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Providing academic access to individuals with significant disabilities [sic]

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PROVIDING ACADEMIC ACCESS TO
INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

Lindsey Jill Frandsen
University of Northern Iowa
August 2013

ABSTRACT

Academic access to the general education curriculum for individuals with significant disabilities poses many challenges for educators. With the implementation of the Essential Elements in the summer of 2013, educators will have a new instructional framework for providing access to their students. Within this thesis I have explored the challenges educators face in regards to facilitating academic access for students with significant support needs through the use of focus group interviews, and provide a literature review demonstrating where schools have been in regards to providing access, and where they are headed.

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This Study by: Lindsey J. Frandsen

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The need to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities has become an important and timely topic in schools across the nation. In this study, I examine the current literature relating to access to the general education curriculum for students identified with significant disabilities and share the results of a qualitative research study exploring the perspectives of teachers serving students with significant disabilities.

Context

I am interested in how teachers of students with significant disabilities create and support their students in accessing and learning general education curriculum as a result of my student teaching experience at the end of my undergraduate degree. During my student teaching, one of my teaching experiences was in a fifth grade general education classroom. I treasured everything about that placement---the personalities of each student, the staff, but more importantly, the curriculum. I loved the content that I was teaching to those students. It was rich, creative and had so much potential to spark new ideas for these students.

After my eight weeks in this vibrant placement, I transitioned to my next eight-week placement in a self-contained special education classroom. I was excited to be teaching in a classroom serving individuals with significant disabilities. Yet as the weeks began to pass I found myself feeling like something was missing from this classroom. I

attempted to implement innovative instructional practices, such as a traveling world wall and cross curricular instruction, both of which were instructional strategies I learned during my undergraduate career at the University of Northern Iowa. I repeatedly experienced others laughing or mocking my efforts. I often heard, “That will never work, but give it a try.” I wanted to expand the knowledge of my students through rigorous instruction in literacy, math, science and social skills. I hoped that if students were able to see connections from one lesson or subject to another they would make personal and academic gains. When the educators around me did not appear to share this vision, I asked myself internal questions such as, “Is this the field for me?” “Maybe special education is not what I thought it was.” Because my passion is for teaching, and specifically teaching *all* students, I became disheartened.

Inclusion in the general education curriculum was a no exceptions issue for me and my family growing up. I have a younger brother who has multiple significant needs, and providing access to the community for him was always something that came as a second nature to my family. As I grew older I found that this second nature was not what all members of society embraced or valued. I knew that if I wanted individuals, like my brother, to have access to the general education curriculum or community, I would need to advocate with and for these students. I wanted to become an ally for individuals with significant disabilities.

As my student teaching experience continued, I changed my strategy and focused on students’ individual education programs. I worked to make the classroom innovative and enriching by bringing in new literature, independent and group work, but each time it

felt as though I was falling short. These particular students followed what is known as Functional Academic Curriculum for Exceptional Students program (FACES). FACES was a curriculum that focused on functional living skills more than academic content knowledge. The curriculum provided step by step instructional methods for teaching students new skills and tasks. I felt that the students were missing something as learners, and I was missing something as an educator. Through reflecting on these student teaching experiences, I wanted to explore the area of providing academic access to students with significant disabilities more deeply. Upon returning to graduate school I wanted to better understand how teachers could support the learning of students with significant disabilities within the general education curriculum in meaningful and relevant ways.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the ways in which educators provide access to the general education curriculum and the Common Core Standards for individuals with significant disabilities. Through this research I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the multiple experiences that teachers of students with significant disabilities have, and to shed light on an educational topic that is becoming ever prevalent in our schools today.

Questions that guided this study included:

- How do special educators serving students with significant disabilities provide access to the general education curriculum?

- What are the challenges in facilitating access to the general education curriculum and the Common Core Standards?

These questions became the foundation for my desire to seek action and explore this topic further. My purpose for researching this subject was to expose an area that not only impacts the way in which our students learn, but the ways in which educators teach. My hope was that through this research an understanding of how to support students with significant disabilities in accessing the general education curriculum and Common Core Standards would become apparent, along with ways to support educators providing instruction for students with significant disabilities.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In examining the literature relating to academic access a number of themes emerged. Below I provide a definition of academic access, the Common Core Standards and Essential Elements, and an overview of the literature and the themes that emerged.

Academic Access for Students with Significant Disabilities

Merriam Webster defines access as: permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with a person or thing (Merriam-Webster Online, 2013). Access in an educational context does not vary far from this dictionary definition. Educational access means that all students have access to engage, interact and communicate with materials that their general education peers have access to on a daily basis (Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson & Agran, 2004; Spooner, Dymond, Smith & Kennedy, 2006). Access for students with significant disabilities has taken many forms throughout history. Educational movements have defined what access and educational opportunities have been provided for individuals with significant disabilities.

An early movement centered on the developmental model. The developmental model was driven by the ideas that an individual's "mental age" would define their educational curriculum (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013). This model is reflective of the developmental stages of children that Jean Piaget defined as: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operations and formal operations. For an individual to move to the next developmental stage they first need to "master" the current stage they are in.

This model filters into the developmental model of access for individuals with significant disabilities because educators must ensure that their students master skills within their developmental age before moving onto skills within another developmental category. Browder et al. (2004) provide a context for the developmental model in providing an understanding of where educators gathered their instructional materials and curriculum, “In the absence of a curriculum model for these new services, professionals adapted preexisting infant and early childhood curriculum for grades K-12” (p. 211). Educators believed that providing academic content at a level that reflected their development was more important than a curriculum that reflected their age.

