Research and Practice for Persons
with Severe Disabilities
2014, Vol. 39(2) 83–99
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DOI: 10.1177/1540796914544547
rpsd.sagepub.com

Weighing Costs and Benefits: Teacher Interpretation and Implementation of Access to the General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all students receive access to the general education curriculum but does not define adequate access. Street-level bureaucracy theory was used to investigate special educators' interpretation of their role and responsibility to create academic access for students with significant cognitive disabilities. In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with elementary, middle, and secondary special educators (n = 33) across one state. Findings revealed that access was ultimately a consistent series of decisions. Participants relied on their ethical beliefs about disability and schooling to make cost–benefit decisions, predicting and assigning value to the long-term benefits of academic activities. Researchers and policymakers concerned with academic access should recognize that special educators' implementation of new interventions will likely be filtered through the process of access described. New initiatives and strategies should explicitly illustrate how they increase the benefits and reduce the costs of inclusive academic experiences for students with severe disabilities.

Keywords

severe disabilities, transition, self-determination, legal rights, access to the general education curriculum, special education, street level bureaucracy

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulates that all students receive access to the general education curriculum but neither prescribes a definition of access nor set criteria for what meaningful access should entail. Much theoretical and empirical work followed the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA and the addition of the word "education" to the provision *access to the general education curriculum*. More recently, empirical studies and theoretical discussions of the meaning of access are rare; however, the definition of access is unresolved, and therefore the implementation of access is incomplete.

Terms such as confusion, nebulous, complicated, and ambiguous appear widely in the severe disability literature when the meaning of access to the general education curriculum is described (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006; Browder, Wakeman, et al., 2007; Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007; Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008-2009; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). Special educators' interpretation of their role and responsibility to create academic access is particularly important because it may influence the knowledge and skills to which students are exposed, and whether they participate in academic as well as social experiences with nondisabled peers (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Dymond et al., 2007; Moores-Abdool, 2010).

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The special education research literature contains three strands of information on access specific to students with significant cognitive disabilities[1]: (a) theoretical conceptualizations (Halle & Dymond, 2008; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009; Wehmeyer, 2006), (b) "how-to" strategies (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2006; Smith, Spooner, Jimenez, & Browder, 2013), and (c) empirical measurement of classroom access and teacher perceptions (Agran et al., 2002; Dymond et al., 2007; Soukup et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003). Debates about the scope of general education involvement with respect to access (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009) and strategies for increasing academic expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007; Smith et al., 2013; Spooner & Browder, 2006) are important contributions for increasing academic achievement. There is still a range of interpretation, however, on the definition and scope of access, for example, whether access is met by aligning learning goals with academic standards, or whether access requires more social and academic links to general education (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006; Dymond et al., 2007; Etscheidt, 2012; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009; Wehmeyer, 2006). The lack of clarity about the definition of access may be of no great concern if researchers, policymakers, and educators continue to develop new strategies, advocate for high-quality instruction, and increase the engagement of students with severe disabilities in academic environments. However, as Spooner, Dymond, Smith, and Kennedy (2006) suggested, the lack of consensus on access could result in varying types and amounts of special education instruction as well as varying inclusive opportunities. Understanding how teachers navigate ambiguous directives and subsequently create academic experiences for students with significant cognitive disabilities is crucial for improving policy clarity, inclusive teacher preparation, and professional development. This research combined two areas—special education and public policy—to discover how special education teachers' policy interpretation shaped how they constructed academic curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Policy in the Classroom

Policy provisions can appear vague or ambiguous, and therefore be challenging to implement. This is particularly true if the policy was intentionally general because the details were difficult to specify (Brodkin, 1990; Heck, 2004; Stone, 2002). Values inherent in terms from IDEA such as "opportunity," "high expectations," and "access," for example, were not defined by policymakers, and therefore could be expected to be difficult to define and agree on during implementation. Street-level bureaucracy theory proposes that professionals on the front lines of social service delivery essentially create policy by their daily actions and decisions (Lipsky, 2010). In the absence of detailed criteria, when decisions require professional discretion, workers' interpretation of policy is revealed. Discovering what educators believe, value, and understand about the general education curriculum is essential to understanding how the "access to the general education curriculum" provision is implemented and what students with significant cognitive disabilities receive in the name of access.

The Ambiguity of Access

Access to the curriculum was first introduced in the 1997 IDEA reauthorization after Congressional debates about the academic progress of students with disabilities highlighted dissatisfaction with the educational outcomes being attained (Karger, 2005). Congress continued to express concerns about academic expectations and student progress during the 2004 IDEA reauthorization, and consequently, the word "education" was added to the general curriculum provision. Access to the same education curriculum used by every other student was considered a mechanism for increasing expectations and improving the effectiveness of special education (Malow-Iroff, Benhar, &Martin, 2008; Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007).

Researchers, educators, and advocates, however, have disagreed on the literal meaning and scope of access to the general education curriculum. These debates have weighed whether placement in a general education classroom is a necessary precursor to access, or whether the general curriculum may be delivered in a separate special education setting (Halle & Dymond, 2008; Jackson et al., 2008-2009; Spooner & Browder, 2006; Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006). Dymond et al. (2007) summarized the varying definitions of

access in the literature and suggested that a "clear" definition of access is essential to connecting students with academic content. Conversely, Ryndak et al. (2008-2009) suggested that a new definition of access is "neither necessary nor beneficial" and recommended that researchers and practitioners focus on implementation of comprehensive school wide supports (p. 209). Access has also been criticized as being simply a vague reference to some academic exposure without addressing important issues of academic instruction and student progress (Etscheidt, 2012; Wehmeyer, 2006). Alternatively, access has been interpreted as meaning exposure to academic content, student participation in general education instruction, environments and routines, and social interactions with general education peers and teachers (Ryndak et al., 2008-2009).

