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Invited Commentary

Beyond Access: Ensuring Progress in the General Education Curriculum for Students With Severe Disabilities

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In September and November of 2000, I served on an "Expert Strategy Panel" on "Students with Disabilities' Access to, Participation in, and Progress in the General Education Curriculum" convened by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), as part of that agency's comprehensive planning process. Among the other members of this panel was Thomas Gilhool, staff attorney at the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia, a former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and, as many *RPSD* readers will know (and should know if they do not), lead attorney in PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1972, a landmark case that literally set the precedence for the doctrine of FAPE as a right for students with disabilities, the settlement from which provided much of the structure for Public Law 94-142 (U.S. Senate, 1975).

For 2 years prior to the OSEP meeting, my colleagues and I had been engaged in research and model development activities exploring how best to promote "access to the general curriculum" for students with severe disabilities. [I would note, parenthetically, that the 1997 amendments used the term "general curriculum," while the 2004 amendments changed that to "general education curriculum." Although I use the more current term, I prefer the earlier term. The "general curriculum" refers, in my mind, to a curriculum with content everyone should know. The "general education curriculum" strikes me as inviting a return to our dual system of general education and special education and a return to the notion of a "special education curriculum" that is, in some way, different from the "general education curriculum."] The "access to the general curriculum" mandates in the 1997 reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were still a relatively new concept at the time of the OSEP panel meetings and, at least for students with severe disabilities, a relatively ignored component of the new law. The Final Regulations for IDEA (1997) had only been out since March 12, 1999, and the field was just then sorting through what was meant by the "general curriculum" [somewhat pithily defined in the regulations, I thought at the time, *simply as the same curriculum as every other student*, although I have since come to appreciate the simple elegance and inclusiveness of that definition] and by "access" to that curriculum, as well as considering how to promote such access. It was, as Carter and Kennedy noted in this issue, a fundamental shift in educational expectations for students with disabilities.

My concern then was that, by and large, there seemed to be only limited recognition that these regulations and requirements actually applied to *all* students, *including* students with severe disabilities. A survey we were conducting about the time the OSEP panel met (eventually published as Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002) was suggesting that teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities were, shall we say, skeptical about the "access" requirements as they applied to the students they taught. Certainly, as Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, and Baker (2006) note, the standards that were established against which to hold students accountable in school reform efforts did not take into consideration students with severe disabilities. Further, those of us looking at ways to achieve greater access were coming to the uncomfortable realization that the research foundation upon which to build models to promote access to the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities—at least when "general curriculum" meant core content—was rather embarrassingly lacking. That Browder et al. located only 10 studies focused on teaching science to students with severe disabilities confirms, I think, their observation that the "evidence is constrained by the field's focus on functional skills" (Browder et al., 2006). I was, quite honestly, just as surprised when we began our work in this area by how

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little research existed looking at curriculum adaptations, like advance or graphic organizers, existed with students with more severe disabilities.

And yet, there were some promising findings. As Browder et al. (2006) noted, there was abundant evidence in the literature that students with severe disabilities can learn key components of literacy and numeracy. Further, there was the heady promise of Universal Design for Learning as an overarching principle to govern models to promote such access to the general education curriculum, and researchers at CAST (Rose & Meyer, 2002, 2006) had begun to pioneer the use of technology to ensure such access for all students. The discussion in the education of students with severe disabilities had shifted from "where" a student should be educated to "what" a student should be taught. In fact, my colleagues, Ann and Rud Turnbull, and I (2007) characterized the focus on "access to the general education curriculum" as third generation inclusive practices. The first generation of inclusion focused on the basics of inclusive practices and efforts during this period were instrumental in changing prevailing educational settings for students with disabilities from, primarily, separate, self-contained settings to inclusion in the regular education classroom. These basics included the fact that students should receive their education in the school they would attend if they did not have a disability, that educational placements be age and grade appropriate, and that special education supports should exist within the general education classroom. First generation inclusion was additive in nature. That is, resources and students were "added" to the general education classroom. The second generation of inclusive practices was more generative in nature, in that instead of focusing on moving students from separate settings to regular classroom settings, the second-generation practices focused on improving practice in the general education classroom. Research and practice during this phase emphasized aspects of instructional practices that promoted inclusion, such as collaborative teaming and team teaching between special and general educators, differentiated instruction, developing family/school/community partnerships, and so forth.

