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Improving Instruction for Students with Learning Needs Pages 34-37

Extending Inclusive Opportunities

How can students with disabilities meaningfully participate in class if they work many levels below classroom peers?

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Ms. Santos,¹ a 5th grade teacher, had successfully included students with learning disabilities or physical limitations in her classroom for years. Even in years when none of her students had been identified as having disabilities, her students' abilities and needs had varied, sometimes substantially. She regularly taught students whose native languages were not English and students who displayed challenging behaviors or fragile emotional health. The range of her students' reading abilities typically spanned several years.

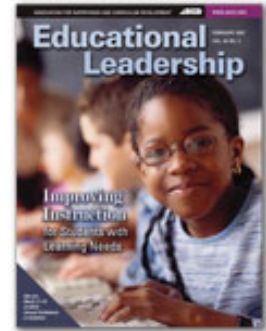
Ms. Santos had confidently made *instructional* accommodations for all her students, for example, by modifying materials and giving individualized cues—but she had rarely needed to modify her curriculum. Students with and without disabilities in her class worked on the same topics, although sometimes at differing levels and paces. But when a boy who worked far below 5th grade level was assigned to her class, Ms. Santos faced a question that looms large for teachers trying to make inclusion work: How can we achieve true curricular inclusion for students who function substantially below grade level?

Facing a New Challenge

Last school year, Ms. Santos welcomed Chris into her 5th grade class. A boy new to the school, Chris had a good sense of humor, liked many kinds of music, and had a history of making friends and liking school. Unfortunately, in the eyes of most people, these qualities were overshadowed by the severity of his intellectual, behavioral, sensory, and physical disabilities. Because Chris came to her class functioning at a kindergarten or prekindergarten level in all academic areas, Ms. Santos had trouble conceiving of how he could learn well in a 5th grade class, and she worried about what Chris's parents and her colleagues would expect. By suggesting how a teacher might handle this kind of situation, I hope to assist teachers and other professionals who are attempting to successfully include students with significant disabilities within mainstream classrooms.

Extending Student Participation

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 presumes that the first



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placement option a school system must consider for each student with a disability, regardless of disability category or severity, is the regular classroom. Students with disabilities are entitled to supplemental supports that enable them to meaningfully pursue individually determined learning outcomes—including those from the general education curriculum. The question to be asked is not whether a student is able to pursue the same learning outcomes as his or her age-level peers, but whether that student's needs can be appropriately addressed in the general education setting.

The participation of students with disabilities within general education classes can be broadly characterized along two dimensions: each student's *program* (such as the goals of the student's individualized education program) and each student's *supports*. Supports are anything that the school provides to help the student pursue education goals—for example materials, adaptations, or a classroom aide (Giangreco, 2006).

Within a school day, or even within a single activity, an individual student will sometimes require modifications to the general education program and at other times be able to work within the standard program. Likewise, the number of supports teachers will need to provide for students will fluctuate greatly. In some scenarios, a student with a disability can do the same academic work his or her classmates are doing. These kinds of opportunities help teachers and students interact in a natural way, show classmates that students with learning needs don't always need special help, and allow students to avoid unnecessary supports.

Setting the Stage for Curricular Modifications

Chris was fortunate that he was assigned a teacher who already had good practices in place for including students with IEPs. Ms. Santos created opportunities for many types of instructional interactions through a busy classroom schedule of inquiry-based activities. Her ability to teach students with disabilities grew out of her belief that the core of teaching and learning was the same, regardless of whether a student had a disability label.

Although Ms. Santos was not sure how to meet the challenge of including Chris in her classroom, she asked important questions to clarify her own role as a team member, understand the curricular expectations for Chris, and get a vision for how to teach a class with a wider mix of abilities than she had encountered before. As part of that vision, she drew on the power of relationships, both in drawing Chris into her plans for students and in building a collaborative team of special educators, parents, and others. In her classroom community, she expected students to help one another learn and be responsible for helping the classroom run smoothly. As much as possible, she also planned for Chris to have an active voice in telling his teachers which supports helped him and which did not.

For Chris to be a viable social member of the classroom, he would have to participate in the academic work, not just be physically present or socially accepted. Ms. Santos knew how frustrating and embarrassing it can be for students when curriculum content is over their heads, and she also knew the hazards of underestimating students. She sought ways to adjust the curriculum to an appropriate level of difficulty for Chris, while leaving opportunities for him to surprise her with his capabilities.

When Curriculum Modifications Are Essential

In many inclusion scenarios, such as the one Ms. Santos faced, modifications to the general education program will be essential. Sometimes the student will need individualized content but will not require specialized supports to work with that content. For example, the teacher might assign a student five new vocabulary words instead of 10, or assign that learner single-digit computation instead of decimals.

In some situations, the classroom teacher will need to both modify the general education program and provide individualized supports. Although students with more severe disabilities may often need both program and support accommodation to succeed in a mainstream class, teachers may not need to alter both the curriculum and the types of support available for all classroom work a student with a disability undertakes. Even a student with significant disabilities, like Chris, rarely needs both an individualized education program and individualized supports all the time.

Multilevel Curriculum and Curriculum Overlapping

Multilevel curriculum and *curriculum overlapping* are two approaches to adapting curriculum that facilitate participation of students with significant disabilities. The box below summarizes the similarities and differences between these two approaches. In the multilevel curriculum approach, students with disabilities and their peers participate in a shared activity. Each student has individually appropriate learning outcomes that are within the same curriculum area but that may be at grade level or below (or above) grade level (Campbell, Campbell, Collicott, Perner, & Stone, 1988; Peterson & Hittie, 2003). Students of different ability levels may be working on the same or different subject matter within the same academic area. In curriculum overlapping, students with disabilities and nondisabled peers participate together in an activity, but they pursue learning outcomes from different curriculum areas, including such broadly defined curriculum areas as social skills.