As educators moved from the developmental model, they transitioned into a functional life skills model. The foundation for the functional life skills model was to provide work skills and independent living skills, such as laundry, cooking meal, navigating public transportation and so on. The goal was to provide an individual with supports and resources needed to succeed within the community. Although this was an improvement from the developmental model, the functional life skills model lacked an educational piece. Browder et al. (2004) describe four domains that became the focus for instruction and planning within the functional model. These domains included community, recreation, domestic and vocational (p.212). These domains have since then become a focus for transitioning a student from the classroom to the community in our schools today. Once a child reaches sixteen, these components of transition need to be included in their IEP along with their academic goals. Classrooms have continued to move forward from these two models, but many classrooms stay rooted within the

functional life skills model, especially within secondary education settings (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013).

Within the mid 80's and 90's schools began the social inclusion movement. Educators and schools wanted students with significant disabilities to be full members of their educational communities, and to have relationships with peers within their grade appropriate classrooms (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013). The purpose of this movement was not to provide educational access to individuals with significant disabilities, but rather social access. Browder et al. (2004) explains that this model did not demonstrate a curricular shift, the primary focus still remained functional, but there was a new added social piece (p. 212). This model is prevalent in schools today. Students with significant disabilities receive instruction within their special education classrooms and move to their respective general education classrooms for physical education, art, music, recess and other "social" interactions (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013).

The self-determination model came soon after the social inclusion movement and had reflections of the functional life skills model. While social access and inclusion was still taking place, educational efforts for individuals with significant disabilities were being educated on choice making and goal setting that would impact their daily lives. Within this model students develop an understanding of themselves and others and how that impacts their daily lives and futures. Planning and setting goals are the focus for this model. This model is very reflective of what educators would see as a functional living

curriculum today. This model embraces reflectivity. There is not accountability to an academic curriculum within this model (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013).

Self-determination led us to where educators and schools are currently at today, access and participation in academic general education curriculum. Up until this point, academics were not a priority, especially the general curriculum. The self determination model exemplifies the fact that all students deserve the opportunity to learn in the general education curriculum (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013). This model brings together the academic and functional pieces of curriculum, and creates a holistic and authentic expectation to providing education for all students to succeed in their communities.

NCLB and the reauthorization of IDEA provided legal foundations for this movement (Karger, 2007). According to the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education §281-41.39(3)(c)(2) IAC, educators must ensure the access of the child to general education curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children. This legal mandate outlines the requirements for educators to not just meet standards for state purposes, but to adapt general education curriculum in a meaningful way for individual student needs (Browder et al., 2004).

While this was a tremendous improvement, this expansion was made while many educators lacked the knowledge and support of educating individuals with such diverse and significant needs. These changes brought about many tensions that lie within the general education classrooms and special education classrooms that are adapting to current changes. Without the proper support and training, little progress can be made within the area of access and participation within the general education curriculum.

Current State of Iowa Relating to Academic Access

Iowa has experienced many changes in regards to creating access to the general education curriculum for students with significant support needs. Iowa has been starting the transition process of implementing the Common Core Essential Elements that will be released to educators in the summer of 2013.

The Common Core Essential Elements have been established to create a more fluid understanding of the Common Core Standards that students are expected to meet within each grade level. The Common Core Standards provides educators with foundational standards that prepare students for the most successful future possible. The Common Core Standards include: literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and 21st century skills. These categories are then broken down further to provide appropriate grade level material that is relevant and rigorous (Common Core, 2012).

With the understanding that the Common Core Standards would be implemented, the challenge of how the Common Core Standards would look for special educators and their students with significant support needs developed. The Common Core Essential Elements was created through Dynamic Learning Maps to assist educators in providing Common Core Standards instruction to their students. Within the drafted example document of The Common Core Essential Elements and Range of Complexity Examples for English Language Arts (2012) an understanding for the purpose of this document is established. The Common Core Essential Elements “provides a high-level view of the relationship between the Common Core Standards and the links to content standards for

students with significant disabilities. It is intended to provide a beginning structure for the design of a summative alternate assessment” (p. 1).

Iowa belongs to a consortium named Dynamic Learning Maps along with 13 other states in regards to educational access and Alternate Assessment. These 14 states are dedicated to the development of an alternate assessment system (“Dynamic learning maps,” 2012). Dynamic Learning Maps are a title provided to sequence learning targets. Dynamic learning maps provides pathways and connections from specific skills to learning objectives and targets (“Dynamic learning maps,” 2012). Many view these dynamic learning maps as any other map, in that it provides a way to get from one objective to another with specific ways of achieving or reaching specific learning goals. With the implementation of this system and the continued support of the consortium, education for individuals with significant support needs is on track for significant advancement within the next year.

Perspectives and Tensions within the Field

Notwithstanding the implementation of NCLB, along with the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, many educators question the feasibility and appropriateness of providing access to the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities (Agran, Apler & Wehmeyer, 2002). A large concern of educators is that individuals with significant support needs will not receive functional activities or life skills (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas & Sievers, 2011).

Ryndak, D. L., Moore, M. A., & Orlando, A. M. (2008) summarized challenges regarding progress for individuals with significant disabilities receiving access to the

general education curriculum. A couple of major concerns include educators being required to accept too great of a paradigm shift related to their instructional practices; and insufficient time being available for teachers to address students' extensive support needs (Parrish & Stodden, 2009; Spooner et al., 2006).