The third generation of inclusive practices builds on the first two generations of practices. The most salient characteristic of this third generation of inclusive practices is that the focal point for our effort switch from advocacy and supports with regard primarily to "where" a student receives his or her educational program to a focus on "what" the student is taught. Because, at least in the opinion of some of us, efforts to ensure that students with severe disabilities are included in the general education classroom seemed to have stalled or, at least, simply are progressing too slowly, the opportunity to address the issue of "where" by focusing on "what" came as a welcome change. In fact, our own research was beginning to show (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003), and our subsequent research confirmed (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, in press; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, in press) that students with severe disabilities had "access" to the general education curriculum when they were in the general education classroom and not in self-contained settings.

This same research has also shown quite clearly, however, that although students with severe disabilities have "access" to the general education curriculum in the general education classroom, they are not being provided the accommodations and curriculum modifications that would enable them to benefit from that access. That brings me back to my experience on the OSEP planning panel. Ten years after the "access" mandates were introduced in IDEA (1997), I am struck by the prescience of Tom Gilhool, who at the first OSEP meeting in September of 2000, lambasted the OSEP leadership for labeling the requirements within IDEA as the "access to the general curriculum" mandates. Nowhere in the law itself, Gilhool rightly pointed out, was the term "access to the general curriculum" ever used. Instead, what the 1997 amendments to IDEA required, and what the 2004 amendments still require, is that students with disabilities be provided supplementary aids and services and special education and related services that promote "involvement with and *progress* in" the general education curriculum.

Gilhool argued then, and I now believe that he was absolutely right, that the intent of the law was watered down by a focus simply on access. Access does not ensure progress, any more than presence in the general classroom ensures inclusion, as we have come to know all to well. Focusing on access instead of progress lowers the expectations for our efforts. Access to the content contained in the general education curriculum is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite to student progress. We have, I would argue, to some degree lived up to the lowered expectations set by the colloquial "access" phrase. The field, me included, has focused mainly on "access" and not as much on progress. Such a focus, I would argue in our/my defense, certainly was (and remains) a necessary step in the process of configuring the third generation of inclusive practices. If we do not, however, now begin to show that our practices lead to progress, we have not fulfilled the intent of the law nor have we adequately educated students with severe disabilities.

So, where are we one decade post-IDEA (1997) with regard to ensuring that students with severe disabilities are involved with and *progress* in the general education curriculum? In some ways, we have made significant progress. The articles in this special topic illustrate this progress. First, there are now several overarching models and organizing frameworks proposing how to promote student "access" to the general education curriculum (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001; Janney &

Snell, 2004; Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, 2002). Further, we do know some things about how to teach core content to this population. This semester I taught the introductory methods course in severe disabilities at our university and used as one of my core texts a book edited by authors of papers in this issue, titled *Teaching Language Arts, Math, & Science to Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (Browder & Spooner, 2006). The text replaced a handful of slides I had previously included in my lectures in the course covering "functional math" and "functional science." There is, after all, only so much one can say about money management or cooking-as-science. I now had to devote substantially more class time, however, to teaching core content areas, and I was able to do so because of the progress made in the last decade. We are not there yet with regard to an adequate empirical base for teaching core content to students with severe disabilities, but we have at least headed down that road, as Browder et al. (2006) amply illustrate. That is progress.

