensure general education curriculum access and measure progress within the general curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities remains relevant.

Teachers of students with significant disabilities now require the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to integrate and align a number of educational components, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), state- and district-level assessments, and Individualized Education Programs (IEP). They are tasked with coordinating and planning for specially designed instruction that is both aligned to the general education curriculum and individualized to meet each student’s unique learning needs and goals. In addition, they must measure students’ progress toward individualized educational outcomes, engage in formative and summative assessment to measure student’s progress within the general education curriculum, and prepare and support students in participating in state accountability assessments. They must also understand how assessment is used to inform decision making, instructional planning, and classroom practice to ensure high expectations and rigorous learning opportunities. Thus, the pragmatics of general education curriculum access continues to be navigated by teachers within the field of low-incidence disability.

Given the prior emphasis on a functional or life skills curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the responsibility of facilitating and assessing students’ participation in the general education curriculum is both new and, understandably, daunting. Coupled with the fact that many of the teachers of students with significant disabilities were prepared to teach at a time when teacher preparation programs also emphasized a functional or life skills curriculum, many teachers may not have formal preparation in academic content, such as math or literacy (Delano, Keefe, & Perner, 2008-2009). On entering the field, they also may not have had any professional development in how to facilitate general education curriculum access.

As teachers of students with significant disabilities have been challenged with increased expectations for themselves and their students, a number of national and state initiatives have informed these expectations and subsequent instructional practices. Perhaps the most significant of these initiatives was the adoption of CCSS by 43 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. With the adoption of the CCSS, a need to develop a means to assess students and measure their learning in relation to the CCSS emerged, and in response, a number of federal grants were awarded to consortia groups to create a comprehensive assessment system aligned to the CCSS.

The Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) and the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) formed respective consortia to develop such a system for students with significant cognitive disabilities. In 2010, each consortium began the work of developing a new and more rigorous comprehensive assessment system. Specific to how students with significant cognitive disabilities would access the CCSS, each consortium developed documents and professional development materials aligned to CCSS math and literacy grade-level expectations. This work has provided teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities resources and supports to increase their content knowledge and improve their instructional practices.

However, a number of questions remain about how teachers might be best supported as they work to conceptualize how general education curriculum access is best achieved.

This qualitative study investigated how teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities in one Midwestern state defined, created, and facilitated curriculum and instructional access. Given recent national initiatives and forthcoming changes within the state, the purpose of this research was to understand the current state of general education curriculum access from the perspectives of teachers who teach students with significant cognitive disabilities. Three research questions guided this study. First, how do teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities define curriculum access? Second, how do these teachers ensure curriculum access? Last, what challenges emerge in teachers' daily efforts to ensure curriculum access? Although a few studies exist that examine the instructional practices of educators attempting to facilitate and support curriculum access (Restorff & Abery, 2013; Spooner et al., 2012), these studies do not explore teachers' perspectives of general education curriculum access. This study adds to the growing body of research literature by exploring academic access as understood and reported by teachers who teach students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Method

This research study used qualitative research, specifically semi-structured focus group interviews, to understand the perspectives of teachers educating students with significant cognitive disabilities. In keeping with the recommendations of Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005), a number of quality indicators were considered when carrying out and reporting the research. These indicators included the purposeful selection of research participants who could report and respond to questions about general education curriculum access for students with significant cognitive disabilities; the use of audio transcription and a computer software program, Atlas Ti, to assist with coding and identifying common codes and frequency of codes across transcripts; and ensuring confidentiality of research participants. A detailed description of these methods follows.

Research Context

The Midwestern state where this research study took place adopted the CCSS in 2010. As noted earlier, the adoption of the CCSS required that a new alternate assessment, reflecting higher expectations and alignment with the CCSS, be developed. To carry out this work, the state joined the DLM Consortium. The DLM consortium, comprised of state education departments, experts in the field of low-incidence disability, and general education content experts, was charged with developing a comprehensive assessment system for students with significant disabilities. This comprehensive assessment system included an instructionally embedded alternate assessment as well as professional development materials and learning resources for teachers (<http://www.dynamiclearningmaps.org/content/essential-elements>). At the time this research took place, the state was preparing to release the new instructionally embedded alternate assessment and the DLM Essential Elements (DLM EEs).

The DLM EEs are grade-level specific statements of knowledge, concepts, and skills that students with significant cognitive disabilities are expected to learn. The DLM EEs are grounded within a dynamic learning map that identifies connections and relationships among academic skills and further delineates multiple and differentiated pathways to learning. The learning map serves as the foundation of the alternate assessment system and provides instructional targets and varied pathways for teachers to provide instruction.

As the state shifted to the adoption of the DLM EEs and a new alternate assessment, the state was interested in gaining the perspectives of teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities. Because the new alternate assessment and DLM EEs significantly increased teacher and student expectations, the state wanted to understand teachers' current perspectives and instructional practices related to general education curriculum access. For instance, prior to joining the DLM consortium, the state used a rating scale checklist system for the purposes of alternate assessment. This yearlong, instructionally embedded alternate assessment required teachers to select 15 items per content area, collect evidence throughout the year, and

Table 1. Participants.

