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Abstract

Ryndak and colleagues provide a strong case that progress toward more and better access to general education is not occurring for students with intellectual disabilities. This response to their paper begins by agreeing with their assessment of our current situation, then it offers one possible reason for this state of affairs: the discourse that occurs when special education teams are planning outcomes and instruction for these students discourages the use of grade-level curriculum and general education classrooms. Part of the problem is that the discourse preserves segregation through a planning terminology that is inconsistent with how all other students in a school are assessed and described. However, it is also argued that a major property of this discourse is a misguided emphasis on "functional skills," and that this emphasis contributes to our lack of progress in achieving access to general education curriculum and settings. A related argument is also made that the educational goal development process that typically occurs within special education discourse derives student outcomes from varied skill sources that, collectively, do not offer the structure and coherency of a real curriculum. This process, justified at least in part by interpretations of individualization, may also be impeding our movement toward greater alignment with general education for these students. A case is made for school districts establishing policies that require the use of grade-level general education curriculum with these students. Potential issues and concerns related to individualization, content standards, curriculum adaptation, and progress monitoring are discussed.

In "Policy and the Impact on Placement, Involvement, and Progress in General Education: Critical Issues That Require Rectification," Ryndak and her colleagues (2014) argue that progress has largely come to a halt for students with intellectual disabilities in their movement toward increasingly less restrictive placements and practices. They assert that despite legal and research imperatives that could have significantly reduced self-contained placements if their implications had been enacted over the past decade, school systems have not changed with respect to how these students are educated either in terms of placement or in terms of curriculum. Their article scrutinizes and examines the policy landscape associated with schools, districts, and governmental entities in relation to least restrictive environment, progress in general curriculum, and assessment. Ryndak et al. conclude that policies governing educational placement and

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practice should be revised or strengthened if we are to achieve the kinds of access to general education that can make a difference for these students.

I will start my discussion with a single caveat: There are individual teachers who practice educational inclusion everyday of their lives, often against incredible odds; and there are some schools and districts within our country that are making integrated education their standard, sometimes even given pressure from higher up to use more pullout and self-contained placements. Having said this, my assessment of our overall progress toward educating students with intellectual disabilities in more inclusive situations yields the same conclusion reached by these authors. I consider the situation to be quite bleak, and I assert, based on my observations in schools, that what students with intellectual disabilities typically receive does not constitute an "appropriate education" in any sense of the word.

Most likely, there are multiple and varied moderating and mediating factors determining what is happening today with these students. Nevertheless, we must first question our own practices: Is what we advocate and implement in our practices today, as evidenced in the planning and instruction of teachers, administrators, and related service providers, contributing to our lack of progress toward inclusion with students who have intellectual disabilities? As a way of responding to this question, I will consider in this article the content and implications of special education *discourse* in schools. More specifically, I will consider aspects of discourse that reflect and potentially influence how special educators make decisions about children's educational services and programs. I will then suggest that a "false logic" permeates this discourse, and this false logic relates to our widespread emphasis on functional skills. Finally, I will recommend that concerns raised by Ryndak et al. can be partially ameliorated by implementing policies in school districts that mandate grade-level general education curriculum, with adaptations when needed, as the only curriculum source to be used by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams developing goals and objectives for students with intellectual disabilities.

Special Education Discourse in Schools

Conversations and interactions across time in which teachers, administrators, parents, and related service providers collaborate, plan, and enact a program of activities (i.e., IEPs, placement, curriculum, and instruction) for students with intellectual disabilities can be described as *purposeful discourse*. In common with other forms of interpersonal discourse, it expresses the following properties: (a) an underlying "common ground" within the exchange that assures a shared understanding of the content, (b) an "accumulation process" in which participants construct knowledge during their interactions in ways that match the function of the exchange, and (c) "unilateral action" in which participants are encouraged to contribute to the exchange only in acceptable or "right" ways (Schaefer, 1992, p. 145). Purposeful discourse also reflects what has been called the *narrative of rhetoric*; that is, the use of language within discourse to "inform and persuade" others toward common ends and consensual understandings (McGuire, 1990, p. 222).