Teacher Definitions of Access

Two prior studies explored the meaning of access to school personnel. Agran et al. (2002) found that almost half of special education teachers in one state reported no curriculum planning for access to the general curriculum for their students with severe disabilities while only one third of special educators reported actively participating in curriculum planning (Agran et al., 2002). Similarly, in interviews with general and special education teachers in one high school, Dymond et al. (2007) found that almost all of the special educators defined access for students with significant cognitive disabilities as "adapted" content and few reported believing these students should be taught the same curriculum that is taught to nondisabled students. Just over half the special educators indicated that the curriculum should be based on the individual needs and interests of the student, many used words like "meaningful" and "relevant" to describe the ideal curricula. However, in contrast to the respondents in Agran et al. (2002), the majority of special educators in Dymond et al. (2007) study said that state standards should be used as a guide to developing curricula for their students. Agran et al.'s (2002) research predates the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA but is one of the few studies to address special educator perceptions specific to curriculum for students with severe disabilities. Both studies document teacher concerns about imposing unrealistic expectations and demands on their students and about the relevance of the content contained in general education curriculum and instruction (Agran et al., 2002; Dymond et al., 2007).

Other study findings have suggested that location is a significant factor if access to the general curriculum is defined as access to academic standards. Wehmeyer et al. (2003) found that students who spent more time in general education classrooms worked on activities linked to academic standards during more observed intervals than those in self-contained classrooms. This study was supported by later work in which students who were included in general education classrooms had greater access and more curricular accommodations than those with less access to general education locations (Soukup et al., 2007). More insight is needed, however, about the role of special educators in developing, accommodating, and/or modifying general education activities. The reasons why teachers decide to use standards-based instruction in conjunction with or separate from their general education colleagues are important to explore. Dymond et al. (2007) revealed that a majority of special educators saw paraprofessionals as able to provide access, suggesting that teachers may perceive curricular access as an activity separate from location and teacher instruction.

Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, and Palmer (2010) replicated the access study a third time and found that the use of classroom modifications was associated with student engagement including more reading and writing and less talking and looking around. The researchers analyzed teachers' instructional behavior and not teacher interpretation of policy or determinations about location; however, the findings suggested the definition of access must include active engagement with academic content. As researchers continue to demonstrate the potential for active student participation in academic instruction, how teachers view their role and responsibility to provide access to content area academics remains a critical need. Despite the fact that IDEA guarantees access to the general education curriculum to students who historically were denied academic instruction, more research on implementation is needed to understand the adequacy of the policy provision.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

Street-level bureaucracy theory asserts that within a context of policy ambiguity, workers on the front lines of social or human service delivery shape policy outcomes as they organize their work (Lipsky, 2010).

Street-level bureaucrats may include police officers, public assistance caseworkers, court personnel, teachers, and others who interact with citizens and make decisions about allocations or benefits (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). The term "bureaucracy" has a negative connotation in the United States today but was used by street-level bureaucracy theorists to designate agencies and organizations with a proliferation of rules and levels of hierarchy, serving the public as representatives of the government and serving as gatekeepers of the provision of federal social services (Brodkin, 2003; Lipsky, 2010). Public schools contain the elements of bureaucracies with rules, policies, and procedures that create and maintain stability and a certain predictability in how work is accomplished (W. R. Scott & Davis, 2007). Special educators function as street-level bureaucrats implementing a variety of federal, state, and local education policy, possessing professional status and certification, facing multiple daily demands on their time, and serving a variety of student strengths and needs with consistently fewer resources than necessary.

Street-level bureaucracy theory has been particularly useful in uncovering the effects of policy on those charged with its implementation and providing a richer picture of how policy is experienced (Brodkin, 2003; Riccucci, 2010). For example, workers in other professions have relied on their colleagues, prior experiences, personal values, and assumptions about what is expected of someone in their position as they implemented ambiguous policy provisions, resulting in both expected and unanticipated outcomes (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005; Sandfort, 2000; P. Scott, 1997; Weissert, 1994). Prior studies have found that time on the job, level of discretion and autonomy, and self-described beliefs and professional ideologies were significant predictors of worker choices about meeting client needs (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998).

Prior research has also revealed differences in the ways general education teachers interpreted ambiguous policy directives. Teachers implementing very specific school reform designs were more likely to report common understandings of what the reforms entailed compared with teachers implementing less structured and more ambiguous reforms (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). Kelly (1994) reported that a group of teachers found ambiguity satisfying because they were able to use their professional and personal perceptions of justice and fairness when making curricular decisions. Analysis of several longitudinal studies of large-scale school reform efforts by Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) revealed that although some teachers embraced and some resisted change, the majority of teachers "molded the reforms in ways that made sense with their professional knowledge" (p. 56). These findings support the premise that special educators will have varying interpretations of access to the general education curriculum and their implementation of access will likely be influenced by these interpretations. Understanding how special educators function as street-level bureaucrats will provide new insights into teacher interpretation and implementation of access.

Teachers' daily work in classrooms represents where policy is enacted and where access to the general education curriculum is defined in practice. The research question guiding this study was as follows:

> **Research Question 1:** How do special education teachers responsible for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities define and interpret the policy provision *access to the general education curriculum* as it pertains to their professional role and responsibilities for academics?