District/location	Participants	Grade	Years teaching	Academic content area
Oakland/rural	P1	5	1	All
	P2	2-4	15	All
	P3	K-1	12	All
	P4	3	9	All
	P5	4-5	19	All
Washington/urban	P1	9-12	3	Science
	P2	9-12	7	ELA and work experience
	P3	9-12	7	Reading
	P4	9-12	15	Math and science
	P5	7-8	4	All
	P6	5-6	12	All
	P7	5-6	10	All
	P8	6	4	ELA
	P9	7-8	5	Math and science
Steamboat/suburban	P1	6-8	2	ELA
	P2	9-12	10	ELA
	P3	9-12	10	Math and government
	P4	7	5	Math
	P5	6-8	20	Math and science
	P6	6-8	2	ELA
	P7	9-12	2	Career and work experience

Note. P = participant; K = kindergarten; ELA = English Language Arts.

report on these selected items 3 times a year. This alternate assessment was based on alternate achievement standards and aligned to the state's teaching standards; however, there were academic content areas that were not represented, such as writing. Thus, the state was aware that the shift to the DLM EEs and a new alternate assessment would require additional professional development for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities, and wished to differentiate that professional development based on teachers' current perspectives and instructional practices related to general education curriculum access.

Description of Participants

Three focus group interviews across three public school districts occurred during the winter of 2013. Area Education Agencies (AEA) assisted in the recruitment of districts through the dissemination of a recruitment email invitation. Districts who indicated a willingness to participate were sorted by demographics and randomly selected to represent a rural, suburban, and urban district. Subsequently, the author worked with district administration to organize each focus group and invite teachers to participate.

In the state where this research took place, students are entitled for special education services based on a non-categorical model, thus students receive services based on identification and significance of need. Students with significant cognitive disabilities receive special education services from a Strategist II special educator. A Strategist II endorsement indicates that an educator has completed the required coursework to teach students with the most complex cognitive challenges and communication needs. There are a total of 389 teachers with a Strategist II endorsement in the state where this research was carried out. Of these teachers, 21 were selected and agreed to participate (see Table 1). The average number of years of teaching experience of these teachers was 9.6 and the range was 1 to 19 years. All the special educators in this study provided instruction in self-contained educational settings. Twelve of the 15 secondary teachers were departmentalized by academic content subject within the self-contained settings (i.e., math, science, English language arts, etc.). For example, a teacher was primarily responsible for one academic content subject and students with significant cognitive disabilities rotated among the teachers.

Table 2. Focus Group Interview Questions.

Questions
1. How are your students currently accessing the general education curriculum?
2. How are your students currently performing in relation to the general education curriculum?
3. What professional development have you participated in to prepare you for teaching the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)?
4. How do you currently align your students' Individualized Education Program to general education curriculum and standards?
5. With regard to the Common Core Essential Elements (CCEE) relating to literacy instruction, how do you anticipate using the example documents to support students with significant cognitive disabilities to access the CCEE literacy curriculum and standards?
6. What challenges do you anticipate when teaching your students the CCEE?
7. What type of support would be helpful in implementing the CCEE?
8. What type of supports do you believe administrators require in understanding and supporting implementation of the CCEE?
9. What type of supports will parents require in understanding and supporting implementation of the CCEE?
10. Where do you see the field of significant cognitive disability in 5 years?

Table 3. Example Common Core Essential Element for Eleventh-Twelfth Grade English Language Arts: Reading (Literature).

Common core grade-level standards	Common core essential element
RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.	EE.RL.11-12.1 Analyze a text to determine its meaning and cite textual evidence to support explicit and implicit understandings.

Note. Adopted from Iowa Core Essential Elements For Eleventh-Twelfth Grade English Language Arts: Reading (Literature).

Questions

In collaboration with a consultant from the state's department of education, a series of questions were generated to understand how teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities defined, facilitated, and supported curriculum access for students with significant cognitive disabilities (see Table 2). The author of this study developed the focus group questions based on an extensive review of the literature around general curriculum access. Once a list of questions was generated, the state's department of education consultant provided additional input and offered suggested revisions. These questions included key areas such as general curriculum access, student performance, alignment, support, and professional development. During the focus groups, these questions served as a guide and follow-up questions were asked in an effort to seek additional information and clarification. In addition, a draft of the DLM EEs was shared with participants and follow-up questions were posed to understand teachers' perspectives after reviewing the draft of the DLM EEs (see Table 3).

Focus Group Procedure

Focus group interviews took place at a convenient location within each school district and lasted 50 to 90 min. A similar procedure was used for each focus group. This procedure entailed the researcher welcoming the participants and providing a brief overview of the purpose of the focus group. Background information pertaining to current state initiatives and the anticipated release of the DLM EES was shared with teachers. Each focus group was tape-recorded and then the audio was transcribed removing any identifying descriptors of individual participants or district characteristics.