Collaboration and Communication

Many educators have become overwhelmed with the ways in which to provide access to the general education curriculum effectively for students with significant disabilities. There is not a specific answer that catches every question, but a word that captures many of the concerns and struggles, is balance. Providing a quality and just education can seem like a load too challenging to carry at times, but maintaining a balance within instruction can make even the heaviest loads lighter (Ayres et al., 2011; Parrish & Stodden, 2009).

Collaboration is a key component in successfully providing access to students. According to Browder, Spooner, and Wakeman (2006). "Collaboration with general educators is essential to creating access to the general curriculum..." (p.7). Successfully implementing access means that educators have opportunities to collaborate. To successfully provide access for students with significant disabilities to the general education curriculum, collaboration and communication along with a core/framework are necessary.

Communication and collaboration are vital to developing a deeper understanding for any topic. Within the area of access and knowledge of the general and special education curriculums, it is no different. Communication with general education teachers

is a critical element in providing access, being aware of risks and pitfalls in communication can prevent hiccups (Burdge, Clayton, Denham & Hess, 2010; Cushing, Clark, Carter & Kennedy, 2005). Having an understanding of the standards and objectives that the general education teacher plans to implement throughout a particular unit or lesson is a key component in special educators discovering ways to accommodate, modify and adjust activities to meet student's needs. Rather than looking at teaching as a one person job, adjusting educator mindsets to teaching is a team job creates much more manageable loads for everyone (Burdge et al., 2010).

Creating an open line of communication and collaboration between general educators and special educators allows for planning and instruction to be cohesive. Classrooms and schools are changing; they no longer have one classroom of students with similar needs. Students have a wide range of supports and levels that are needed for success, and using a variety of resources and educational personnel to reach those goals is much more effective than one educator trying to conquer all.

Framework for Academic Access

Burdge et al., (2010) provide a framework that lays the foundation for a method in successfully providing access. The first step entails identifying the standard(s) the instructional unit addresses. This step requires that educators become familiar with Common Core Standards for the lesson they plan to teach. Educators develop an understanding of grade level expectations, outcomes they hope to see, and check points they hope to make along the way. This step allows for educators to take a broad concept

and begin making it specific for the students they serve and the lessons they plan to teach (Burdge et al., 2010).

The second step involves defining the outcome(s) of instruction from the instructional unit (Burdge et al., 2010). This instructional step causes educators to really develop an understanding for the end hope for their unit or lesson. The questions that may go through an educators mind through this planning process can include: What do I hope my students learn from this unit? What objectives will their students learn within each lesson? How will I help them reach these end goals? These questions help to guide the instructional process of developing a deeper understanding of the material being taught and how the material is relevant to student learning.

Step three requires educators to identify the instructional activities to use during the unit (Burdge et al., 2010). This step is where educators develop differentiation for students with significant needs. Once the Common Core Standards are in place along with objectives that will be taught through each lesson, differentiation planning can begin. Educators then focus on the objectives and standards needed to be met and plan activities that support students with significant needs and allow them to remain fully involved within instruction.

The final step focuses on targeting specific IEP objectives and foundational skills that can be addressed during the unit (Burdge et al., 2010). This final step within this four step framework is where imbedding a student's IEP goals within the lesson and unit take place. This creates efficiency for educators to meet the needs of their individual students, while meeting the lesson and unit objectives. Student IEP goals are focused

around academic achievement, so aligning them to academic standards should not be impossible (Burdge et al., 2010).

Social skills and functional living skills are areas that are essential for all students to gain through general instruction. Many educators believe that by creating a more academically focused curriculum plan for individuals with significant disabilities, students will lose a functional aspect to their learning that parents and educators found beneficial to their current and future success. By analyzing the general education Common Core Standards and creating meaningful learning moments within specific units, students can gain adequate social skills and functional living skills through grade and age appropriate instruction. Forgan and Gonzalez-DeHass (2004) address a potential method of infusing social skills. “If teachers infuse social skills training into the academic curriculum, their students receive more time devoted to social skills training than when these programs are offered as an isolated area of instruction...” (p.25) Imbedding social skills instruction allows for educators to develop a natural process of learning and understanding. Through imbedding this instruction into daily learning, students develop an understanding of how to use their gained skills within their school, community and workplace environments.

An example of infusing social skills within general instruction is utilizing group work. Group work is a simple yet very effective way to implement social skills into the general education classroom. Discussing with students how to effectively work in a group, debate in a productive way, and to discover conflict management techniques are all ways social skills can be acquired through group or partner work, and require little leg

work on the educators end. Creating natural means for social instruction and functional living is one of the strongest forms of instructing these topics.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This research project was a qualitative study that focused on interviews with current special educators. I chose qualitative methods for this research because of the nature and style that qualitative research brings about. The personal connections made through qualitative research allow for a rich analysis and discussion of the data collected, and provides a comprehensive understanding of the data for me as a researcher. The purpose of this research was to understand the perspectives of educators serving students with significant disabilities and the ways in which they provide access to the general education curriculum for their students. The research questions that guided my study included: How do special educators serving students with significant disabilities provide access to the general education curriculum? What are the challenges in facilitating access to the general education curriculum and the Common Core Standards?