Method

In-depth qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with elementary, middle, and secondary special educators (n = 33) in one northeastern state. The interviews addressed perceptions of access, decisions about instructional priorities, and choices of academic content and the factors influencing whether students received academic instruction in general education classrooms.

Participants

A description of the study and invitation to participate was disseminated electronically via four venues: (a) the state Department of Education's Alternate Assessment listserve, (b) the state organization of special

Table 1. Special Educator Participants.

	Years of experience				Composition of caseload			Gender	
Participants	<10	11-20	21-30	30 +	SVH	MX	A	Female	Male
Elementary teachers n = 14	4	2	5	3	7	5	2	13	1
Middle-level teachers n = 7	0	6	1	0	4	3	0	6	1
High school teachers n = 12	4	2	4	2	5	6	1	8	4

Note. Mixed caseloads means participants were responsible for students with a variety of support needs in addition to those considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. Caseload: SVH = severe disabilities only; MX= mixed caseload; A= autism only.

education administrators with the request that administrators forward to their teachers of students with severe disabilities, (c) the state principals association, and (d) an advertisement in the newsletter of a popular professional development organization. Twenty-seven participants were recruited through the Alternate Assessment listserve. Of the remainder, 3 reported receiving the recruitment letter via their principal and 3 were referred by other study participants.

Five criteria were required for inclusion in the study. Participants had to (a) be teaching during the 2011-2012 school year; (b) work in a public school with general education classrooms; (c) teach students with significant cognitive disabilities, defined as responsible for at least 2 students participating in the state alternate assessment; (d) have at least 2 years experience teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities; and (e) possess the appropriate certification to teach students with severe disabilities. Forty-five individuals responded to the invitation; the final sample included 33 participants who met all criteria.

Fourteen elementary, 7 middle-level, and 12 high school teachers were interviewed by telephone from January to March 2012. Respondents were geographically dispersed across one northeastern state. The sample's demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

A range of experience was represented; however, the sample contained more veteran than novice teachers. Some participants had a caseload consisting of students with a variety of labels, including learning disabilities and behavior impairment in addition to students with severe disabilities. Others had a caseload consisting solely of students with severe disabilities (significant intellectual, physical, communication, and health issues), while the third group exclusively supported students with autism. The middle-level participants came from both junior high and middle schools but because there were no obvious differences in responses, "middle level" is used to represent these participants. Because only six respondents were male, and gender did not appear significant in the analysis of participant responses, the pronoun "she" is used in the findings to maintain anonymity.

Materials

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions covering four conceptual areas was developed after an extensive review of the special education research and the policy implementation literature. Queries involved teachers' (a) definitions of access, (b) decisions about academic content and how they are made, (c) levels of control and discretion over curricular choices, and (d) factors influencing whether students attended general education or self-contained classrooms for academic instruction. Use of the term "inclusion" was deliberately omitted from the interview guide to avoid labeling the general education experience and communicating any assumptions about teacher practice.

To focus precisely on curricular access, interview questions focused on *what* was being taught. Although curriculum, instruction, and assessment may be viewed as an integrated system and is difficult in practice to separate *what* is being taught from *how* it is being taught, participants were asked about what they taught and why they prioritized the skills and content they reported. The researcher also avoided using the term "universal design" or other options for creating curriculum and consistently used the term "access."

Table 2. Selected Participant Interview Questions.

How do you decide what the most important academic content is for your students?
What influences your decisions?
Can you give me an example of reading, math, or science content you believe is really valuable for your students to learn?
Can you give me an example of academic skills or content that is **NOT** important for your students?
What does the phrase "access to the general education curriculum" mean to you?
How would you define or explain the meaning of *access to the general education curriculum* to a new teacher or a parent?
Can you give me an example of what I would see if I observed your students having access to the general education curriculum?
Does your school or district have a written policy on access to the general education curriculum?
What role do the state standards play in curriculum development for students with significant cognitive disabilities?
What role does the state assessment play?
Who decides (i.e., do you have the authority to decide) if your students go into general education classes?
What factors go into these decisions?

Note. Entire interview guide is available on request.

The same interview guide was used for teachers at all grade levels, and the interviews lasted approximately 1 hr. The first question for all participants was a general request to describe their current work situation, for example, students, grade levels, caseloads, and then participants were asked about planning and prioritizing. Selected interview questions are shown in Table 2, and the entire interview guide is available on request.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board (IRB)–approved study description and informed consent forms were emailed to all participants. All interviews were conducted by telephone at times convenient for the participants, informed consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of each call, and all participants consented to have their interview recorded. The researcher explained being interested in how teachers make decisions about academics and that because there was no consensus on the definition of access, there were no right or wrong answers. Each interview began with a request for an overview of the teachers' current position and progressed to more complex questions about perceptions of autonomy and decision making. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked whether they were willing to be contacted for further questions, and four teachers were subsequently contacted to obtain clarification. In addition, participants were invited to call or email if they wished to add to their responses after reflecting on the interview, and two teachers emailed additional details about their teaching after the interview.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified for accuracy. Transcribed documents were organized and analyzed with Atlas.ti, a qualitative software package. The steps for qualitative data analysis for applied policy research outlined by Ritchie and Spencer (2002) provided the general framework, while elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and systematic pattern coding and data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were integrated into the process. The first step involved coding the transcripts and then organizing similarities and differences between individual participants and between groups by grade span and years of experience. Both inductive analysis, where theory was generated through categorizing the codes into increasingly complex constructs, and deductive analysis to make meaning of the emerging themes based on researcher experience and the special education literature were used.