Data Analysis

After each focus group interview, audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The first step of analysis included uploading the transcripts into Atlas Ti, a software program, to assist with coding. The researcher used Atlas Ti to review and reread the transcripts, create memos, and sort and assign the data into coding categories (Glesne, 2011). First, the researcher read the transcripts, identified common phrases and ideas, defined those phrases and ideas, and assigned each a code. Initial codes included the role of administrators, needed supports and resources, CCSS and access, logistical challenges, student needs, and collaboration. Based on these initial codes, related phrases and words were identified, and a search for these words and phrases was carried out using the auto-coding feature across the transcripts. For example, a common phrase that emerged within the coding category of “student needs” was functional skills. Categories emerged based on the frequency with which particular codes arose across the focus groups and were further developed based on participants’ comments and direct quotes. Recurring categories, or those that were emphasized across the three focus groups, were grouped into themes. These themes are shared in the results section below.

Results

Each focus group started with a discussion about curriculum access. Three themes emerged from this discussion: (a) confusion about curriculum access, (b) the logistics of curriculum access, and (c) the need for collaboration and communication. Following this initial discussion, a draft of the DLM EEs was shared with teachers. Teachers were positive about the DLM EEs and hopeful that the document would provide additional guidance related to their instructional practices.

Confusion About Curriculum Access

Teachers in the focus groups predominantly spoke about curriculum access as participation in the alternate assessment. When asked about current instructional practices relating to curriculum access, teachers referred to the state’s current alternate assessment. One teacher stated, “The alternate assessment is my link to the core. When I teach the 15 items that are required by the alternate assessment, I know I am linking to the core.” When asked to explain how she taught the 15 items targeted by the alternate assessment, this teacher described a one-on-one interaction with each of her students where she presented the content, such as a reading passage, and then immediately tested the student over the content with who, what, when, and where comprehension questions.

Depending on the grade level of their students, a number of teachers reported that they did not always “carry out” the alternate assessment with students.¹ Teachers indicated that if it was not a “reporting year” they did not “work on” or “teach the rating scale items from the alternate assessment.” During these non-reporting years, teachers primarily focused on students’ IEP goals. One teacher shared, “If it is not a reporting year, then I focus on students’ IEP goals and probably more functional skills.”

Teachers in the focus groups understood the IEP, Alternate Assessment, and CCSS each as separate entities, requiring separate planning, instruction, and assessment. Teachers wondered how it would be possible to “get it all done.” One teacher bluntly shared, “I feel like I have to choose today whether I am going to teach the core, the alternate assessment, or I am going to teach the IEP. So which is access?” When asked about the degree to which each aligned, one teacher responded, “I don’t see how they align. Maybe I am missing something, but I feel like I have to do each separately.” Others indicated that they were unfamiliar with the CCSS and had not had opportunities to participate in professional development about the CCSS. One teacher asked, “Is the Core for all students? I don’t think we [referring to her school district] have adopted the Core or at least we haven’t received any professional development about it.” When asked about professional development opportunities, teachers overwhelmingly shared they had no professional development about how to provide instruction aligned to the core. Rather, the few professional development opportunities that they participated in centered on the logistics of meeting accountability requirements and deadlines.

The Logistics of Curriculum Access

Teachers conveyed a number of questions and concerns about how to create, support, and facilitate curriculum access. First, teachers wondered how to provide instruction across multiple grade levels. Because the teachers interviewed provided instruction to students across multiple grade ranges in self-contained settings, they expressed concern with the expectation of being responsible for teaching and assessing standards across each grade level. One teacher asked,

I have fifth through eighth grades. I do pullout math, and I have students who are working on a second grade level, students who are working on a fourth grade level, and a fifth grade level. So I'm trying to figure out if I am supposed to become familiar with the second grade core standards, the fourth grade standards, and the fifth grade?

After pausing, she then wondered aloud, "Does my fifth grade student who is reading at a second grade level, do the second grade or the fifth grade standard?" She continued to explain how she currently makes it work,

I split my class up into two sections of math, and so I spend a certain amount of time on the second grade and then they move to independent work while I focus on fifth grade. But, I am not doing an exact match in terms of my 5th grader working on 5th grade work. I pick and choose different materials depending on what the students can do.

After reviewing a draft of the DLM EEs, another teacher returned to this dilemma. She commented,

The student I do the alternate assessment with is a sixth grader, but she's more like a first grader. So, I want to know, am I doing sixth grade or first grade? Because I just looked at the second grade, and I am thinking, *yeah she can do that, no she can't do that* [emphasis added]. I just know that there are things she will struggle with if she were to do the 6th grade, and we won't be able to accomplish those. I'm afraid because I just don't want to frustrate her and ask her for these things when I can tell you right now there's no way that we can probably do it, and that's not only discouraging to her, but to me, too.

Related to the above questions and given students' individual and slower learning rates, teachers wondered how to make decisions about what to teach and how to pace instruction so that students make progress in the curriculum. An elementary school teacher explained her struggle,

I think I know where I am going and then all of a sudden I'm like I just don't have a clue because I feel like I should be doing this or that, and I don't have time. And, I am not talking about my personal time. I am talking about time in the classroom with my kids.

The amount of time that it takes them [students] to learn one concept, I mean, if we are doing what would be considered a first or second grade skill, that first or second grader may learn it in two-30 minute classes, and my kids it might take them a week or two weeks of 30-minute classes to get that concept.