Glesne (2011) described interviewing as a means of understanding, she states “interviewing...brings together different persons and personalities” (p.118). I wanted to understand the challenges, methods and successes that educators currently face in the field of special education with regards to providing access to the general education curriculum. For my interviews I used focus groups which allowed for me to be a moderator and pose questions that were then discussed within a group setting as opposed to an individual basis. Focus groups generally include a more formal atmosphere with guided pre-written questions by the interviewer. The purpose of focus-group interviews is often to explore a topic that is of interest to a particular field (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

During these focus group interviews I wanted to remove my preconceived notions and judgments that have influence on my thinking, and allow myself to simply learn. Being a researcher with the intent of strictly learning “entails a frame of mind by which you set aside your assumptions that you know what your respondents mean when they tell you something rather than seek explanations about what they mean” (Glesne, 2011). This quote embodies the framework for how I wanted to guide my focus groups and to allow me to maintain an unbiased approach to interviewing my participants.

Participants

Participants for this research study included special education teachers currently serving individuals with significant disabilities. Three focus groups were held to gather data in regards to access to the general education curriculum and Common Core Standards. To be able to participate in these focus groups educators needed to currently be serving an individual or individuals with significant disabilities and where the student or students they serve take the Iowa Alternate Assessments. Focus group locations were chosen to provide a wide representation of district sizes, communities, and dispositions across the state of Iowa. I wanted to have a broad understanding of what access was like for different populations of educators across the state. For the purpose of this research and to maintain confidentiality, individuals involved in the focus groups and their district locations have been given pseudonyms. I have provided a table to describe the characteristics of each focus group. Participants within all three focus groups had varied teaching experience. Teaching experience ranged from first year educators to educators who have been in the field for 35 plus years.

Table 1:

Focus group participants

Pseudonym location of each school district	# of Educators present during focus group	Level: Elementary, Middle Level, High School	Urban, Rural, Suburban
Oakland Community School District	5	Elementary	Rural
Washington Community School District	7	Middle Level & High School	Urban
Steamboat Community School District	9	Middle Level & High School	Suburban

Data Collection

Data was collected from three focus group interviews. Each focus group lasted from 50 to 90 minutes. Each focus group was recorded using an audio recording device that was then transcribed removing descriptors of each district and individual participants.

Data Analysis

To analyze my interviews I used a thematic approach to understanding the content. I searched the interview notes and transcriptions for themes across the three focus groups. I then took themes that arose and assigned specific codes to them. Quotes that revolved around a specific topic, desires of educators, challenges, successes, etc.

were labeled with a particular code (Glesne, 2011). Coding data allowed for me to develop a framework of categories that became the structure for my results of this research (Glesne, 2011).

I took notes from each focus group along with transcriptions and cut out key themes and quotations that arose across each group. My decision to use a particular theme was chosen based on the continued occurrence of the topic across all three focus groups. When a theme was present in all three focus groups and stressed by the participants as a critical component, it was then used for results. Through their responses I was able to code and theme their conversations to provide an in depth understanding of their perspectives. The following overarching themes emerged: Academic versus function living curriculums, instructional challenges and desired supports. Sub-themes developed under each category including: dispositions of educators in terms of functional and academic curriculums, educators believing academics is functional, instructional challenges related to everyday instruction, IEP's and alternate assessment, and supports for everyday instruction, the Common Core Essential Elements, and Iowa Alternate Assessment. Additional coding categories were added, including support and instructional challenges surrounding the Iowa Alternate Assessment.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through my analysis of the data collected during this study, various themes emerged. These themes included academic versus functional living curriculums, instructional challenges, and supports educators need to effectively instruct the population they serve.

Academic versus Functional Living Curriculums

A tension has developed internally and externally for many educators serving individuals with significant disabilities. The strain revolves around the implementation of an academic or functional curriculum and what is more beneficial for students. The tension of what is “better” for students with significant needs was wrestled with during some of my focus group interviews. Educators expressed not knowing what was necessarily best for their students in the long run, and hoped that what they were teaching them now would not be a disservice to them in the future.

Teachers expressed varying beliefs about what their students needed. The largest desire for a functional based curriculum arose when I communicated with middle school and high school educators. There seemed to be a sense of desperation in preparing their students for work, living and leisure. The Common Core Standards academic curriculum did not serve as a priority in accomplishing these areas of independence post high school. One educator from the Oakland school district expressed in a blatant tone her thoughts as a work experience coordinator preparing students for their post high school experiences:

I agree with that (referring to linking the core to functional skills) because I'm the work experience coordinator and maybe I'd like to see more of maybe job skills because teens really don't know what they are going to do when they graduate because some of them, they are not going to college. So after they graduate and have seen this, how they are going to work. So I think we need to prepare them more on that. And I'm not saying that science is good, but knowing how magnets attract each other and maybe knowing how to answer a job interview (question), I mean I would go with the interview instead of the magnet.

The concern this particular educator had in regards to understanding what is appropriate to teach when is representative of what many educators across the state face when instructing their students with the most significant support needs. Another educator serving high school students in their last two years expressed a similar concern:

Sometimes they fit well (referring to academics and functional), but especially juniors and seniors who are right about to go out the door, I'm really not that concerned about some of those core things. I'm more concerned about where they're going to live, where they're going to work

The internal and external struggles that educators face does not end with academic and functional curriculums. Educators desire to provide a dynamic and rich educational foundation for their students. This dynamic and rich instruction does not come without a new set of instructional challenges.

Instructional Challenges

Every educator is faced with instructional challenges. These challenges can prevent educators from being the best they can be, and students from being the learners they could be. Developing an understanding of the variety of challenges educators face on a regular basis can help lead to a way of assisting educators in relieving some of these challenges and stressors.