Sentences were assigned short descriptive codes, and in vivo codes of teachers' own words were often used to avoid imposing researcher interpretation prematurely (Charmaz, 2006). Examples of in vivo codes

included “a sad reality,” one teacher’s description of current budget cuts, “pay dividends,” teachers’ explanation for choosing certain activities, and “whatever they need,” a response to researcher query about academic priorities. Other codes indicated evidence of content area academics, references to general education locations, and descriptions of decision making. A codebook with definitions was developed to help make coding consistent and document the analysis process. Codes were also grouped by emergent and unexpected content and recurring points of view. Extensive memos were regularly written exploring the meaning of teachers’ words and the multiple elements of their professional ideologies and behaviors. Initial coding and pattern coding, where early themes began to emerge, were followed by a systematic process of documenting similarities, common words and opinions, differences and contradictions, by participant. Matrices were developed to view similarities and differences across participants in categories specific to access, such as “access as standards” and “access as mainstreaming” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes were eventually clustered into categories, and categories were subsequently integrated into larger themes.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Participant responses were continually compared during the data analysis process, and similarities and differences about perceptions of access among individual participants and within grade spans were noted and explanations for differences were sought. Additional strategies were used to increase the interpretive rigor of the findings (Patton, 2002). First, preliminary findings were summarized and emailed to all participants with an invitation to read and respond. All teachers were also invited to participate in a focus group via conference call to review preliminary analyses and provide feedback on the theoretical relevance of the findings. Seventeen participants responded and 7 teachers were available during the same week, at the end of June 2012. Due to the complexity of schedules, the format for participant feedback was telephone conferences between the researcher and three pairs of teachers, and one individual call. Three elementary, 2 middle, and 2 high school teachers discussed the findings, provided feedback on the researchers’ analysis, confirmed the accuracy of the proposed model of access to the general education curriculum, and provided further elaboration on the specific components of access.

Results

These special educators perceived their role and responsibility to create access to the general education curriculum as an ongoing process of “cost–benefit” decisions. Teachers acted on their ethical beliefs about disability and schooling while evaluating the social and cognitive demands and rewards available within the school environment.

Three prominent themes emerged regarding participants’ perceptions of curricular access and struggle to enact the curricular access provision: (a) student skills and ability, (b) professional beliefs and values, and (c) the general education dilemma. The themes are representative of the participants overall, although details varied by grade span (elementary, middle, high school) and years of teaching experience. The combined themes form the components of cost–benefit decisions, as shown in Figure 1.

Making decisions about the meaning of access to the general education curriculum was a major part of teachers’ daily work, participants frequently referred to the necessity of weighing the expected benefits of a skill, activity, or experience against the perceived cost, and the process of weighing was described as intuitive rather than as an explicitly defined process with standard criteria.

Teachers described evaluating what students might gain and lose through their participation in a particular academic activity. The highest “cost” was defined as “wasting time,” or using limited instructional time in unimportant ways. In terms of “benefits,” participants—especially middle and high school teachers—used words like “payoff” and “trade off” and “dividends” to be gained. During the feedback sessions, teachers were asked how they defined benefit, and how they assessed the amount of benefit in an activity. This was difficult for participants to articulate, indicating this knowledge was tacit and taken for granted. One teacher said that benefit was essentially the intuitive assessment that an activity has long-term practical value “5 years from now.”

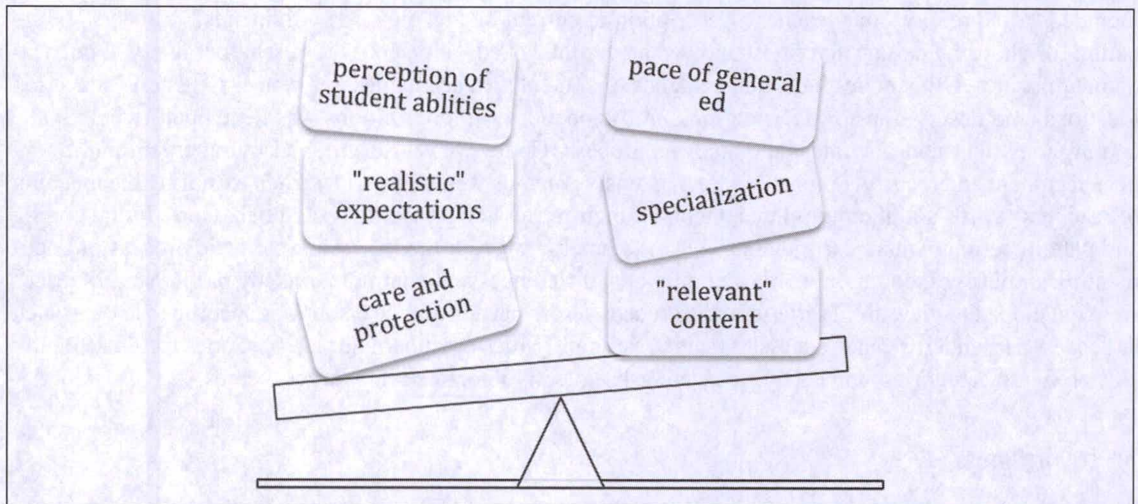

Figure 1. Weighing perceived costs and benefits.
Note. Special educators' academic access decisions were a combination of values-based and pragmatic considerations that resulted in the nature and type of students' academic access to the general education curriculum.