Further, I think Universal Design for Learning is still ripe with promise. My colleagues at AbleLink Technologies and I have just finished a manuscript (Davies, Stock, King, Woodard, & Wehmeyer, 2006) reporting a study of the use of a cognitively accessible audio player by adolescents and adults with intellectual disability which has one of my all-time favorite article title beginnings: "My Favorite is *Moby Dick*!" That title came from statements made by a man with intellectual disability in the study who, after years of no access to the world of literature, had been able to listen to books through the use of a universally designed audio reader. Instead of being relegated to age-inappropriate picture books, he could tackle the classics, and among them, he was enraptured by Melville's timeless tale of Captain Ahab and the white whale. Obviously, the accessible audio reader provided this man the opportunity to enhance his quality of life in the same way many of us do, by immersing himself in a good book. What other "benefits," however, might this man accrue from his new access to literature? How might other people, coworkers perhaps, think differently of him (or hold different expectations about him) when he talks to them about his favorite part of *Moby Dick*? What opportunities for friendships might emerge as he meets other people whose favorite book is *Moby Dick*? What other books related to his interests might propel a change in vocational options? The opportunity opens, literally, a new world to him.

But UDL is more than just accessible devices. The 2004 amendments to the IDEA included the National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard, affectionately referred to as NIMAS by those of us who have lived with these somewhat arcane computer-language standards since the panel to develop the standard was originally convened by OSEP (and hosted by CAST) in early 2002. When instructional content is truly designed to be accessible for all students, up-front and not after-the-fact, using both technology and pedagogical strategies, then we can begin to make progress in ensuring access to the general curriculum. The NIMAS standard is, essentially, a subset of XML tags used in digital talking books (DTB) (for more in depth information on NIMAS, see http://nimas.cast.org/). With content available through NIMAS compliant/DTB formats, students can "access" and respond to content through digital audio, video, graphic, and individually configured formats. Students who cannot read well can click (through multiple input formats and accommodations) on a hyperlink to get an audio playback of the pronunciation of a word or to read a sentence. Such formats allow access to content, like *Moby Dick*, in formats that can involve and include all students. Already, for example, researchers at CAST have developed and commercially marketed the *Thinking Reader* series, which utilizes DTB features to teach students grades 5–8 reading comprehension skills using popular young adult fiction titles like Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time,* Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*. These DTB versions provide not only "access" to the books' content via adjustable font size, hyperlinked definitions of unknown words, screen-reader compatibility and synchronized text-to-audio capacity, but also provide computer-assisted support on reading comprehension strategies like summarizing, clarifying, predicting, and reflecting. I am looking forward to hearing a sixth-grade student with severe disabilities say (or communicate) that "My favorite is *Bud, Not Buddy*" because Christopher Paul Curtis's Newberry Award winning novel about a 10-year-old "orphan" in search of his family during the Great Depression is both a compelling story and teaches students about life during that important era in America. Advocates for students with severe disabilities have long argued that there is value for students with disabilities to engage in experiences like dissecting frogs in biology class in part because every other student in the school does so and the experience becomes a marker for being part of that community. Every other student in the 6th grade reads *Bud, Not Buddy* in many districts. With universally designed materials, so can students with severe disabilities.

Not only, though, can universally designed instructional formats ensure that students have *access* to content that other students read from, they can use that technology to learn essential literacy skills. Again, researchers at CAST have, through funding from OSEP, developed a DTB format program for use by students with severe disabilities in K-3. Using age-appropriate reading materials, these students begin learning essential literacy skills like story prediction, summarization, and reflection. Add these types of materials in with instruction on sight words that would provide a basis for a vocabulary for literacy using strategies that we know work with this population, and I believe we will

see real progress in literacy for students with severe disabilities.