Special education service providers engaged in purposeful discourse may sometimes express the stance that it is all about the child, determining his or her real needs, and configuring a program that is fully individualized, independent of location of services. In my experience, this is often said in IEP meetings when parents express a desire for "more inclusion" for their child. However, the discourse eventually, and inevitably, assumes a character that reflects the true culture and attitudes of the school with regard to disability, and it mirrors the patterns of service provision that have a history of use with all other students with intellectual disabilities. If we were to examine the language of this discourse, expressions that we would hear when adults are referencing any and all individuals within this group of students include the following: (a) categories of disability that define special education eligibility (e.g., autism, severe disabilities), (b) the terminology of IEP planning (IEP team, educational program, annual meeting), (c) identified developmental and functional individualized, educational needs (e.g., communication goals, self-care goals, "speech"), (d) specific program placement recommendations (e.g., autism class, life skills), (e) recommended specialized instruction (Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA, one-to-one instruction, a list of adaptations and modifications), and last (f) general education options that are permissible (lunch, PE, hallways, Science), accompanied by words such as "appropriate" or "meaningful" inclusion. When contrasted with the language used to describe all other students who are *not* in special education (e.g., first grader; reader; in Ms. Smith's class), it can be seen that "separateness" and "differentness" are mirrored in this discourse. Purposeful discourse of this type will, of course, follow students with intellectual disabilities across their educational careers.

I would propose that social exchanges associated with purposeful discourse do not just reflect but actually *promote* and *sustain* the program options that are provided to these students, by maintaining the team's focus on educational options that are familiar and acceptable as defined by this discourse. The implication is that the educational decision-making processes used by schools with these students are neither truly individualized nor do they focus on providing these students with the educational opportunities offered to other students. Instead, these processes operate in a self-preserving manner, narrowing educational opportunities to those in keeping with what has been legitimized by the discourse; that is, those opportunities that are consistent with the already established social and ecological boundaries of the program.

A concept that is operative within the purposeful discourse of special educators in many of these programs is the notion of *functional skills*, typically defined as those self-care and independent living skills that are needed for a student to be successful in the home and in the community, and within adult life in general. When selected as goals and objectives, these skills are drawn from outside the offerings of general education curriculum. It has been argued that appropriately and effectively teaching functional skills requires curriculum and instruction that run contrary to the academic emphasis of the general education classroom (Bouck, 2009).

The problem with the foregoing is that general education is, of itself, a functional educational process, in which students have both broad and particular opportunities for socialization, acculturation, and information acquisition related to their culture and society (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009). Equally important, the maturation and growth associated with these opportunities cannot be realized using the "intense," one-to-one instruction typically favored in special education classrooms. Rather, authentic maturation and growth is an evolving process, becoming more complex and more like the norms of adulthood as a product of a dynamic relationship between long-term exposure to a shared curriculum and the context of instruction represented by elementary, middle, and high school classrooms at grade level (Jackson et al., 2008-2009).

Hence, the logic behind emphasizing functional skills as the proper and best outcomes for students with intellectual disability is a "false logic," embedded within the persuasive appeals of special education discourse to maintain the dominance of this type of instruction and to bring others into agreement with it. It, in fact, projects a false picture of both the outcomes of the general education academic orientation and the benefits of the special education functional skills orientation.

The foregoing presents a troubling concern for those of us who are special educators: We have asserted to parents for many decades now a rationale that something better and more appropriate is achieved for students with intellectual disabilities by focusing on a particular and delimiting definition of "functional skills," and our actions are contributing to the large-scale denial for these students of the normalizing and functional experiences provided in general education. To make matters worse, there is no evidence that a better education is realized for these students when the emphasis is on isolated functional skills as opposed to what could be realized using general curriculum within K-12 classrooms (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013).

Where Do We Go From Here?

In my work with special education teachers who educate students who have intellectual disabilities, I have noted an odd dilemma that they experience when writing IEP goals. Unlike, say, a first-grade or high school teacher, special education teachers must come up with goals and objectives for students not from a unified curriculum but rather from multiple curriculum and non-curriculum sources. These may include specialized curriculum for basic skills (e.g., reading); special education "expanded" state standards that sometimes bear little resemblance to grade-level curriculum; their own experiences as teachers; parents' wishes for their children; social, behavioral, and academic initiatives in their schools; observed gaps in adaptive skills; developmental assessments from other professionals (e.g., occupational therapy); and even, simply, what they like teaching as part of their program.

The foregoing can be viewed positively as what makes "individualization" possible, because it opens up a wide range of outcome possibilities to choose from. However, the other side of the coin is that it involves picking and choosing from something that approaches the character of an ill-defined list and not from a skill set that has a defined scope and sequence. The question that can be raised here is whether individualization, as accomplished by this process, is any better of a way to define outcomes than using the unified school curriculum, the latter at least bearing an apparent relationship with the educational standards of the area. When one considers how the

purposeful discourse of the special education team plays out when choosing educational outcomes, the prediction would be that individualization is no better served, because goals and objectives would tend to regress toward the mean of the program. Moreover, the discourse processes of the service providers would tend to discourage consideration of goals related to age-level general education curriculum, because these require language and concepts that are at odds with the language and conceptual boundaries of the discourse.

