General Curriculum Access: What Does it Mean for Students with Disabilities?

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Abstract: This paper examines the status of empirical research on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with all types of disabilities. Conclusions and implications are provided for improving the quality of education and access to the general curriculum for students with autism.

The initial intention of this literature review was to investigate curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with autism. However, the bulk of information in this specific area includes discussion of policy analysis and legal interpretations of the law in the form of briefs and critiques (Browder, Wakeman, & Floweres, 2006; Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Karger & Hitchcock, 2003; Smith, 2006). Empirical research on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations by teachers in general education classrooms for students with autism is also limited. As a result of the scarcity of such studies, the current literature review was expanded to include peer-reviewed empirical research on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with all types of disability in order to determine what is being done in the field of public education. The research question addressed in this paper is: What is the status of empirical research in the field of public education on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with all types of disabilities? To answer the research question, this paper is organized as follows: (a) method, (b) literature review, (c) results, and (d) conclusion and implications.

Method

The method for the current literature review consisted of the following steps. First, I examined dissertations by reviewing Proquest Dissertation Abstracts International to find out what has been researched regarding accommodations and students with autism. Then, I looked at various key terms, such as accommodations, adaptations, inclusion, autism strategies, and students with autism in various electronic databases. Then, I searched for research studies on access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. The next section reports on studies I have identified thus far in my search to answer the research question for this paper.

Literature Review

The literature review identifies five research studies that explore the general curriculum access, which means access to the educational standards within the school district that are applicable to all students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). These studies are concerned with the meaning and degree of access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities and types of modifications and accommodations offered students with disabilities at the school and school district level.

First, research on the definition of access to the general curriculum was conducted by Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, and Slagor (2007). Dymond and colleagues conducted a mixed methods study in an urban school in a small mid-western state. They interviewed 20 general education social studies/science teachers and 15 special education teachers to explore their definitions of access to the general curriculum. General education social studies/science teachers

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defined access for students with disabilities as being able to use the same curriculum and materials as students without disabilities. In contrast, special education teachers' defined access to the general curriculum as the use of an adapted curriculum tailored to individual student needs that also developed appropriate life skills. All of the interviewees believed that special education teachers were responsible for providing access to the general curriculum. General education teachers reported that they were the content experts, while special education teachers stated they were skilled in individualizing student instruction. Half of the general educators and only 8% of special educators interviewed defined access to the general curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities as having access to the same curriculum content as those students without disabilities. The limitations of this study included the small sample size and the fact that teachers from only one school were interviewed.

Second, the degree of classroom participation and access to the general curriculum that middle school students with cognitive disability have in relation to their classroom setting, meaning inclusive or self-contained, was the subject of a study conducted by Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, and Agran (2003). Participants included 33 middle school students in grades 6 through 9 at two schools. A time sample observation coded the subject content being taught, the type of setting, and whether or not there was a peer without a disability present in the classroom. Accommodations, adaptations and augmentations were coded broadly, not by specific types. For example, if an accommodation was documented, it was not stated whether it was extended time, reduction in amount of work, and so forth. It was noted only that an accommodation, adaptation, or augmentation was provided to a student. Wehmeyer et al. (2003) also examined school records to uncover anecdotal data such as IQ test scores, accommodations used, and current goals and objectives to provide a clear picture of the participants in the study.

Wehmeyer et al. (2003) analyzed variances across 439 observations first to determine if there was a difference between inclusion status of a student and what they were studying, either IEP goals or general curriculum, and to what degree accommodations, modifications, and augmentations were present. A second variance analysis examined class content being studied in the different types of general education classes (e.g., math, science/health, social studies, art/ music, English/language arts, and history) which were then grouped with special education classes to assess each type of class and its impact on access to the general curriculum for students with cognitive disability. The researchers found that variances were based on the amount of support required for a student and were correlated to the amount of time spent on accessing the general curriculum. Students requiring limited support were engaged in activities related to the general curriculum in 87% of the intervals. Yet, students requiring intensive support were engaged in activities related to accessing the general curriculum in only 55% of the intervals. Students in inclusive settings were 40% more likely to be working on general curriculum than their counterparts in self-contained classrooms. In contrast, students in self-contained classrooms were more likely to be working on their IEP goals than students in inclusive settings.