That is the promise. What do we need to do? Spooner, Dymond, Smith, and Kennedy (2006) provide a comprehensive look at barriers to access to the general education curriculum, and I will not try to repeat all of these but instead will identify those steps I think are most important at this point in time. Nor, I would note, am I oblivious to the genuinely problematic issues that remain true barriers to a high-quality education program for students with severe disabilities, including the use of high-stakes testing as the sole determinant of success and the narrowing of the general education curriculum to include only core academic content. We need to address these issues, but from a perspective that makes it clear that we support high-quality instruction and high expectations for all students, including students with severe disabilities, and in ways that emphasize the impact of practices like high-stakes testing and a narrow curriculum on all students.

With regard to important next steps, we need research to inform us what instructional strategies work to teach students with severe disabilities core literacy, numeracy, and science facts, knowledge, and skills. The truth is, we have not really tried many existing strategies with this population and we need to try them with the newly emerging universally designed materials that actually ensure access, as well as to develop new methods and strategies. We need to push to ensure that universally designed materials are, in fact, universally designed; that they include features that will enable students with severe disabilities to have access to the content. Further, we need to ensure that our pedagogy is also "universally designed." Dymond et al. (2006) and Spooner et al. (2006) illustrate the need, in fact, to think about issues of universal design beyond just the curriculum, but including the classroom environment and instructional strategies. The use of curriculum adaptation strategies like advance and graphic organizers or the use of mnemonics has a rich history in ensuring access for students with high incidence disabilities, and we should explore ways to use technology and other universal design features, as illustrated by Dymond et al. (2006) to examine the impact of such strategies with students with more severe disabilities. We also need to ensure that all teachers, including general educators, know how to use curriculum adaptations that ensure access to the general education curriculum for a wider array of students.

It is time, though, to move beyond *access* to focus on *progress*. We need research and practices that inform us as to how to best measure progress for this population within the general education curriculum. Clearly, standardized tests are not the answer. We need to expand Research to Intervention (RTI) research to include students with severe disabilities, and to examine practices like Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) with this population. It seems evident that data-based measurement procedures provide the best way to assess progress and we, as a field, have a history of being data-based and data-driven, so this is not that much of a stretch. Obviously, such efforts must align with efforts in the development and refinement of alternate assessment procedures means to determine AYP for this population and efforts to align standards with instruction and assessment with this process.

Finally, readers familiar with my own work will not be surprised that I wholly endorse the focus on student-directed learning and self-determination highlighted by Spooner et al. (2006). We need to move beyond teacher-directed strategies to achieve access and progress. Carter and Kennedy (2006) overview the evidence that students with severe disabilities can benefit from peer-mediated learning strategies, and we need to utilize such peer-supports. Further, we need to teach students with severe disabilities student-directed learning strategies (Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000) that enable students to self-regulate learning and to become more self-determined. As we have noted previously (Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004) and as summarized by Spooner et al. (2006), promoting self-determination provides both an entry point to the general education curriculum and teaches students skills they need to more effectively engage with the general education curriculum.

I make a habit to point out to students taking my introductory methods class that the one characteristic of the literature from each decade in which I have been involved with special education, beginning with the 1970s and through the current decade, is that the expectations for people with severe disabilities embodied in that decade's literature were too low, and in the literature base for the following decade, people with severe disabilities exceeded those previous expectations. Today we talk about supported competitive employment, supported independent living, community and classroom inclusion, and self-determination for students with severe disabilities. When I entered the field in the late 1970s, I (and the field) could not have imagined those as viable outcomes. We are now asked to think about the potential that students with severe disabilities could learn to read, do math, and engage in science. It may be hard to imagine now, but I am guessing that in 10 years from now we will wonder how we could not see the potential. It is time to move beyond access and strive to ensure progress in the general education curriculum for all students, including students with severe disabilities. It is time to focus on *what* students are taught and to demand that they be taught in environments that promote progress. Those environments are, our research suggests, general education classrooms.

It is time to go beyond access, to look beyond our expectations, and to forge a path that ensures that all students, including students with severe disabilities,

progress in a general education curriculum that is, indeed, what all students in our society should learn if they are to succeed as adults. It is time.

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