Another teacher added, again illustrating the compounding dilemma of teaching students at multiple grade levels at a time,

And, it's not just one lesson plan in an hour, its five lesson plans in an hour—one for each kid. So, if you are teaching six different subjects, you have five kids in a class, then you are doing 30 lesson plans in a day and creating the materials yourself.

For this reason, many teachers when reviewing the draft of the DLM EEs for the first time were cautious concerning how much learning or progress might be feasibly accomplished,

We may also need to reduce the number [of standards] that we expect these kids to grasp. Instead of having 30 reading standards, we might expect them to figure out maybe 15, and we pick the 15 most important standards and just not worry about the other ones that they might never get.

Recognizing this was not ideal, but attempting to problem solve by suggesting that the DLM EEs be further narrowed, she continued, "I mean I know it kind of stinks to pick and choose, but . . ."

Teachers also wondered how to balance life skills with academic instruction. For example, one teacher juxtaposed her decision making,

Am I going to teach them to find the plot in a novel or how to read the directions to cook dinner? I can teach them the core and then leave out the skills they need, but since my kids are all about ready to graduate, a lot of times I just forget the core. I don't care if they can figure out a plot in a novel. I care if they can read a bus schedule. So, it's really tough to balance what is important, especially juniors and seniors who are about to go out the door. I'm really not concerned with some of those core things.

Another teacher who also served half-time as a work experience coordinator added,

I'd like to see more of job skills because teens don't know what they are going to do when they graduate because they are not going to college. . . . So, I think we need to prepare them more on that. And, I am not saying that science isn't good, but knowing how magnets attract each other and knowing how to do a job interview, I mean I would go with the interview.

In response to this dilemma and the discussion that emerged within the focus group, one teacher shared how she attempted to balance academic instruction with functional skills, indicating a sense of general education curriculum access and alignment:

I find myself looking at some of the reading and what I use for IEP goals and the reading is so far out there, but if I look at the social studies or sometimes the science or the 21st century [learning standards], there are reading goals embedded in those that are more functional.

Another teacher also alluded to how to bridge the academic expectations with functional life skills. She shared, "I think the way it is now, I have to get really creative and clever and when I try to tie those core standards into what we are doing, it takes a lot of work."

Teachers of secondary students also expressed concerns with how to coordinate services, including instruction and assessment of their students as a result of the structure of the high school setting. These teachers explained that although they may have a full roster of students, they might not work directly with each student because the students attend departmentalized self-contained classes. One teacher explained,

I actually assess none of my students. I help assess a couple of his students [pointing to another teacher] because they are in my reading and math. And science is the biggest challenge because there's no science [students are only required to take one science class during their high school career, although alternate assessment requires ongoing assessment of science], so I have to do some science during writing and he may do some science during work experience. So, the logistics are just very complicated.

In addition, depending on graduation criteria, students might not take particular content classes, such as math or science, each semester.

The Need for Collaboration and Communication

Teachers emphasized the need for collaboration as a means to support student curriculum access and desired additional opportunities to collaborate. Of particular interest, teachers overwhelmingly felt that curriculum access required collaboration among and across special and general education teachers. With regard to collaboration with special education colleagues, one teacher stated,

It would be beneficial to have those that I work with on a regular basis on my team together so we're working on the same information, and we can share it. And, to be able to see what each other is doing as far as assessment

goes because she might have a really good idea on one of the standards that I'm struggling with and instead of reinventing the wheel I could adapt it for my grade level.

Teachers also wanted additional interaction with their general education colleagues. However, this collaboration presented many logistical challenges, such as scheduling across multiple grade levels, student emergencies, "covering" the classroom, and knowledge of the available opportunities to collaborate with general education teachers. For example, one teacher noted,

We have grade level team meetings on general education stuff, but I don't usually get to those, that is, if I happen to know about them, because of the needs of the classroom, but you know I have students there [in those general education classes].

All the teachers expressed a desire to collaborate. Yet, few teachers reported opportunities to do so. One teacher stated, "If we make the time and hunt them down, we can make it happen for maybe five minutes." Problem-solving around this issue, a teacher suggested,

I know it is hard for us to get together, but if we had a discussion board or some common place where we could post questions or ideas or even lesson plans, that would be really helpful. Then, I could go and pull up a lesson plan that a general education teacher might be planning and use it in my classroom as a starting point—that would be wonderful.

Teachers reported that they received the message that collaboration was important, but there were no formal structures to support that collaboration. A teacher shared,

I have administrators that come in and tell me that I need to be consulting with a teacher who is certified in a particular area. I need to consult with a math teacher, a science teacher, a reading teacher, but there's no time for that. And, I don't even know which teachers to contact. I mean there's nothing set up to give you that support.

Communication related to dissemination of information and training also presented major challenges. Teachers expressed that they often did not know whom to reach out to about concerns or questions relating to their students. For example, each group was asked to identify the individual who served in their district or area as the significant disability coordinator, yet none of the focus groups could identify who that person was or the role of that person. Surprisingly, in one instance, the significant disability coordinator was among the teachers in the focus group (although not participating in the focus group), yet no one identified her as such. Thus, teachers often felt it became their sole responsibility to understand expectations, new initiatives and reporting requirements relating to their students, and provide others in their school with the information. One teacher shared that it often fell on her to keep her administrator informed,

I don't know if you all do this, but I feel like I am always filling everybody in [with information]. You know, this is what is happening; this is what we need to do. I don't think there has been much training with administration.