Multilevel Curriculum in Action

Let's go back to Ms. Santos's challenge of including Chris as an academic member of her class and see how she used multilevel curriculum. In class work for a social studies unit, Chris and his classmates studied the Revolutionary War. But Ms. Santos adapted Chris's level of learning outcomes to suit him: His goals were to become familiar with historical people, places, and events, whereas his classmates' goals were to demonstrate knowledge of political and economic factors that led to the war.

To reinforce students' learning, Ms. Santos created a Revolutionary War board game that drew on both the class's grade-appropriate learning goals and Chris's lower-level goals to advance in the game. The game board had colored spaces, and each color a student landed on corresponded to a stack of question cards related to the desired content, with blue cards for historical people, green cards for historical places, and so on. Ms. Santos and a special educator had set aside specially prepared cards for Chris with questions matched to his learning outcomes. The rest of the class drew cards matched to their goals.

Another player read aloud for Chris each question and the multiple-choice answers, which were given both verbally and with images. For example, the question, "What American Revolutionary War hero became the first president of the United States?" might be followed by the labeled images of George Washington and two other famous people. When Chris was learning new content, Ms. Santos made the distracter choices substantially different and included at least one absurd choice (such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and LeBron James). As Chris became more proficient, she used distracter choices that were more difficult to spot. When Chris answered a question correctly, he rolled dice and moved forward. Although this activity focused on social studies, Chris also learned the social skill of taking turns and such math skills as counting.

Curriculum Overlapping in Action

Curriculum overlapping is a vital strategy for classrooms in which there are substantial differences between the learning outcomes most of the students are pursuing and the outcomes a student with a disability is pursuing.

For example, in a human biology unit, a group of four students might assemble a model of the human cardio-vascular system. The primary goal of three students is to learn anatomical structures and their functions. The fourth student, who has significant disabilities, shares the activity, but has learning goals within the curriculum area of communications and social skills, such as learning to follow directions, taking turns, or making requests using a communication device.

One way to start planning for curriculum overlapping with a student who has significant disabilities is to make a simple matrix with the student's individually determined learning outcomes down the side and a list of regularly occurring classes or activities across the top. Team members can then identify where they should focus additional energy to ensure meaningful participation.

Ms. Santos and her team did this. They established cross-lesson routines through which Chris's individual learning outcomes could be embedded within many class activities. For example, Chris had a series of learning objectives involving communication and social skills, including matching to a sample; discriminating between different symbols and photos; following one- and two-step instructions; responding to questions; and describing events, objects, or emotions. Ms. Santos routinely embedded these skills in activities and lessons Chris participated in across different content areas as a form of curriculum overlapping.

While pursuing these learning outcomes, Chris might also work with the actual curricular content. For example, in a geography activity Chris might distinguish between maps of European countries, first discriminating between highly different pairs (a map of Italy paired with an image that is not a map); followed by slightly more similar pairs (a map of Greece and a map of China); followed by even more similar pairs (maps of France and Germany).

When first using multilevel curriculum and curriculum overlapping, teams often feel that they don't have enough for their student with a significant disability to do within the typical classroom activities. But as they persist in collaborative planning, seek input directly from the

student, and involve classmates in problem solving, they find new opportunities for the student's meaningful participation and learning.

Although multilevel curriculum and curriculum overlapping are primarily ways to include students with disabilities, they also enable more meaningful participation for students functioning above grade level. Applying multilevel curriculum allows teachers to stretch their curriculum away from a "middle zone" in which all students share the same curricular content, level, and amount of work. The practices many people associate with differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) occur within the boundaries of this middle zone. Multilevel curriculum stretches the concept of differentiated instruction. With curriculum overlapping, the boundaries of curriculum planning expand even further to create effective learning situations for students working both far above and far below their peers.

In the interest of access to the general education curriculum, teachers and teams working with students with disabilities should first consider whether the student can pursue the same learning outcomes as classmates or whether multilevel curriculum and instruction will provide enough accommodation before using curriculum overlapping.

Making It Happen

Implementing either multilevel curriculum and instruction or curriculum overlapping requires time, collaboration, and creativity. But the reward is the authentic inclusion of students who function substantially below grade level. Approaching inclusive education this way contributes to a positive classroom culture, acknowledges differences, promotes acceptance, and provides opportunities for real-life problem solving.

Some claim that inclusion of students with certain disabilities is impossible because in many schools the curriculum is one-size-fits-all and differentiation is minimal or nonexistent. Although it is difficult to include a student with significant disabilities in such classes, this begs the question of whether one-size-fits-all classes are what we want for anyone. Instructional practices such as cooperative learning and differentiated instruction are often beneficial for general education students, too.

Students with disabilities bring educators a challenge to make our teaching practices more inclusive. Meeting the challenge invariably improves the way we teach the broader range of students who don't have disabilities.

Components of Multilevel Curriculum and Curriculum Overlapping

Shared Components	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons include a diverse group of same-age learners with different ability levels (such as advanced students and students with disabilities). • Students share an activity or experience. • Each learner has individual learning outcomes at an appropriate level of difficulty. 	
Distinct Components	
<i>Multilevel Curriculum</i>	<i>Curriculum Overlapping</i>
<p>All learning outcomes are within the same curriculum area. Students are responsible for more or fewer outcomes at different levels of complexity.</p>	<p>Learning outcomes within a shared activity come from two or more curriculum areas, for example, from both science and social skills. Students are responsible for more or fewer outcomes at different levels of complexity.</p>

Endnote

¹ Ms. Santos is a composite of teachers I have observed who work with students with severe disabilities.

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