Third, Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, and Boviard (2007) investigated the level of general curriculum access for elementary students with cognitive disability. Access to the general curriculum was determined by variables such as type of classroom, meaning either being in a general education classroom or a self-contained classroom, and what type of work was being done by the students. Included in the sample were 19 elementary school students, ages 7-12 years old, who were observed in either science or social studies class. Classroom observation data on accommodations and adaptations, as well as access to the general curriculum, were

collected using the Code for Instructional Structure and Student Academic Response (CISSAR), a computer-based time sampling program.

Factors that led to increased levels of general curriculum access were determined by Soukup et al. (2007) to be instructional grouping, physical arrangements, and whether it was a general education or a self-contained classroom. Students who spent a greater amount of time in the general education classroom worked 98% of the time on grade level standards but only 10% of the time on IEP goals. Students in the low inclusion group spent almost 58% of their time working on IEP goals in self-contained classrooms. Accommodations, which included mostly paraprofessional or peer support, were provided 67% of the time to all students; they were followed by adaptations, such as reduced work, lower reading levels, or key words represented in pictures 18% of the time. The researchers concluded that students included at a high or medium rate were more likely to have higher access to the general curriculum than students with low inclusion rates.

Unlike Wehmeyer and colleagues (2003) who did not differentiate between the types of accommodations, modifications, and augmentations, but only noted the presence of such in the classroom, Soukup et al. (2007) coded three types of student interventions, giving specific examples of each. These researchers coded for specific types of augmentations, modifications, and accommodations in the interval recordings. Augmentations were defined as types of strategies for learning, test taking, organization, self regulation, and other. Augmentations were never observed during the interval recordings.

Soukup et al. (2007) investigated the presence of the following adaptations or modifications in the classroom: (a) adjusted reading demand, (b) adjusted cognitive demand (not reading), (c) non-print content, (d) content through technology, (e) enhanced content, (f) non-traditional response to instruction, (g) non-traditional instructional materials, and (h) other. Only four out of the eight modifications were observed in the classroom in 17.6% of the time samples. The most frequently used modifications in descending order were adjusted cognitive demand (8.4%), using non-print content (7.7 %), adjusted reading demand (6.2%), and enhanced content (0.6%).

Accommodations in the Soukup et al. (2007) study consisted of the student with a disability having any of the following in the classroom: (a) paraprofessional, (b) peer support, (c) note-taker, (d) environmental adjustment, (e) extended time, (f) redistributed time, (g) assistive technology, and (h) other. Accommodations were observed 67.4% of the time, but these included only paraprofessional support (65.4%), peer support (1.0%), and a note-taker (2.7%). Based on these results, it appears that the most preferred accommodation being provided to students with cognitive disabilities to access the general curriculum was providing a paraprofessional in the general education classroom.

Limitations of the study included small sample size and possible teacher effects because most of the students had the same teachers. The researchers believed that their results were within the norm of what can be found in similar settings since both their study and the Wehmeyer et al. (2003) study found that higher rates of inclusion resulted in higher rates of access to the general curriculum.

Fourth, establishing a model instructional implementation method for access to the general curriculum for students with cognitive disability was the goal of a study conducted by McDonell, Mathot-Buckner, Thorson, and Fister (2001). McDonell and colleagues sought both to increase general education inclusion time for students with cognitive disability and to enhance the quality of instruction by employing a multiple probe across subjects single-subject design to

examine the use of class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT), multi-element curriculum, and accommodations on the responding and competing patterns of included students with moderate to severe disabilities in a junior high school. A random selection of participants in this study comprised 3 students with moderate to severe disabilities, 3 students without disabilities, 1 special education teacher, and 3 general education teachers. Dependent measures were academic responding and student competition using the CISSAR. Experimental conditions of this single-subject multiple baseline design included the baseline and intervention measurements and an instructional package.

CWPT was the first component of this study and was implemented two times per week for 15 minutes a session by general education teachers who were told to create peer tutoring teams. The second component of this study was multi-element curriculum. Multi-element curriculum mirrors the definition of curriculum modifications. Both definitions require general education teachers to make changes to student expectations and modify instructional materials in order for students with disabilities to gain access to the general curriculum. Multi-element curriculum in this study included a change in focus on the instructional objectives for the students with disabilities to a subset of skills. The final component of this study was focused on accommodations which were developed for each of the 3 students with cognitive disability by the general education teacher and the special education teacher. Accommodations for many of the tasks these students were required to do involved reduced response demands.

