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Expanding Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disability

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These six actions can move students from limited access to the supported inclusion they deserve.

Picture a sea of young adult students in a university library working independently or in small groups around tables and at rows of computers. When I recently walked through such a vibrant workspace, I spotted a longtime family friend, Andrew. I've known him since he was three years old. Now here he was, a university student! So I stopped to visit. After introducing me to his study partner, he told me about a history course he was taking, mentioned how much he was enjoying it, and showed me a website they were exploring for a class assignment.

You might be wondering why I'm sharing such a seemingly unremarkable interaction. It's because in another way it was quite remarkable. What I didn't mention is that Andrew has Down syndrome. He is enrolled in the university as a nonmatriculated student through Think College Vermont, a program associated with the national [Think College](#) initiative, which uses a peer-mentoring model to facilitate inclusive postsecondary educational, social, and vocational opportunities for young adults with intellectual disability.

The Person-Environment Fit

Andrew's inclusion in university life epitomizes shifts in attitudes, opportunities, and practices that have important implications for the K–12 education of students with intellectual disability. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (n.d.) defines intellectual disability as "characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills." The association has adopted a multidimensional classification system based on the patterns and intensity of support an individual needs. By focusing on the supports needed—the person-environment fit—rather than just the level of the individual's disability, this system encourages inclusive participation in home, school, work, recreational, and community settings.

Placement in special classes has unnecessarily kept too many students with intellectual disability from accessing the benefits of regular classes: (1) highly qualified teachers with curriculum content expertise and high expectations; (2) academic and social modeling from peers without disabilities; (3) opportunities to develop a wider range of meaningful relationships; and (4) access to valued and varied experiences. Nationally, only 16.5 percent of students with intellectual disability have their primary educational placement in regular classes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Even in situations where students with intellectual disability have been included in typical classrooms in the early grades, their degree of inclusion trends downward over time as they receive more instruction from special educators and paraprofessionals. It raises equity concerns when students receive a substantial portion of their primary instruction from paraprofessionals, who are often well-intentioned and hardworking, but too often underprepared, inadequately trained, and minimally supervised (Giangreco, 2013).

Research and experience tell us a great deal about how to successfully educate students with the full range of intellectual disability, but unfortunately this knowledge remains underutilized and inconsistently applied. Students with intellectual disability who have virtually identical profiles but live in different locales can find themselves in entirely different educational placements, ranging from special education schools and classes to regular classes with support.

The good news is that some people with Down syndrome, Williams syndrome, and other conditions associated with intellectual disability are today having valued life experiences that were considered implausible only a few decades ago—more advanced academic outcomes, wide-ranging vocational options, postsecondary education, home ownership, community and civic engagement, inclusive recreation, and marriage. Evidence and logic suggests that the potential of students with intellectual disability to prosper in inclusive classrooms might have more to do with educators' attitudes and practices than it has to do with the students' learning characteristics.

Italy provides a potent example of what we can learn from other countries about how to help more students with intellectual disability thrive in society (Giangreco & Doyle, 2015). Researchers have reported that students in Italy with genetically based intellectual disability function at higher levels than students with the same genetic conditions in some other countries. The researchers suggest this success may be attributable to Italy's longstanding tradition of regular class placement of students with intellectual disability (Vianello & LanFranchi, 2009).

What Works

Successfully educating these students requires simultaneous access to inclusive environments, a meaningful curriculum, purposeful instruction, and necessary supports (Giangreco, Dymond, & Shogren, 2016). Here are six ways educators can support these pillars of access.

1. See the Person, Not Just the Disability

The lens through which we see an individual with intellectual disability has an impact on everything that follows. We've been socialized to equate intellectual disability with deficit—to consider it the defining characteristic of a person. Too often the response is segregation, protectionism, and pity. In contrast, opportunities and supports are extended when we think of intellectual disability as another dimension of individual difference—one of the constellation of characteristics that are part of the human condition.

The way we think about individuals with intellectual disability may differ from how they think about themselves. It would not be surprising for someone to describe Andrew as a person with Down syndrome. Yet if you talk to him, you'd find that he thinks of himself as a college student, a Red Sox and Patriots fan, a specialty-car-show enthusiast, the co-owner of a dog treats business, a music lover, a proud uncle, and more. He is a multifaceted person, with relationships, interests, and immense curiosity about the world. We should not artificially impose limits on what he experiences or is capable of learning based on connotations associated with a disability label.