Daily Instructional Challenges

The daily grind of instructing such a wide range of students proves to be a challenge for many educators. Scheduling and collaboration with their colleagues along with providing differentiation for all of their students proved to be the largest challenge among educators within the three focus group locations. One educator from the Steamboat school district expressed the challenges and emotions that special educators are face: “I think that’s where we’ve been (referring to educators). Just overwhelmed when you teach so many subjects at so many grade levels and having no training on the Common Core Standards and the language...” An educator within the same district expanded upon the frustrations previously voiced: “It’s like every time you thought you’d get something and then they’d change it and it was like OK, start again. So I mean it just feels like a useless cycle at the current point and time.” These frustrations did no only reside within this district, but across the other two focus groups as well. An educator within the Washington school district described the heavy load that she carries and feeling the need to “choose” what she will focus on that day:

Sometimes I kind of feel like I get to choose today am I going to teach the core or am I going to teach their IEP. Am I going to teach them how to find the plot in the novel or am I going to teach them how to read the directions to cook dinner?...

Those same feelings of wrestling with what at times seems to be a “pointless” curriculum were found in the Oakland school district too:

I know last year I had a group of five and we were in the classroom and then we were given permission to be out of the classroom and it’s just like, but they were cognitive at like a first grade level. So sitting there through a fifth grade science class was just like, what’s the point?

Being discouraged with the curricular frameworks was a frustration that led another area of challenge for special educators; focusing on what material is most important to teach when. An educator from Oakland began this conversation with describing the internal struggles she faces when providing instruction for her students:

...sometimes I've just really scratched my head hard thinking about how am I overlooking that and really how am I doing that, to really reassure the parents that we're doing everything we can. You know, I mean I can say I'm doing it but really am I?

Another educator from the Washington district discussed the pressure she felt in regards to instructing the "right" material, and wanting a framework for how to prioritize standards and material so that she does not make a mistake:

I'd rather have the core tell me which ones are more important rather than me decide we're going to do this and have someone say well they probably should've learned that instead. Because I don't know necessarily what they're going to face once they get out of my classroom. I've never gone through that, so maybe I'll think it's really important they can do one skill and it turns out another one was much more important in their life.

This particular educator is not alone in wanting a clearer picture of what is expected of them when instructing their students. This educator provides a pivotal thought in terms of instructing students with the most significant of needs, and that is educators do not always know what is "best" for their students, knowing what students will need every day of their lives after school is not feasible, but educators can provide their students with the richest and most dynamic education possible to them for their day to day lives. The individuals within each of the focus groups expressed such a mixed bag of raw emotions and the intensity of their emotions, confusion and frustration seemed to escalate as the topic of alternate assessment was brought up.

Instructional Challenges in Regards to Alternate Assessment

The challenges in implementing, recording, tracking and reporting their students' on alternate assessment was one of the largest frustrations the educators within all three focus groups expressed. One educator from Oakland expressed that even the diligent work she does towards alternate assessment does not always demonstrate that knowledge of her students in an appropriate way: "...I feel like sometimes some of the scores I report aren't reflective of the knowledge she has...I don't feel like I'm at times really getting a good assessment on what she can do, what she knows." An educator from within the Washington district explained her frustrations with getting a "good" assessment of her student's knowledge in mathematics, and how the state compares that data to other students:

...I have concerns of how the Iowa assessment uses that data then. Because when we get this report back on this kid and it says this is how they rank, by my kid who is doing you know in the 100s (within mathematics) scored poorly...They might've scored 70% and the kid who was doing the 10s (within mathematics) scored 100% and it comes back that this kids academically more proficient than this kid in the report.

Educators are not only concerned they are getting accurate data on the work their students are capable of, but that the state is interpreting that data in a way that is not reflective of the current state of their classrooms.

The frustrations of gathering data are one piece of the headache that many special educators face in regards to alternate assessment. Developing a comprehensive understanding of what is required of educators in picking and assessing the data used for alternate assessment seemed to be another piece that the individuals within each focus

group were concerned about. A teacher from the Oakland district described a scenario involving a fifth grade student:

...This year, I have fifth grade and you have to assess science in fifth grade...I don't know when I come down to picking those 15 criteria I'm like oh my goodness... You know that's not even in the general education curriculum, they don't even talk about that. So you know I think sometimes those goal areas are just so hard and far-fetched to find, I don't know, meaning.

Creating meaning is crucial for an educator to feel accomplished. Another educator from Oakland expressed her difficulty with creating meaning for her wide range of student age and abilities within alternate assessment and the Common Core Standards:

I think it what's hard is with alternate assessment in Iowa core is trying to figure out how you are supposed to make it to their ability level. I mean I have fifth through eighth grade yes, but then I have students who I did pull out 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 am trying to figure out am I supposed to become familiar with the second grade core standards, the fourth grade standards, and the fifth grade standards? And then make sure that I'm hitting it with alternate assessment too?

An educator from Steamboat did not understand the connection between the Iowa Alternate Assessment and the Common Core Standards "...Trying to do that and then teach the core...right now the two don't match so you feel like you're running two different areas..."

Daily instruction and alternate assessment are two areas that cause challenge within the classroom. A student's IEP is a final component that the educators within each focus group expressed as being a challenge in regards to making all three instructional components function smoothly.