Student Skills and Ability

The first theme that emerged was related to student characteristics and teacher perceptions of student abilities and disabilities. Queries about access to the general education curriculum brought forth issues related to much more than just curriculum. The participants most frequently defined academic access as standards-based instruction and the use of parallel content and materials, and these definitions of access were primarily attributed to student characteristics. Although participants reported that they balanced a range of competing factors when making curricular decisions, there was widespread agreement that the most important factor in these decisions was the students' cognitive and communicative abilities.

First, prerequisite skills were considered necessary for access to the general education curriculum, and access was often described as contingent upon the extent to which students were cognitively capable of "getting something" from the content with minimal modifications or assistance. A teacher who supported students K-4 said, "If there's something in general ed they can do, then, of course, they should go out and do that." Another elementary teacher agreed "If they go out in the mainstream, it means they've got enough skills so they can be successful with very little modifications." More than half of the elementary and middle-level teachers believed that access to the general education curriculum could mean academic instruction in general education classrooms if students "can grasp the content" or "follow along" or "have the skills to keep up." High school teachers mentioned content area general education classrooms as feasible for academics far less frequently, regardless of student skill levels.

Second, a small number of high school and middle school respondents questioned whether the curricular access provision might be dismissed or avoided based on student choice. Two participants spoke of students "trying out" general education classes to see if they found the experience interesting and motivating, while another two respondents said students should start to "have a voice in what their day looks like." A high school teacher explained,

> I tend to think of what motivates a student more. So if they're interested in English and science and that works for them and that's interesting for them, then that's great, but if they're a student who has no interest in that and are more interested in art class and craft classes, as long as they're able to interact with others and work on communication and social skills, that's OK.

Third, in reflecting on students' cognitive abilities, participants described a struggle to simultaneously identify and address deficits while recognizing strengths. They often spoke of having high expectations while also being "realistic." While explaining her choice of academic content for students, a middle-level teacher said, " . . . I don't mean to cut kids off in their lives or to predict things in a negative way. I'm just trying to be realistic I guess." Participants shared numerous stories that illustrated this struggle of tempering high aspirations with careful reality. One elementary teacher said she was amazed when a student with autism revealed he already knew how to read. The back-and-forth process of expecting more and then reining in those expectations is evident in her descriptions of her interactions with this student,

> My philosophy at the time was "we're gonna learn phonics!" And I went through a lot of little lessons and so forth, and he hated it. He would just get so tired of it, and he'd spit and say, "I don't do this anymore." And one day, I went in with word cards, just words on cards and I put down four or five cards and made a sentence. He said every single word in the sentence, and I said, "you know how to read!" And he said, "I know." It gives me chills right now to think about that. Now was he gonna go very far with it? Maybe not. He can't read every word in the dictionary. But he could get pleasure out of reading little books because he could read those words by sight. And I just went, "Oh, my gosh." Don't limit kids. You don't really know how they're thinking when they're listening to you."

A high school teacher described access as a mechanism to prevent students' hidden gifts and talents from being overlooked,

> If it's not in there [the access provision of IDEA] that means because a student has a disability, he can't try to take French . . . what if he loved it? What if he found he had some savant abilities in French? Not likely but on the other hand . . . you just don't know . . . you don't know what secret abilities they hide.

She did not, however, consider the provision as requiring all students to participate in general education classes, and she articulated the view of many other participants that the teacher's role is to selectively implement the provision using her professional judgment.

Despite the struggles around perceptions of cognition and student disability, nearly all participants reported that they taught academics to students considered to have significant cognitive disabilities, although there were differences in how they described the nature of the instruction.

Professional Beliefs and Values

Professional values became the second prominent theme because the data included strong expressions of professional ethics and integrity. When asked how they chose academic priorities for students with significant cognitive disabilities, participants across the grade spans maintained that it was their responsibility to know children well, keep them safe, and protect them from situations that were irrelevant or too difficult. Situations that were perceived as important to avoid included participation in unproductive assessments, unrealistic expectations from others, and fast-paced classes that were overly demanding. For most participants, protection was a core element of professional integrity, expressed by an elementary teacher who referenced safety in describing her approach to general education,

> I like to err on the side of caution and start kids in my very safe house and then push them out as soon as I possibly can. I'm more of that motherly protective type. I'll be the first to shove them out the door when they're ready to go.

Another elementary teacher said that "being in the general ed classroom is stressful for them. They just can't control their emotions there, so this [self-contained classroom] is a safer environment for them." Safety concerns were not restricted to teachers of young children. Three high school teachers also said it was their job to create a school day where students "feel safe and comfortable." Teachers also felt responsible for protecting students from "wasting time," which will be discussed in more detail below.

Teachers also described feeling an ethical responsibility to provide diverse experiences for students, using words like "opportunity" and "exposure" to convey a general approach to providing activities outside of the classroom. One high school teacher explained that increasing students' communication skills was the highest priority because "that's access to life in general." She said, "I'm less worried about whether a student has access to science and math versus art and music. I find it more important that they're with other students in whatever environment." Another high school teacher said, "I think students should have a fairly broad range of experiences like understanding what it is to be part of a community and understanding the people around them." Interestingly, both indicated that their perspectives on inclusion had moved away from a strong commitment to academics to a more social and community orientation.

Teachers' professional values doubtlessly developed in a context of economic conditions, administrative support, and teacher preparation programs among many others. However, these data suggest that teachers' professional values and ethical commitments (as they define them) shaped access to academics.