2. Advocate for Full Access

Students with intellectual disability should have access to the full range of environments and experiences available to other students of the same age. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) supports access by requiring that the first placement option considered each year should be the age-appropriate regular classroom in the school the student would attend if not disabled.

So why are so few students with intellectual disability in regular classrooms as their primary placement? This may be attributable to widespread misunderstanding or misapplication of the IDEA's *least restrictive environment* provision. Too often, educational teams ask the wrong question: "Can the student with intellectual disability do the same work, or close to the same work, as their age peers?" If the answer is no, the team assumes that the student does not belong in the regular classroom. However, federal guidance explains that students with disabilities need not function at or near the grade level of their peers without disabilities for the regular classroom to be considered the least restrictive environment (Rebhorn & Smith, 2008).

More constructively, we might ask, "What changes (curricular, instructional, supports, service delivery, and so on) could we make to meet the student's individual needs without abrogating his or her right to be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with peers who do not have disabilities?" This question challenges us as educators to reflect on our practice and aspire to more inclusively meet the needs of all students. We each can play a role by advocating for students with intellectual disability to gain more supported access to inclusive environments.

3. Individualize Learning Outcomes

We can include students with intellectual disability in shared activities with their classmates through strategies like *multilevel curriculum* and *curriculum overlapping* (Giangreco, Dymond, & Shogren, 2016). These strategies share three common elements: (1) a heterogeneous group that includes a naturally proportional number of students with disabilities; (2) interdependent involvement in a shared activity (such as a game, lab experiment, scavenger hunt, or web quest); and (3) individually appropriate learning outcomes for each student. In a multilevel curriculum, all group members' learning outcomes come from the same curriculum area (for example, social studies, math, or science), whereas in curriculum overlapping, learning outcomes may come from different curriculum areas. Here are some examples of how these two approaches can work.

In one variation of multilevel curriculum (*multilevel curriculum-same content*), all students work within the same curriculum area on the same subject matter. For example, four students are playing a teacher-created board game about the Lewis and Clark expedition. The teacher has supplied each student with an individualized stack of game cards. When students correctly answer a question from their stack, they're allowed to roll the dice and move along the board, which is set up as a map of the explorers' route. Although all the game cards relate to the same social studies topic, the cards for the student with intellectual disability pose appropriately leveled questions, whereas the cards for the typically performing students pose more advanced questions.

If the functioning gap between a student with intellectual disability and his or her peers is wider, the teacher might use *multilevel curriculum-different content*. In this approach, all group members work within the same curriculum area, but on different subject matter.

For example, a group of 5th graders is engaged in a math activity. Their teacher has hidden 20 cardboard shapes (circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles) of various sizes in a designated area. Most of the students are given rulers, calculators, and data sheets, and their assignment is to take measurements needed to calculate the area and record the equation they used as they find each hidden shape. For the student with intellectual disability (who is functioning at a pre-K level in math), the goal is to identify the shapes. As more shapes are found, the student's peers support him by arraying several shapes together and prompting him to point to the shape they name.

A third approach, *curriculum overlapping*, provides a way to include students with the most intensive needs. In this approach, students pursue targeted learning objectives from different curriculum areas within a shared activity. For example, in a high school science lab, small groups of students are conducting chemistry experiments. Most of the students have science learning objectives—to identify elements, mix solutions, observe, and report reactions. A student with intellectual disability, who has intensive support needs and emerging language, participates with classmates in the experiments while focused on learning outcomes from curriculum areas other than science, such as communication and socialization. The lab experiment provides this student with multiple opportunities to practice skills like taking turns, following one-step instructions, extending vocabulary, making choices, and asking for assistance.

Multilevel curriculum and curriculum overlapping provide practical ways to include students with intellectual disability when the functioning level gap with peers is wide.

4. Use Age-Appropriate Approaches and Partial Participation

Too often, individuals with intellectual disability are subjected to environments, social expectations, verbal interactions, clothing and accessories, educational materials, books, movies, toys, games, and activities associated with much younger individuals. Age-inappropriateness perpetuates antiquated and limiting expectations by encouraging others to perceive those with intellectual disability as permanently stuck in stages of childhood much younger than their chronological age. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which individuals with intellectual disability act inappropriately young. A simple and effective step each of us can take is to treat individuals with intellectual disability respectfully by interacting with them in ways commensurate with their chronological age. Same-age peers without disabilities can be a helpful source for what is age-appropriate.