Instructional Challenges in Regards to a Student's IEP

A student's IEP is a legal document that mandates and binds an educator to providing the most beneficial and supportive education for an individual student. Connecting a student's IEP to the Common Core Standards and aligning the Iowa Alternate Assessment can prove to be a challenge. Educators within the Steamboat district expressed concern about the Common Core Standards and their student's IEP goals "Because I get at some point it's a stretch trying to spiral to the core's to meet the needs of the students that need the IEP." Another educator within the Steamboat district went onto say that "fitting that in (referring to the common core) with trying to give all the IEP goals and then accessing the, you know core curriculum that we have and everything, it's just how do we find time to get it done?" These concerns echo throughout special education classrooms across the state, one educator from Washington started getting creative with the requirements she was given and began double dipping her standards to meet the needs of her students while still satisfying the requirements of the Common Core Standards, alternate assessment and a student's IEP:

...I find myself looking for some of my reading what I use on my IEP is so far out there, but if I look at the social studies sometimes or the science or the 21st century skills, there's reading goals imbedded in those that are more functional.

The instructional challenges that educators face each day can feel less challenging if the supports needed are in place.

Support

Supports for educators that are serving individuals with significant disabilities vary from district and school, but a common theme among all is that additional support and collaboration is needed. To effectively instruct any student, proper resources need to be available.

General Support Needs

The desire to be heard was a faint echo that began to roar louder as the conversation of needed supports for educators serving students with significant support needs continued. The lack of administrator support and understanding, to the professional relationship with their general education colleagues, proved to be a tangled net of confusion, frustration and a feeling of being in this alone.

An educator from the Steamboat district began discussing the lack of administrator support her district experiences in regards to special education:

...We had a level three meeting, no administrator whatsoever was there. So it was kind of pointless...We can talk amongst ourselves, but if there's not somebody to realize what's actually going to happen...They don't have a clue what's going on...

Steamboat was not the only district feeling a lack of support from their administration; an

Oakland educator expressed a similar concern:

I really don't think there's much (referring to the support from administrators) no I don't there has been much training to our administration. I don't know do yours but I feel like I am always filling everybody else in [laughs] This is what is happening, you know this is what we need to do because I just think it's kind of that unknown.

The conversation of support from administration quickly turned into a conversation of collaboration and support in general; collaboration with their special education team members, administrators, and general education staff members. A Steamboat educator personally expressed a desire she has for collaboration in general “To me, it would be beneficial to have those that I work with on a regular basis on my team together so you know we’re working on the same information and we can share...” An educator from Oakland expanded upon the importance of collaboration “I think that’s the biggest thing, the collaboration...”

The educators within each focus group brought up a consistent topic of access to materials and resources in a virtual world rather than face to face communication. Educators are aware of the realities of scheduling meetings and collaboration time, if the challenges of that are present, these educators proposed a solution. One educator from Washington expressed her thoughts “...have a discussion board because I know it is hard for all of us to get together and it would be a common place...” A library of materials was a topic of discussion along with the online discussion board. One of the interviewers summarized what side conversations were taking place about this library of materials “I heard something like a resource library too over here. At some point, earlier today, is that a resource library or a material library of some sort? [nods from participant educators]” An educator from Washington expanded upon their desire for an online collaboration community:

...People can post there, I guess that somebody approved but you know that you can go and you can pull up a lesson plan example you know to use in your classroom or as a starting point to modify or whatever would be wonderful. And

then like you said just you know if you post you could post questions. You could post examples, you know. If you had that resource to go to between the times, yea that would be wonderful.

The optimism of opportunity increased as educators were introduced to the Common Core Essential Elements. With this new optimism a new need for support was produced.

Supports Desired for Effective Implementation of the Common Core Essential Elements

As described above, the Common Core Essential Elements are a supplemental curriculum to the already existing Common Core Standards. Before, special educators were expected to align their students IEP's and instruction to the Common Core Standards with little support and examples. Now, the Essential Elements provide concrete examples for educators to provide access to the Common Core Standards through a range of complexity examples.

The response to the Common Core Essential Elements was mixed with a general positive tone. The positive became stronger as the talk of additional supports began to surface. One educator from Washington expressed what she would need to be successful in implementing these Essential Elements:

...the additional planning time at least for this first rolling out to tie this to what we're already doing instead of having to have what we're doing, plus re-planning everything to fit this; Just having that time to tie it in.

Oakland educators expressed not only having time to explore the document, but to have additional training as well "...having like that hands-on training on how we are going to pick these things and then what are you are going to do to get them." Another educator from Oakland said "And even just an overview of what it is all about to stress the need for collaboration time is probably what I would need from my administrator." Steamboat

educators echoed what other districts were discussing “I think it will be useful if we could have time to work with it.” An Oakland educator began thinking of her support team while looking through these Essential Elements and wanted them to be prepared as well:

If my associate had this information ahead of time, the planning and organization to develop some of these materials so that, because I have a wonderful associate that’s able to be in the classroom with the student and can do this while the other kids are doing things or even in a small group work together and have the materials. And the general education kids can use the materials as well also...I think it comes down to planning though...I mean I think about the time of the collaboration...I guess just having the standards out in front even, knowing what you’re doing is helpful.

An educator from Steamboat expressed concern about adding “more” to her plate “I think that is where we’ve been. Just overwhelmed when you teach so many subjects at so many grade levels and having no training on the common core and the language....we are not experts in each of these areas.” Educators in all three focus groups demonstrated a sense of relief towards the Essential Elements, but still felt that they could be supported within an area that has already been established within their classrooms, the Iowa Alternate Assessment.

Supports Needed for a Comprehensive Approach to the Iowa Alternate Assessment

Support in all areas of instruction is critical to successfully providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum for our students. Through the focus groups, the Iowa Alternate Assessment has proven to be an area where additional support is needed. An educator from Steamboat expressed wanting additional training in regards to alternate assessment:

To me, ideally it would be great to have an expert in that area come as whether it would be your, a couple of your AEA people. Because really for the most part, I

haven't gotten a lot of assistance on alternate. I have got great AEA people, don't get me wrong, but as far as alternate assessment there hasn't been a lot of assistance there, or even you know a couple of teachers who work with that could be a go-to person that could assist for those of us who don't do the alternate assessment as often.