The General Education Dilemma

The general education dilemma theme reflects that teachers reported a desire to expose students to the routines and activities of a typical school day but reported a conflicting duty to provide separate specialized instruction. Almost all participants used the words "inclusion" and "general education classrooms" when queried about access to the general education curriculum. However, although most teachers acknowledged that the words "general education" suggested a policy preference for regular education classes, they also considered it their responsibility to assess the relevance of the provision for their students. The reasons given for their misgivings about general education classrooms for academic instruction fell into three categories: (a) skepticism about the relevance of a literal interpretation of the phrase "general education" to students with significant cognitive disabilities, (b) the impact of budget cuts, and (c) their commitment to specialized instruction. All three reasons reportedly played a strong role in shaping teacher opinions about general education and reportedly caused an internal struggle about what was best for students.

Teachers reportedly did not approach the responsibility to interpret and create access lightly nor were the decisions easy. Eight participants used the word "struggle" to explain how they thought about their role in regard to general education. For example, an elementary teacher said, "I've been going back and forth, how much time do we spend on [academics in general education] that we feel isn't terribly useful? It's a real struggle," and a middle-level teacher said, "I struggle with 'okay, I'm helping them to access the general curriculum' but am I moving them as far as they can go? I don't know." Three high school teachers expressed variations of this same dilemma and the fact that the struggle to determine their students' relationship with general education was ongoing. As one of them said, "I would characterize [decisions about general education] as a struggle in terms of looking at the year, the quarter or just day to day."

More than two thirds of the participants addressed the general education dilemma by using the same materials and teaching a parallel curriculum to that of general education, in a separate setting. In response to queries about academic access, seven elementary, three middle level, and two high school teachers specifically mentioned teaching the general education curriculum through specific reading and math programs developed by companies and purchased by their general education colleagues. Using the same materials as those used in general education but at lower grade levels was considered to be providing access to the general education curriculum. Four elementary teachers used their general education colleagues for the curricular information necessarily to prepare parallel presentations. For example, one explained,

> I work very closely with classroom teachers. They know I need all the materials they're presenting . . . I usually pick out the key components of what I think my students will be able to learn, so they get some of the topics they're covering in the classroom.

Another teacher echoed this practice:

> I took the 5th grade science curriculum and looked for overarching objectives . . . I went to the 5th grade teachers as a consult to make sure I was covering the right bases.

This perception of access was associated with experience, and the elementary teachers with the fewest years in the classroom were more likely to seek out general education teachers for curricular guidance. These special educators drew from academic curricula, but they did not expect the general education teachers to provide the instruction or modifications. In fact, most participants said it was their job to prioritize and modify content.

Financial problems were the second reported reason that academic instruction in general education classrooms was not feasible. An elementary teacher asserted, "it's not philosophical, it's practical" as she explained that although she supported the idea of her students participating in general education for academics, she did not have enough staff to go with the children. Other participants perceived the access provision as unrealistic and unfunded, and as one middle-level teacher explained, " . . . there's only one of me, so that access has to be supported and paid for by the district." Three elementary teachers lamented the cuts that resulted in the loss of their music and art teachers and shared stories of general education opportunities that had disappeared as electives in particular were eliminated. Although the specific impact of the budget may vary, these findings suggest that access is significantly related to financial resources.

The participants' commitment to specialized instruction was the third reason that access was not implemented in a substantial way in general education classrooms. Participants expressed their professional identities in different ways, such as "I'm the great dispenser of supports" or "I'm a life skills teacher," but all described their role as maximizing student learning. To them, this commitment often meant individualized and separate instruction. An elementary teacher declared, "as a specialized instructor, my job is to get kids learning and independent," and a middle-level educator also used the term "specialized" in referring to her role, "yes, it's nice for them to be around their peers and stuff, but my goal is to provide specialized instruction." Most special educators defined their primary role as providing "relevant" instruction and often described academic access and relevant instruction as incompatible.

While the three identified elements of the general education dilemma—the feasibility of instruction in regular classrooms, budget cuts, and specialized instruction—were common across participants, there were some differences by grade span. Elementary teachers were more likely than middle and high school teachers to describe changes to the climate in their building. Four teachers used a form of the "pendulum swinging" expression to characterize how they experienced general education as no longer able to welcome students with disabilities. Three of the four had taught for over 20 years. One teacher explained,

> Instead of us making a niche for the kids, it's if they don't fit, well, then find something else for them . . . it didn't used to be that way in the old inclusion model that we used to have, it's really been a shift.

This group talked about the demise of inclusive education and cooperative learning and reminisced about the times when friendships and social connections were valued outcomes for children. One teacher said, "We have more kids who can read but they don't know how to play together." These participants did not blame other teachers. They simultaneously expressed concern for their general education colleagues and described the pressures general education teachers faced to increase standardized test scores.

Elementary teachers were also most likely to note the ambiguity involved in the term "access," and that access to curricular content may be conceptually different from access to instruction. For example, an elementary educator in her second year of teaching said,

> If you define curriculum by the lesson plan and materials provided to the general ed student, absolutely, if you define it by the experience that they're having in the general ed environment, then no they can't [have access to the general curriculum in a special ed setting].

Another elementary teacher had a similar reply,

> You can [have curricular access in a separate setting, but] will you have equivalent access? No, probably not.

A third elementary teacher expressed the same distinction regarding the students in her self-contained classroom,

> They're still getting their general ed materials and curriculum . . . it's not as rich because they don't have their peers to be working with, but as far as the statement, "general education curriculum," well, they are getting it, at least on paper it looks like they're getting it.