Another threat to supported inclusion is all-or-nothing thinking and corresponding actions—the belief that if a person cannot do all of something, then he or she should not be allowed to participate in any of it. Such a mentality would restrict anyone's life, yet it happens all too often to individuals with intellectual disability. The antidote is simple: the principle of *partial participation* (Ferguson & Baumgart, 1991), which asserts that individuals should have supported access to participate in whatever parts of an activity or experience they can.

Applying partial participation means we can almost always find ways for students to participate meaningfully. This may be accomplished by adjusting time parameters, rules, roles, or the amount and/or quality of expected participation. For example, in a high school culinary class, a student with intellectual disability who does not currently have the literacy and math skills to independently read and follow a written recipe can still collaborate

with a classmate and contribute in many ways (gathering ingredients and materials using picture cue cards, pouring, stirring, operating a mixer, kneading, and so on).

Partial participation need not be considered exclusively a disability-related practice. In your own life you can probably recall examples across the age span. We can always look to families for inspiration and examples because the lives of families in which one member has intellectual disability are filled with examples of partial participation.

5. Encourage Teacher Engagement

Possibly the single most important factor in the success of inclusion for any student with a disability is the extent of teacher engagement with the learner. Being engaged is the opposite of relinquishing primary responsibility to special education personnel. It extends beyond merely being a welcoming host. Teachers demonstrate their engagement with their students with intellectual disability in many ways: by knowing their performance levels and targeted learning outcomes; by working directly with them individually and in various groupings; by arranging the physical environment to facilitate their participation; by retaining a collaborative role in instructional planning and decision making with special education personnel; and by codirecting the work of paraprofessionals. Engagement also means facilitating peer interactions and keeping informed about effective practices.

As a primary adult role model, the classroom teacher can demonstrate to his or her students how to respond constructively to the challenges of including individuals who have differences on any number of dimensions. The teacher's engagement sends a potent message to students about the value of all individuals in a community.

Teachers are not expected to go it alone, of course. Special educators, related-services personnel, and the family are all involved in supporting the classroom teacher's efforts. Administrators can offer additional support by facilitating opportunities for collaboration, ensuring conducive working conditions, providing access to professional development, and establishing inclusive service delivery models (Giangreco & Suter, 2015).

6. Use Natural Supports First

Although the supports provided by the special education system can be essential, natural supports can be equally important. Natural supports are simply those typically available to all students—for example, other people, including classroom teachers, classmates, school nurses, school counselors, librarians, and others. Natural supports can also include materials and technology. For example, consider whether a student can benefit from typically available options such as the kinds of computers or tablets other students are using—with their built-in accessibility features like text-to-voice options and word prediction—before immediately considering disability-specific materials. Although highly specialized technology may be necessary in some cases, its overuse can be unnecessarily stigmatizing.

A simple starting point is to ask yourself what support would be offered if the student didn't have a disability. For example, if a student *without* intellectual disability needed extra support in reading, it might come from a literacy specialist. Similarly, this should be an initial consideration for a student *with* intellectual disability.

An often overlooked natural support is the student with intellectual disability himself or herself. The student can often provide insightful perspectives about his or her own needs while learning self-determination skills. For example, some students with intellectual disability who are placed in regular classes are assigned a one-to-one paraprofessional. Although this support is offered with the best of intentions, evidence suggests that it can have inadvertent detrimental effects on students and can even be unwanted by the students themselves, especially as they progress to middle and high school (Giangreco, et al., 2005). Rather than guessing where and under what circumstances students need or want support, we can simply ask them. This encourages their self-determination and provides opportunities for educators to listen to the students' perspectives.

A Path to Fuller Lives

The ideas and practices offered in this article, implemented collectively, can improve educational and life outcomes for students with and without disabilities. These ideas are within the power of all educators to implement.

Much work remains to be done. The kinds of positive life outcomes Andrew is currently experiencing are only happening for a relatively small subset of individuals with intellectual disability. For too many of these students, their lives get smaller once their compulsory schooling ends.

This need not be the case. Inclusive practices can serve as a launching pad to fuller lives. Imagine a future in which well-supported inclusive opportunities are ubiquitous for all students with intellectual disability, pre-K through high school and beyond. That will be remarkable!

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