This Steamboat educator was not alone in wanting clarification of some kind in regards to alternate assessment. An educator from Oakland expressed wanting her support personnel to be more informed on the topic:

I mean, I felt like my AEA didn't know (referring to alternate assessment). I feel like my administration didn't know, So I just went above them for help, because I thought if anyone is going to know the answer they (referring to higher administration) will. If there is a direction they want us to go, I just hope there is training available...I just wanted hands on, I wanted someone talking back to me. I just didn't want a bunch of videos.

The largest theme surrounding all three areas of needed support is the desire for collaboration and time to digest new material with the addition of administrator support. Having the needed supports allows for educators to truly meet the needs of their students and to not feel a sense of defeat when it comes to instructing their students.

The next chapter will provide a discussion of the results, implications, and the need for future research in regards to access to the general education curriculum.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Within this chapter I will provide a discussion for the results of this research study. Throughout this study I learned a great deal in regards to the perspectives, challenges and success that educators face facilitating access to the general education curriculum for students with significant support needs.

How do Special Educators Serving Students with Significant Disabilities Provide Access to the General Education Curriculum?

Throughout the focus group interviews there were two major themes that developed relating to academic and functional curriculums. My participants were providing academic access in compartmentalized ways. Many of my participants did not connect functional and academic, and found that the separation between the two instructional methods caused tension within their instructional delivery. The argument of individuals with significant disabilities needing a functional living based curriculum, and the benefits that individuals with significant disabilities have when provided with meaningful academic access was where the root of these tensions developed. The literature provides reason to believe that an academically based curriculum is more beneficial for students with significant disabilities than a functional curriculum (Ayres et al., 2011; Burdge et al., 2010; Michael & Trezek, 2006; Palmer et al., 2004; Ryndak et al., 2008; Spooner et al., 2006). Ayres et al., (2011) provide a visual for the contradiction that occurs for some educators: “The imperative question to be answered is ‘at what cost do they (students with significant disabilities) learn these standards?’ Will these skills

help the students get a job? Choose where to live? Actively participate in their community?” (p.11). This quote embodies the tangled thoughts that many educators face when thinking about the most beneficial content for their students. Within my interviews, educators demonstrated a disconnect between functional and academic curriculums, believing that instruction needed to exclusively be one or the other.

There seems to be a lack of understanding on where special education classrooms should be and where they actually are. This deep rooted issue grounds many of the challenges that educators face when instructing students with significant support needs. Browder et al. (2004) describes the various models that special education classrooms have gone through over the last 45 years. As educators have moved from one movement and model to another there is baggage brought forward from the previous model. For example, many educators in today’s classrooms are rooted within the functional model of special education. Setting goals and preparing students for life in the community as opposed to having an academic focus (Browder et al., 2004; Thatcher, 2013). Because educators are continuing to stay rooted or bring methodology and instructional practices from previous movements and models, schools have not truly embraced the current state of where special education should be. Today, Thatcher (2013) points out that educators and schools should be facilitating instruction within an access and participation in the general education curriculum mindset; providing social inclusion and academic inclusion regardless of a student’s placement.

This misunderstanding of where special education classrooms are capable of being has led to an even deeper misunderstanding of how assessments and instruction

align to benefit students. Iowa Alternate Assessment, Common Core Standards, and students IEP's have created a skewed understanding of how each of these pieces work together to bring the most equitable and relevant instruction for students. Ryndak et al. (2008) explain that the context for understanding access lies in the interpretation of the individuals providing educational services: "How the mandate for access to the general curriculum is interpreted creates the foundation for the approach used to develop and implement services for students with extensive support needs." (p.200). This quote provides a deeper understanding of why educators may have a disconnect when providing access and evaluating the services that need to be provided . If the administrators, educators and individuals involved in facilitating access are unclear of how the pieces of providing access fit together, the understanding will continue to be blurred. This blurred understanding of how to provide access to students with significant support needs is what creates the eminent challenges that special educators face when facilitating access.

What are the Challenges in Facilitating Access to the General Education Curriculum and the Common Core Standards?

Throughout my time listening to my participants discuss their instructional requirements, a theme developed that expressed their need for support in all areas of their job; I continued to feel that they were crying for help. Not that these educators were not capable of the jobs they were doing, but that they had exhausted all the resources they were given and still did not feel supported in the ways most beneficial to them. All of my district participants expressed needing and wanting additional support in the areas of daily instruction, Iowa Alternate Assessment, the incoming Common Core Essential

Elements, and their student's IEP's. With so many areas of support need, feeling exasperated is natural.