Another teacher continued,

I feel like my administration doesn't know. I've been on email [with the state consultant] because nobody knows. I mean I feel like my AEA doesn't even know. So, if this is the direction they are going to go, I just hope that there is training. And be consistent, you know, because I really feel like when I was talking to other people, everybody's doing their own thing. And, so if that's what the state wants, I guess consistency, training, and expectations and all that needs to be communicated.

Related to communication, teachers regarded their professional development experiences as irrelevant to their instruction, and thus, felt it hindered their ability to plan for and facilitate access. Teachers expressed frustration with current professional development practices. One teacher stated, "I personally would like not

to be expected to sit in with the rest of the staff looking at general education test scores, but rather would like to work on my assessments (i.e., alternate assessment data).” This teacher went on to explain how professional development might be improved to incorporate teachers examining and thinking about all students’ data. Another teacher shared, “I just feel like we do a lot of wasted time. I mean I am going to meetings, but they are not useful to me. And it just feels like, why?”

These special educators also expressed a desire for general educators to participate in professional development related to special education services and supports. A teacher stated,

General education needs training, too. And, this could assist with the collaboration between general and special education. It we had like an AEA person come in and explain the alternate assessment and what their [general educators’] role is and then what it looks like because we might share an alternate assessment kid and we’ll be working together, that would be great because they [general educator] don’t really have the background or training to know what to do.

Another teacher added, “I mean we come from an extremely large staff. I mean I think they have absolutely no idea what the alternate assessment is or what it entails.” In sum, teachers desired structures to support collaboration among various educational stakeholders and professional development to support their unique needs, as well as to provide others, such as administrators and general educators, with training to support mutual collaboration.

The Dynamic Learning Map Essential Elements

After sharing a draft of the DLM EEs, teachers’ comments reflected on the potential of the DLM EEs to improve their instructional planning and teaching. Many teachers stated that they currently had no curriculum to guide their instruction and described how they had to “make it up as they went along.” One teacher stated, “We’ve had to beg, borrow, you know create everything on our own. This [draft of DLM EEs] is wonderful!”

Teachers recognized and were excited by how the DLM EEs might provide a linkage to the CCSS and thus, general education curriculum access. This linkage was especially important to the teachers because they did not understand or were not able to imagine how the CCSS might be relevant to their students. One elementary teacher commented, “These [DLM EEs] make sense to me. They help me to make sense of how the Common Core is relevant to my students.” Another teacher added, “This [referring to a draft of the DLM EEs] provides us with some sense of structure as it relates to the general education curriculum.” With excitement, a third teacher shared, “I’ve been waiting for this document for years! I read them [referring to the DLM EEs] and thought, oh, yeah, I could do that. Yeah.”

Teachers also described how the DLM EEs provided them with guidance on what to teach and potentially how to prioritize instruction. Teachers noted that often they randomly chose academic content for their students without a sense of how their decisions fit into a broader framework, such as the general education curriculum. One teacher confessed,

I don’t always know what is going on in general ed [*sic*], so I tend to pick and choose a lot. Often, we do things that relate to them, like folk tales or winter. But, I don’t think it is connected to what is happening in general ed [*sic*]. These [DLM EEs] would potentially change all that.

Teachers appreciated how the DLM EEs provided a description of how their students might participate in academic content and how that content was linked to the CCSS and subsequently, general education curriculum. Teachers anticipated that this link would also help them in making decisions about what to teach. A middle school teacher commented, “I’d rather have the DLM EEs tell me which ones are important rather than me deciding where we’re going to go and then having someone say to me that we probably should have learned something else instead.” Teachers anticipated that the DLM EEs would provide a roadmap for instruction, and this roadmap would assist in teachers prioritizing instruction and ensuring that their instruction was connected and aligned across time.

Discussion

What is Curriculum Access?

Curriculum access is generally understood as engagement and progress in the general education curriculum. Yet, there is continued confusion about how the concept is defined and subsequently, enacted (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Restorff & Abery, 2013; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009; Spooner et al., 2012). In this research study, teachers' responses further illuminated this confusion. Teachers understood general education curriculum access as teaching the 15 alternate assessment rating scale items and thus, viewed curriculum access as assessment. Moreover, their questions about how curriculum access related to students' IEP goals indicated that they did not fully understand how assessment, curriculum access, and students' IEPs might align to support a coherent educational plan.

Teachers' understanding of access as merely assessment may be understood in relation to the NCLB (2002) legislation and the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) which required, for the first time, that students with significant cognitive disabilities not only participate in standardized assessment for accountability purposes, but also make progress, as measured by these standardized measures (Delano et al., 2008-2009). Given these new reporting requirements, teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities were required to measure students' progress using an alternate assessment, and subsequently, prioritize and provide instruction that might be characterized as "teaching to the test" in that instruction primarily targeted alternate assessment rating scale items. Because they had only received professional development related to meeting testing requirements and submission windows, teachers lacked a broader understanding of how instruction might be aligned with the CCSS, as well as how they might deliver instruction.