Elementary teachers also described compromises made because general education instruction was inaccessible to their students because of the fast pace and scripted nature of the instruction. Whereas many teachers reported separate settings as necessary to optimize individual instruction, a few elementary teachers described teaching academics in a special education setting as less than optimal. It was difficult to discern why certain teachers expressed a desire for more inclusion, but one possibility is due to their own higher education. Three of the elementary teachers in this group explained that the graduate courses they took (administration, assessment, and literacy) were causing them to question the lack of inclusive practice in their schools and sparking a desire for change.

Middle and high school teachers reported different priorities from the elementary school teachers and were more likely to attribute the general education dilemma to the relevance of the content. The words "benefit" and "gain" were used repeatedly across the 6 to 12 grade span. As one high school teacher explained,

> Most of my students would not benefit, I don't feel, from being exposed to a history class talking about the ancient Greeks. Most students in the regular classroom are gonna be paying attention to what the teacher has to say, or a PowerPoint presentation or whatever, so it wouldn't even be a socially good time for [students with disabilities] . . . access to me means they're going to gain something.

This statement was echoed in various ways by other participants as well and highlighted the assumption that the general education curriculum was too challenging to be adequately modified and that the instructional methods were inappropriate for student access.

The availability of supportive general education teachers was a factor that special educators considered when evaluating the costs and benefits of students attending general education classes. However, meaningful activities with identifiable relevance to the "real world" carried the most weight in the cost–benefit equation. For example, four of the seven middle-level teachers said they could go to their general education colleagues to obtain curricular information but asked a rhetorical "why?" and explained the impracticality of teaching grade-level math to students with severe disabilities at the middle level. One teacher clarified, "My main focus is what is relevant to their life " and "what can they do to be the most independent, safe, and socially appropriate?" Teachers reported that curricular access was filtered through how it could help toward this goal (independence) and noted they rejected access if it did not contribute to this priority, or if the cost of spending instructional time on the topic was "too high."

Discussion

This study used street-level bureaucracy theory to examine how teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities interpreted the policy provision *access to the general education curriculum*, specific to academics. This research proposes an exploratory theory of access as a decision-making process that requires teachers to continually make complex value-laden decisions about children and youth. These findings suggest that access meant far more than strategies to incorporate academic standards or modify curriculum because although teachers made modifications and crafted instruction, the form and content of these actions were shaped by their interpretation of the policy provision. The essence of access was the struggle—to enact one's professional values, make choices and decisions consistent with professional identity, and continually weigh opportunities and costs. As shown in Figure 1, special educator interpretation of access to the general education curriculum may be conceptualized as a decision-making process, a continual weighing and assigning value to curricular options, time, and resources.

These results are consistent with two findings from prior research: (a) teachers considered functionality and relevance as key components of curricular decisions and (b) teachers believed the use of parallel standards-based curriculum in a special education setting satisfied the access requirement (Agran et al., 2002;

Dymond et al., 2007). These results are also consistent with general education reform research in which most teachers did not substantially change their approach in response to reform but integrated the requirements of a new initiative into their pre-existing routines and practices (Datnow et al., 2002). Although these results supported prior research that aligning instruction with academic content standards is an important part of creating access, there was little evidence that modifications or accommodations played a significant role in teacher reported interpretation or implementation of access (Lee et al., 2010; Soukup et al., 2007; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

While reviewing the findings, an elementary participant declared, "The days of not teaching academics are over!" That extraordinary statement, given the history of educating students with severe disabilities, was supported by these data; findings suggested that participants accept teaching standards-based academic content, although separation from general education remains problematic. The cost–benefit calculus that teachers reported conducting was reminiscent of the Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption. This seminal work by Anne Donnellan (1984) urged professionals to consider the consequences of their interpretations and choices in the absence of observable evidence about what was "best" for a student. The least dangerous choice was the one that would cause the least damage if the assumptions about the individual were incorrect. The criterion has been applied to advocacy for inclusive education, academic instruction, the request to "presume competence" and other forms of demonstrating high expectations (Jorgensen, 2005). These findings, however, suggest that the criterion of the least dangerous assumption has changed. For these participants, the responsible choice was to provide direct skill instruction in small groups on content with demonstrable practical application. The decision to spend time in inclusive situations had become the more dangerous choice, and instead of low expectations, "wasted time" was the outcome to be avoided. These findings further suggest the lack of general education classes for content area academic subjects was not merely teacher resistance or a lack of philosophical agreement with inclusive principles but a pragmatic decision based on teacher judgment that the school day is finite and important priorities such as independence and skill acquisition have to be addressed.

Finally, the findings are also consistent with prior research that professionals who operate as street-level bureaucrats referred to their professional identities as the guide for making difficult decisions (Evans, 2011; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Street-level bureaucracy theory would suggest that changing teacher interpretation of academic access will require challenging and changing the norms or professional ethics of special education. Specifically, the ethics of specialization, protection, and a perception of academics as largely unnecessary for the lives children will lead currently work against inclusive academic access.

This study confirmed prior theoretical characterizations of access as ambiguous and nuanced (Dymond et al., 2007); however, the findings uncovered elements of professional value judgments and ongoing struggles that begin to explain what makes access so difficult to define. The struggle to simultaneously challenge and protect students and the desire to simultaneously see strengths and gifts while identifying and targeting deficits were particularly influential in informing the value judgment about academics.