Spooner et al. (2006) describes the barriers and challenges that educators face in facilitating access to the general education curriculum with three reasons. The first being professional development, "Institutions of Higher Education are not adequately preparing or graduating school personnel to work in today's schools" (p.277). When discussing the concept of preparedness with my participants they felt as though they had not been trained adequately to teach general education content in a way that accommodated their students' needs. This daily instructional challenge introduces Spooner et al.'s (2006) second challenge in facilitating access for special educators. Spooner et al. (2006) believes it is the general education curriculum itself that creates a large barrier for educators. Spooner et al. (2006) states: "Some districts have not aligned the K-12 learning standards. Many special education teachers in the field do not have sufficient content background to be active partners in the curriculum due to the categorical emphasis on their teacher-training program" (p.277). Many of my participants stated that they had limited access to the materials that were used within the general education setting, and felt that they were unable to modify materials appropriately when collaboration with their general education team members was limited. This added challenge in facilitating access only magnifies the final challenge Spooner et al. (2006) describes. The third and final reason Spooner et al. (2006), explains is a barrier for educators providing access to students with significant support needs lies within the legal mandates placed before teachers. The least restrictive environment (LRE) has proven to

provide challenges for educators. Spooner et al. (2006) explains “LRE/physical presence is an important step toward access and when students are in separate sites there are major barriers in providing Access to the General Education Curriculum” (p. 278). My participants often described having multiple general education teachers to collaborate with due to their students’ ages and the general education classrooms they participated in. Scheduling with multiple teachers poses a challenge that impacts students and teachers. These three critical barriers Spooner et al. (2006) describes are evident throughout my conversations with my participants, and only add to the daily challenges educators face when facilitating access for their students with significant support needs.

The burden of having “too much to do” and not having the resources to do it adds stress to educator’s lives, and filters down to the support staff and students. When discussing with my participants the impact of the Common Core Essential Elements, many of the educators expressed that the Essential Elements provided a foundational map to know what to teach and steps that can be taken to instruct within a specific instructional area. The Common Core Essential Elements provided a mental shift for many of my participants when thinking of how to successfully provide access to their students with significant support needs, but Spooner et al. (2006) provides additional supports that contribute to the success of providing access to the general education curriculum: “Family, community, and school partnerships; performance standards for students; aligned curricula and established accountability systems with state initiatives, school accountability for all students; and ongoing professional development systems...” (p.278). These keys to success that Spooner et al. (2006) describes are included within

the state of Iowa's initiative with releasing the Common Core Essential Elements in the summer of 2013.

Implications

A variety of implications developed through the results of this research study. Educators across the state of Iowa desire for increased support within the areas of instructional strategies, methods, and an understanding of the research and reasoning behind the instructional techniques that are required by educators to fulfill the Common Core Standards. When educators are provided with the support that directly relates to the needs; students and teachers can do their jobs to a higher quality level.

Professional development for educators serving students with significant support needs is an area that many educators would like to see improvement on. Professional development is used to provide information, training, and planning for educators to develop areas of instruction, management, and philosophical beliefs (Guskey, 2002; Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Educators within my focus groups expressed not understanding the elements of the Common Core Standards and its relevance for students with significant support needs. Increasing the amount of professional development for educators serving students with significant support needs would allow for all educators to provide better services for their students, and to be more confident in the practices they have in place (Guskey, 2002; Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Not only would professional development allow for educators to provide better services and instruction for their students, but they would develop knowledge on the importance of the Common Core Standards, and the relevance and importance that the Common Core Standards have for

their students. Providing professional development specifically for educators serving students with significant support needs would release many of the tensions educators face in regards to not feeling prepared or supported professionally.

Professional development would assist in relieving another challenge for educators that is associated in facilitating access to students with significant support needs; the challenge of having a thorough understanding of the content expected to be taught within the general education curriculum. Education has taken many shapes throughout history, but special education has seen the most dramatic instructional changes (Browder et al., 2004). These instructional shifts have left educators feeling lost and frustrated with a lack of guidance on the best instructional approach for their students (Ryndak et al., 2008). As stated within the review of the literature, Ryndak (2008) summarized the work of many authors and stated that an area that has contributed to the poor progress within the field of special education is “Educators being required to accept too great a paradigm shift related to instructional practice” (p.201). This paradigm shift has left educators feeling frustrated. Added professional development that is purposeful and meaningful for special educators would allow for opportunities for educators to learn about the changes that have taken place within special education by law, and what those changes need to look like within the classroom. When educators are able to develop a concrete understanding of where classrooms once were and why classrooms need to be moving in a new direction, appropriate change is more likely to occur.

When discussing with my participants their frustrations and challenges, a repeated comment included the components related to having too much content to understand and

modify for their students. When I continued to discuss with my participants about what specific professional development targeted towards their needs would provide for them, a feeling of relief was expressed. This sigh of relief demonstrated educators' needs for having more instructional resources provided for them. When educators are provided adequate resources they feel valued, more capable, and supported.

Conclusion

Results of this study illuminated the complexities in meeting the intent of the law. According to the Iowa Administrative Rules of Special Education §281--41.39(3)(c)(2)IAC, Educators must ensure the access of the child to general education curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children (Department of Special Education, 2010). This legal mandate outlines the requirements for educators to not just meet standards for state purposes, but to adapt general education curriculum in a meaningful way for individual student needs. While this is a socially just improvement, this improvement was made while many educators lack the knowledge of educating individuals with such diverse and significant needs. Michael and Trezek (2006) provide a justification for academic access for individuals with disabilities and the importance that access of this nature can provide:

If we want all our students to be able to participate in all aspects of society, why are in some--in fact, why are any students--left out of the general educational vision of literacy we hold as fundamental to human success and progress?" (p.315).

Although this quote discusses the importance of academic access in regards to literacy, the importance of academic access as a whole cannot be missed. If we as educators desire for our students to be fully functioning members of society, removing them from the academic and social settings that provide just that is wrong and inequitable. I believe that if we as educators provide a rigorous and relevant academic and standards based curriculum for all students, we will hit many of the functional elements that are needed for success (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Supplemental materials and content can be used to expand upon a topic, but the root of instruction should come through academics.

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