To further understand these teachers' experiences within the broader context of curriculum access, Ryndak et al. (2008-2009) described three typical interpretations of curriculum access. First, access may refer to a physical location, meaning students with significant cognitive disabilities are placed into general education settings to access curriculum content. However, Ryndak et al. cautioned that placement in a general education setting does not necessarily guarantee general education curriculum access within that general education setting. Second, access may refer to learning curriculum content, which while linked to the general education curriculum takes place in a self-contained or more restrictive setting. Third, access may include both content and context whereas students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to general education settings, curriculum content, typical peers, content area specialists, and instructional and non-instructional activities. It is the third understanding of access that promotes students' engagement in the general education curriculum through grade-level instruction, activities, and materials. How this definition of access applies to students with the most significant needs is less understood in practice.

The experiences of teachers in this study most closely aligned with Ryndak et al.'s (2008-2009) second definition of access as linkages to general education curriculum content within more restrictive educational settings. However, the manner with which that content was accessed (i.e., through the alternate assessment), was problematic in that the alternate assessment became the curriculum. The emphasis on the alternate assessment to drive instruction likely resulted in a narrowing of content, as well as fragmented exposure to the curriculum. Because the rating scale items did not represent the breadth of curriculum content and teachers were responsible for choosing which 15 rating scale items to focus on, there was a lack of coherency across classrooms, school buildings, and districts. There was, however, an interesting paradox here. Because many of the teachers shared that they had previously prioritized solely a functional or life skills curriculum, the emphasis on the alternate assessment, even if only 15 items, provided greater access to general education content than students had once received.

The experiences that teachers shared revealed some awareness, as well as confusion about the meaning of curriculum access. The confusion included, to some extent, a lack of knowledge about the CCSS and how the DLM EEs, alternate assessment, and student IEPs were related. Certainly, it is understandable that the participants would not have any background or knowledge of the DLM EEs; however, it was surprising that many participants lacked any knowledge of or professional development about the CCSS. This lack of understanding revealed a need for extensive and ongoing professional development to assist teachers in defining general education curriculum access and the relationship among access, assessment, and instruction. Teachers

need assistance in understanding general education curriculum access as more than merely testing. For instance, teachers require professional development opportunities that assist them in understanding how assessment is directly linked to CCSS, drives and informs instruction, and thereby ensures access to content, activities, and materials that promote learning. In addition, teachers need to understand how the alternate assessment is aligned with the CCSS, specifically the DLM EEs for students with disabilities and furthermore, aligned with students' IEPs. With regard to a student's IEP, teachers also must understand how to account for students' unique learning needs, such as medical, mobility, or functional skills within the context of the IEP and general education curriculum access. The IEP, alternate assessment, and DLM EEs should not be understood as stand-alone components that comprise a student's educational experiences, but rather as interrelated, coherent components that promote student's full access to learning.

How Do Educators Facilitate Curriculum Access?

In this study, teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities raised a number of worthy and valid questions about how to ensure and implement general education curriculum access. Given the challenges and rapidly changing field of low-incidence disability it is understandable that participants in this study questioned the appropriateness and pragmatics of curriculum access. However, they also raised additional questions that pointed to a desire to facilitate general education curriculum access. How can teachers provide access across multiple grade levels? How can teachers pace and prioritize instruction? And, how can teachers coordinate services among multiple teachers?

The question of how to provide instruction in functional or life skills was also raised by teachers and is not a new question. Ensuring curriculum access and academic instruction, at the same time providing opportunities for students to learn functional or life skills, has been a challenge at the forefront of the field for some time (Agran et al., 2002; Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011; Ruppard, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009). Agran et al. (2002) surveyed teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to learn more about their practices and perspectives relating to general education curriculum access. The majority of participants reported that they did not believe that access to the general education curriculum was appropriate and that these students should not be held accountable to the same performance standards as typical peers. Agran et al. summarized,

... despite the federal mandate to ensure access for all students, respondents do not believe it has much relevance for students with severe disabilities, and have done little to advance it. It is likely that the lack of a clear school policy and the failure to be involved in related planning have contributed to this situation. (p. 132)

The results of this study represent a slight shift in the findings of Agran et al. in that teachers seemed to acknowledge the need for academic instruction, but struggled with how to "do it all."

Teachers indicated that both academics and functional skills were important, yet were unprepared for how to provide both academic and functional skill instruction. Because teachers understood academic instruction as separate from functional or life skills instruction, teachers would benefit from professional development that assists teachers in making the connection that core academic instruction is also functional. Demonstrating for teachers through example lesson plans, modeling instruction, and making explicit how functional or life skills may be embedded in core academic instruction would assist teachers in understanding the "how," as well as making a necessary dispositional shift toward understanding core academic instructions as, in fact, functional. Moreover, embedding traditionally perceived functional or life skills into core academic content instruction benefits students because they have multiple opportunities to generalize these skills within natural and typical contexts (Forgan & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2004).