Limitations

The study limitations must be considered to fairly interpret the findings. The sample included special educators in one state. Although participants supported students from K-12, results cannot be generalized to other special educators. The theoretical resonance, however, may appeal to others as these issues have national relevance. Although each state has some unique characteristics, and state-specific standards and assessments, the implementation issues examined in this study may inform researchers, policymakers, administrators, and teachers in other states. Because teachers were contacted indirectly through listserves and district administrators, rather than directly, there may be selection bias. However, the recruitment invitation was distributed through multiple venues and ample volunteers were obtained. It is possible that teachers who volunteered differ than those who did not see the invitation or chose not to respond. Because teachers were reporting their own beliefs and behaviors, they may have reported what they believed they "should" say, and although the researcher avoided disclosing her philosophical positions, it is also possible that not all

questions sounded neutral to the listener. The findings are dependent on the procedural and interpretive rigor of a single researcher, however, the researchers' experience as a special education teacher and university instructor provide a strong conceptual and personal understanding of students with significant disabilities and the role and responsibilities of their teachers. Validation was also addressed by treating each of the 33 interviews as a "case" and systematically tracking details, seeking alternative explanations, and searching for negative evidence across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, the theoretical model of access described is exploratory and has not been validated by other researchers.

Implications

There are three main implications of these findings for future research, policy revision, and professional development. The first is that a more specific definition of access to the general education curriculum at the policy level is necessary. The second is that the norms of specialization and individualization associated with students with significant cognitive disabilities must be challenged. Third, the role of general educators in access could be clarified and increased.

First, these findings refute assumptions that the current policy adequately ensures access for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Jackson et al., 2008-2009; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009). Participants' conceptualization of access as a struggle was ubiquitous, and adding language to IDEA's access provision that explicitly specifies that access must include links to general education classes and peers would change the nature of this reported struggle. The struggle to identify potential benefits of different classes, to expect a lot but not too much, and to choose the most important skill to teach in a finite amount of time would likely persist. However, the struggle could change to mean choosing from an array of universally designed academic content in inclusive instructional environments. Participants who provided feedback on these findings agreed with the concept of the struggle, and significantly, each thought she was the only one experiencing difficulty. This conceptual struggle did not mean teachers were unhappy; most participants portrayed their work as the source of great satisfaction, something they enjoyed and devoted long hours to. The professional act of weighing options and making decisions contributed to teachers' descriptions of their work as intellectually and creatively rewarding. However, research and policy should focus on improving the nature of the struggle. Although IDEA reads "access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom," these words are immediately followed by "to the maximum extent possible." This equivocating about general education locations in the policy language has passed more of the struggle along to special educators and may be contributing to educators' interpretation of curricular access as subject matter and standards but not as general education classrooms, teachers, and children.

The second implication of these findings is the need to explicitly address the norms associated with students with significant cognitive disabilities. Foundational theoretical work such as the criterion of the least dangerous assumptions and "presume competence" pushed education professionals to consider student capacity in a new way (Biklen & Burke, 2006; Donnellan, 1984; Jorgenson, 2005). The rationale for access to the general education curriculum as active engagement in general education academic classes has been clearly and comprehensively defined (Agran, Wehmeyer, Calvin, & Palmer, 2010; Jackson et al., 2008-2009; Ryndak et al., 2008-2009). However, these findings suggest a gap between the norms associated with academic access in the literature and the norms "on the ground." The guiding norms prevalent in these participants' responses were student safety, protection, and long-term functional benefit. These norms appeared in the data as care and concern for students and commitments to using their time productively, but the value of exposing students to academic experiences without prior evidence that they will comprehend and achieve was missing. Researchers and policymakers concerned with academic access will benefit by recognizing that as special educators implement new initiatives or interventions they will likely be filtered through the process of access shown in Figure 1. New instructional procedures or academic assessments, for example, should explicitly illustrate how they increase the benefits and reduce the costs of inclusive academic experiences for students with severe disabilities.

The prevalence of self-contained instruction described by participants is a concern after decades of advocacy to secure inclusive education for student with disabilities. Notably, teachers did not attribute academic access in

separate settings to their own lack of skills and strategies but to budgetary limitations and strong professional commitments to specialized and functional skills instruction. Introduction of techniques or reforms aimed at increasing curricular access for students with significant cognitive disabilities must consider the influence of teacher professionalism and incorporate teachers' commitment to protect students into the rationale for academic access. Future research should also test whether this preliminary model of access as cost–benefit decisions is applicable to special educators in a wider array of schools and across states and regions.

Third and finally, there was an overall absence of general educators in the special educators' narratives. General education teachers were not interviewed, but when special educators discussed them, it was as colleagues and not as co-teachers or collaborators in relation to content area academics. The general education dilemma described by these special educators is unlikely to be resolved without systemic participation by their general education peers and administrators.

Conclusion

These results illustrate how special educators conceptualized access and struggled to enact academic access. There is a history of low expectations and limited academic instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and these teachers' acceptance of content area academic instruction for these students represents a significant advance in the field. A next step for researchers and policymakers is to help reduce the perceived cost of inclusive academic instruction and help resolve the general education dilemma.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

Funding

Partial support for this research was provided by the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy at Brandeis University.

Note

1. Students are referred to as having "significant cognitive disabilities" throughout this article because the term is used to designate eligibility for participation in the Alternate Assessment, and student participation in the Alternate was one of the criteria used to recruit these participants. The term "severe disabilities" is also used if it was the term used in the original source of a citation.

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Received: July 28, 2013
Final Acceptance: June 12, 2014
Editor in Charge: Craig Michaels

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