As a result of the combination of CWPT, multi-element curriculum, and accommodations, the researchers found an increased participation of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Limitations of the study included the small sample size, and the effects of implementing the instructional program with three different teachers. A recommendation for further study included examining each strategy individually for students with disabilities that function at different levels.

Fifth, access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities is not only an issue with which individual schools must grapple but also for school districts to address. The Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) district began a phase out of 30-year-old learning centers (LCs) for students with learning disabilities in an attempt to increase student access to the general curriculum as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and IDEA (2004). Additional factors for the LC phase out consisted of lower academic performance for LC students than their included disabled peers, overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic students, difficulty integrating LC students into inclusive settings, and excessive numbers of students in LCs as opposed to their home schools. The overall aim of the phase out was to move students who were recipients of special education since kindergarten from the LC to more inclusive settings in their home schools. An evaluation of the phase-out process and the transition of these students into general education classrooms was conducted by Merchlinsky, Cooper-Martin, and McNary (2009).

Merchlinsky et al. (2009) utilized surveys, interviewed prime stakeholders in the process, and performed classroom observations on inclusive practices. Evaluation results indicated that while the MCPS offered training on inclusive practices, the training was poorly attended by teachers and support staff. Results from classroom observations showed that only 27% of sixth-grade and 23% of seventh-grade general education teachers were using differentiated instruction to assist included students to access the general curriculum. LC-transitioned students scored lower on standardized tests than students with similar disabilities. School staff expressed that

included students transitions from LCs required more support in the general education classroom than other students with disabilities.

Results

Results of the literature review show that the status of empirical research in the field of public education on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with all types of disabilities is limited to the meaning and degree of access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities and to the types of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations offered to students with disabilities. General curriculum access is interpreted in many school districts as simply a student with disabilities being placed in a general education classroom (Soukup et al., 2007). However, placement does not necessarily equate with access to the general curriculum (Browder, Wakeman, & Floweres, 2006; Newman, 2006; Wehmeyer et al., 2006), and most school districts do not have clear policies on strategies to promote access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities (Soukup et al., 2007).

While access to the general curriculum is important, there are different interpretations of what access to the general curriculum actually means for students with disabilities (Browder et al., 2006; Dymond et al., 2007; Newman, 2006). Many in special education try to make the point that access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities does not just equate to student placement (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Karger & Hitchcock, 2003; Smith, 2006; Wehmeyer, 2006). However, an important consideration for general and special education teachers, as well as students with disabilities when gaining access to the general curriculum, is linking Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals to general curriculum in order to avoid the dilemma of teachers having to choose between providing access to the general curriculum or working on IEP goals that frequently do not relate to the general curriculum (Soukup et al., 2007; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

Based on the research of the meaning and degree of access to the general curriculum, differing views exist among teachers as to who is supposed to provide access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. Research on the use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations has been limited almost exclusively to students with cognitive disability. The most often used instructional accommodation was having a paraprofessional in the classroom, followed by extended time for assignments. However, more research needs to be done in the area of general education teachers' use of curriculum modifications and instructional accommodations for students with disabilities. Generating an understanding of classroom inclusion practices will benefit general education teachers and their students by finding out both what is currently being done and what could be done differently.

As demonstrated by McDonell and colleagues' (2001), with support, general education teachers can successfully offer access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. However, many general education teachers lament that they do not have enough training to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Consequently, compelling reasons exist for examining what teachers are doing in the classroom and where they have received training to provide access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities, specifically for students with autism since this has not been a research topic.

Conclusion and Implications

Federal mandates, such as (NCLB, 2001) and IDEA (2004), combined with the public interest in providing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities exist. While much is being done to make this a reality for all students, more research needs to be conducted on the topic. Ultimately, once more is known about curriculum modifications and instructional

accommodations general education teachers are using, the overall quality of education and access to the general curriculum might improve for middle school students with autism.

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