Affirming Restorff, Sharpe, Abery, Rodriguez, and Kim (2012), and Restorff and Abery (2013), who found that teachers serving students with significant cognitive disabilities did not have access to general education and age-appropriate curriculum materials, teachers in this study also lacked materials and resources to facilitate curriculum access. After reviewing a draft of the DLM EEs, they were excited at the prospect of using the DLM EEs to guide and prioritize instruction. The DLM EEs provided a framework and a way for teachers to better understand what general education curriculum access looks like, how the

DLM EEs link to general education core standards, and how they can be used to inform instructional practice.

To further assist teachers in understanding of how to provide curriculum access, a number of scholars suggest frameworks to access general education content and align instruction across IEP, assessment, and instruction (e.g., Browder et al., 2006; Burdge, Clayton, Denham, & Hess, 2010). Coupled with the state's adoption of the DLM EEs, frameworks such as the one described by Burdge et al. can support teachers when implementing curriculum access. Burdge et al. describe a four-step process for facilitating access: (a) identify the standard the instructional unit addresses, (b) define the outcomes of instruction from the instructional unit, (c) identify the instructional activities to be used within the unit, and (d) target IEP objectives and foundational skills that can be addressed during the unit. This framework shifts the focus from functional skills or social inclusion to an emphasis on grade-level, academic content while embedding those functional skills within general education content. Coupled with the concepts of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiation, such a framework allows teachers to individualize student-specific goals within the larger instructional context and align instruction between the IEP and alternate assessment. Because teachers can target student-specific goals within a larger lesson or unit, there is not an expectation that all students would engage in the same way, at the same time, or to the same extent. Rather, student learning would be individualized and contribute to the larger classroom community, thus alleviating challenges that emerge when teachers educate students across multiple grade levels. Instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, thematic units, and project-based learning would also align well with UDL, differentiation, and individualized learner supports to remedy some of the teachers' concerns and provide a framework with which to create multi-tiered lessons.

What Supports Are Necessary to Ensure Curriculum Access?

If curriculum access is to be realized for students with significant cognitive disabilities, a number of supports are necessary. First, teachers' comments reveal a need for extensive and ongoing professional development. The challenges associated with collaboration and communication are certainly not new. However, given the recent changes in the field of low-incidence disability, these challenges are illuminated and the need to address these challenges more pressing if general education curriculum access is to be realized. Structures to support both collaboration and communication are needed, as Browder et al. (2006) state, "Collaboration with general educators is essential to creating access to the general curriculum . . ." (p. 7). If special educators are expected to provide general education curriculum access to students with the most challenging and complex disabilities, structures to support collaboration and communication among a variety of educational professionals is a critical element in ensuring access (Burdge et al., 2010).

Second, leadership is needed to create, implement, and sustain formal structures to support ongoing communication and collaboration. An emphasis on creating structures to support communication and collaboration should be prioritized and embedded within the planning for professional development. Also noted by teachers within this study was the importance of administrative support in the form of awareness that leads to consistent dissemination of information, proactive planning, and consideration of teacher needs related to resources, materials, and scheduling.

Last, professional development that moves beyond mere compliance and assessment for the purpose of accountability to assisting teachers in how to prepare, plan, and deliver instruction that ensures not only curriculum access but positive student outcomes is vital. Professional development that provides teachers with additional learning opportunities to understand how to integrate their current knowledge, while expanding their knowledge of academic content is paramount. Teachers' understanding of core academic content standards is limited and thus, they need professional development to examine and explore CCSS, including the DLM EEs and the relationship between the CCSS and DLM EEs.

Teachers also desired to participate in professional development targeted at general education teachers. Professional development should include both general and special educators sharing their respective expertise with the intent of acquiring additional knowledge and understanding of the linkages between the CCSS and DLM EEs. If curriculum access is to be achieved, teachers of students with significant cognitive

disabilities need access to the professional development that their general education counterparts participate in to understand core curriculum standards, expectations, and assessment practices and subsequently, make the necessary modifications and accommodations to ensure access. On the other hand, general education teachers also require professional development relating to the DLM EEs to understand their roles in facilitating curriculum access.

Teachers also need professional development that answers the question of “how to” provide curriculum access. This type of professional development should be learner-centered and should emerge from teachers’ questions and needs. Pugach, Blanton, Correa, McLeskey, and Langley (2009) describe learner-centered professional development where educators and researchers work collaboratively to improve and sustain new practices. An emphasis on acquiring new knowledge coupled with ongoing modeling, coaching, and reflection characterizes this form of professional development as shared and collective. If teachers are to apply a framework such as described by Burdge et al. (2010), teachers need hands-on coaching, classroom models, and examples. Ideally, these models would emerge from current district personnel, such as instructional coaches or content experts. Identifying teachers willing to bridge the special education–general education divide to collaborate on a common goal of providing curriculum access to all students is a necessary first step.