The issue of establishing and setting expectations based on a single curriculum versus multiple curriculum and non-curriculum sources can be framed as a policy issue. In my opinion, districts need to move quickly toward viewing grade-level general curriculum as *the* curriculum source for all students, and districts should begin mandating that other instructional outcomes (e.g., using a communication device, following an activity schedule, independent mobility) be framed not as IEP goals but instead as supports and adaptations that assist students in accessing general education curriculum. When general education curriculum is the established curriculum for all students, the fundamental question that must be asked by IEP teams would change in ways that could enhance inclusive placements: "How can we better teach and test general education curriculum knowledge," instead of, "How do we make a determination whether grade-level general education curriculum is appropriate or not."

A concern that can be raised with the foregoing is that such a policy elevates the influence of a single curriculum and lowers that of IEP teams in the task of choosing learning expectations for students. However, one should ask, has giving this kind of authority and power to IEP teams benefitted students with intellectual disabilities in today's climate of standards-based testing? I think not. If anything, the team's power to override grade-level curriculum has likely contributed to the decline of inclusion in schools that is described by Ryndak et al. (2014). Of course, a related concern is whether the courts, given what is expected of IEP teams by the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA), would overturn a single curriculum policy if legally challenged. I can only respond to this by noting that IDEA also favors general education curriculum and classes, and that a unified curriculum does not prevent individualization or interdisciplinary teaming. It only gives direction to both.

A final concern about district policy mandating the use of K-12 curriculum for all children is, "How does this impact standards-based assessment results, especially alternate assessment results?" I note first that if alternate assessments are really assessing the same standards as the regular tests, then results could improve for these students because of the increased focus on general education curriculum and because there could be a greater reliance on qualified instruction from general education teachers. At the same time, issues in the alignment between instruction and alternate testing might need to be further examined. This concern, of course, exists for all children who participate in standards-based testing; that is, concern for the alignment between what is taught and what is tested. However, in my view, this research should not simply examine whether what is taught aligns with what is tested. Rather, it should examine instead how the results of two assessments, standards-based/alternate testing and adapted (modified or accommodated) measurement of what is being taught, align with each other, and a third source of information. This third source could include post-school success indicators (McDonnell, Hunt, Jackson, & Ryndak, 2013) and self-determination measures (Hughes, Cosgriff, Agran, & Washington, 2013).

Conclusion

Ryndak and her colleagues have raised valid concerns about backsliding with respect to less restrictive placements, access to general curriculum, and alternate assessment testing. There is obviously no simple solution, but one approach is for those of us in special education to reflect more thoughtfully about our discourse processes when engaged in educational planning with these students, and consider whether what we have advocated in the past regarding functional skills actually benefits students with intellectual disabilities. I have argued that our advocacy on this account is not only part of the problem but is actually a questionable practice in and of itself. I note in closing that evidence-based practice research showing that functional skills can be effectively taught (Alwell & Cobb, 2009) does not validate these skills as outcomes for students in the K-12 period of life; it only shows that these students can learn them.

Ryndak and her colleagues argue that district and state policies need to be more assertive in assuring access to general curriculum. I suggest that one way we might achieve this, and realize more inclusive placements as

well, is through encouraging districts to implement policies that mandate general education grade-level curriculum as *the* curriculum to be used with all students. I emphasize that "grade-level" does not mean that one cannot use the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) to creatively adapt content and response expectations to achieve curriculum access, or to provide alternative means to measure progress. However, it does mean avoiding derivatives of standards ("expanded standards") that alter both what is taught and what is expected to the point where neither resemble the content standards presumably represented.

To accomplish the foregoing, it is evident that we in special education must relinquish a belief structure and a set of practices that are cherished by many of us, the delineation of "functional skills" as primary IEP goals and objectives for students with intellectual disabilities during the K-12 period. We must then generate a very different special education discourse that will be heard throughout our schools, one that communicates grade-level general education curriculum as the basis for educating these and all students. In my view, this would represent an important, positive step toward encouraging districts to move away from the routine segregation of these children and youth for educational purposes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biography

Lewis Jackson is a professor of special education at the University of Northern Colorado. He coordinates the Master degree program for preparing special education teachers to work with a wide range of students in today's schools. Over his forty years in special education, he has worked in both self-contained and "inclusive" settings, with the result being that he has become a strong proponent for inclusive educational practices. He consults, publishes, and provides advocacy supports at the state, national, and international level.