In summary, teachers were positive about curriculum access and their responses represented a shift from merely teaching functional skills. However, additional opportunity to examine and reflect on their dispositions and how those dispositions influence and inform their practice is also necessary. For instance, when reviewing the DLM EEs teachers repeatedly spoke about their instruction dependent on what students could currently do rather than how instruction might promote learning. Teachers spoke in terms of what students could or could not do, in contrast to imagining what students might learn. It seemed that teachers understood teaching as absent of the teaching of new content or expectation that students would and could learn new things. Certainly, this may be a result of the emphasis on accountability; yet, assisting teachers to shift their paradigm from one of “cannot” to that of possibility and optimism would create a foundation with which teachers might presume competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006; Kliever, Biklen, & Petersen, 2015). Presuming competence and teaching with the expectation that students will learn has very different implications than teaching to the test.

The Future of Curriculum Access

The teachers who participated in this research study provided special education services in self-contained settings. The comments, questions, and concerns that they raised implicitly lead to a larger question: What setting is most appropriate to ensure general education curriculum access (Spooner et al., 2006)? When considering this question, Jackson et al. (2008-2009) warned of the trend toward returning to more restrictive placements. After listening to the teachers in this study, including their concerns about how to teach and prioritize instruction across multiple grade levels, it seemed that these very concerns emerged not from the move toward general education curriculum access, but rather came about as a result of more restrictive educational settings for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The more restrictive an educational context, the more difficult it was to access not only general education curriculum content, but also materials, resources, and typical peers who often provide language and behavior models. In this study, the barriers and challenges that teachers articulated, such as lack of collaboration and awareness of CCSS, as well as disconnected professional development opportunities were the result of the isolating nature of the self-contained setting and structure. Thus, if we, as educators, scholars, and administrators, are to define, create, facilitate, and support general education curriculum access, our efforts may best be used to develop formal structures that prioritize inclusive education.

As Sapon-Shevin (1996) asserts with regard to inclusive education, it is not the mere act of teaching inclusively and including all students in general education settings that causes challenges, but rather teaching inclusively illuminates problems that have always existed within the system. This assertion can also be applied to general education curriculum access. When we educate students in more restrictive settings and then attempt to ensure general education curriculum access, challenges certainly emerge; however, these are

challenges that result from our reliance on more restrictive placements. For this reason, Jackson et al. (2008-2009) call for us to rethink a reliance on self-contained settings and assert that “inclusive education, defined in terms of general education context and age-and grade-level curriculum, can provide benefits to students with extensive support needs” while ensuring curriculum access (p. 190).

In addition, more restrictive settings also present barriers to communication and collaboration with a variety of educational stakeholders because multi-age classrooms typically juggle a number of schedules, are often located apart from the general education classrooms and are comprised of students with vastly different needs. Yet the education of students with significant cognitive disabilities requires, perhaps more so than any other student, the collaboration of an interdisciplinary team of educators, including general educators. The current structure relegates special educators to silos and perpetuates the existence of two separate systems and two kinds of students—general and special education students. Given these barriers, is it reasonable to expect that special educators alone can create, support, and ensure access? Rather, ensuring curriculum access must be viewed as the responsibility of all educators and can only be achieved through the collaborative effort and work of interdisciplinary teams of educators and leadership. Ryndak et al.’s (2008-2009) third definition of access as including peers, setting, materials, and curriculum opportunities is the way forward if we are to be confident that we are providing students with significant cognitive disabilities access.

Study Considerations and Future Research

A number of considerations should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study. These considerations offer direction for future research. Because this research was preliminary in nature, the scope of research participants and the data collected were small. Additional research is needed that explores curriculum access through the lens of other educators, such as general education teachers, administrators, and those who provide support services. This research study was carried out in one state, and additional research that examines these questions across multiple states and geographic locations is needed. Expanding data collection to include multiple data sources, including classroom observations, document analysis, and individual interviews with educators to better understand how curriculum access is understood and implemented within daily instructional practice would be especially valuable.

Conclusion

How academic curriculum access is defined, created, supported, and facilitated in ways that provide equitable opportunity and meaningful engagement for students with significant cognitive disabilities has yet to be consistently understood and articulated in practice. The participants in this study raise a number of questions about what general education curriculum access is and how it might be realized. This study illuminates the need for professional development to assist teachers in the logistics of ensuring access, such as how to prioritize and align instruction with the DLM EEs, alternate assessment, and student IEPs. Perhaps more important, this study also reminds us of the need to create and support formal structures within which inclusive education is not only a priority, but also necessary (Jackson et al., 2008-2009). Returning to the question posed by Smith (2006) regarding how we achieve educational equity for students who are not part of the mainstream student population, the results of this study illuminate the need for formal structures to support inclusive teaching and learning, thereby, inherently addressing the many challenges raised by participants in this study.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the reviewers and editors who offered thoughtful and useful feedback that assisted in finalizing this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a state-funded grant #054112.

Note

1. Public schools and districts are accountable for the academic growth of all students in Grades 3 to 8, 10, and 11. At the time this research was carried out, an alternate assessment for Grades K-2 did not exist. Secondary teachers have adopted the informal practice of not testing students using the alternate assessment in Grades 9 and 12 because those years are not considered an official reporting year.

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Received: November 3, 2014

Final acceptance: June 11, 2015

Editor in Charge: Craig Michaels

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