

Inclusion Means More than Just Being “In:” Planning Full Participation of Students with Intellectual and Other Developmental Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

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Abstract

When students with autism, intellectual, and multiple disabilities are included in general education classes their teachers often struggle with identifying meaningful participation opportunities. Too often students are seated in the back of the room, socially isolated from their classmates, taught primarily by a paraprofessional, and without access to the general education curriculum. This paper describes the routines-based instructional planning process of The Beyond Access Model that promotes students' full membership, participation, and learning of the general education curriculum in the general education classroom. The process is grounded in high expectations for all students and provides step by step guidance to their educational teams. Limitations of the research on the Model are presented with suggestions for future study.

Keywords: inclusive education, participation, presuming competence, curriculum modification, autism, intellectual disabilities, general education curriculum

When Amanda¹ was in ninth grade, the science teacher was nervous about having her in his general education class. He read on her Individualized Education Program (IEP) that she had an I.Q. of 55 related to a rare chromosomal condition that made her legally blind, unsteady on her feet, and prone to challenging behavior. In the first team meeting of the year he said “But what is she supposed to learn in my class?”

Tomas was a kindergarten student with autism who used echolalic speech, was bilingual, was legally blind, and had sensitivities to noise and light. His kindergarten teacher was eager to have him in her class but wondered how he would participate in the 90 minute literacy block if he were unable to speak and became anxious when the noise level in the classroom rose, as it frequently did in kindergarten.

Both of these teachers expressed fears that are common to general education teachers when they have not had students with autism, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities in their classrooms. The United States special education law – The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – clearly states that schools are accountable for all students with disabilities making progress in the general education curriculum. Although a clear preference is stated for those students to learn in a general education classroom, translating policy into daily practice is a challenge (IDEA, 2004; Rainforth, 2000; Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006).

When these students’ teams used the Beyond Access Model (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010) to plan supports for their students’ membership, participation, and learning of the general education curriculum in the general education classroom, positive outcomes occurred. The Beyond Access Model consists of four iterative phases including a baseline needs assessment, exploring and describing best-guess team and student supports, systematic implementation of promising supports with data collection, and review and revision of student and team supports based on data analysis. It also includes comprehensive professional development related to the Model’s best practices (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).

This article focuses on the Beyond Access Model’s routines-based planning process that guides teams in planning a student’s full participation in general education instructional routines. This process helps to assure that students will not be an “island in the mainstream,” but fully participating and successful learners (Biklen, 1985, p. 18). Two case studies will be presented that illustrate how the planning process is used. The outcomes reported by students’ educational team members will be presented. Finally, the limitations of the Beyond Access Model and directions for future research will be discussed.

Planning for Amanda’s Participation in Physical Science

The Beyond Access Model’s routines-based planning process consists of five questions that teams answer during regularly scheduled meetings that take place prior to the coming week’s lessons (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010). This process has its roots in the discrepancy analysis technique described by Brown, Shiraga, York, Zanaga, and Rogan (1984); and adapted for use in inclusive education by many others (Biklen, 1985; Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1993; Jorgensen, 1992; York, Vandercook, Macdonald, & Wolff, 1989).

The questions are:

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

1. What is the general education instructional routine?
2. What are students *without* disabilities doing to participate in the instructional routine?
3. Can the student with the disability participate in the same way in all components of the instructional routine or does the student need an alternate way to participate?
4. What supports does the student need to participate using alternate means?
5. Who will prepare the supports?

This process can be illustrated using Amanda’s science class. During a 15 minute weekly meeting, Mr. Becker, the science teacher, provided Amanda’s special education teacher with information about upcoming units, including the instructional routines that he used frequently, essential vocabulary, the unit’s enduring understandings (McTighe & Wiggins, 2011), and the assessments he designed to measure students’ knowledge and skills. Mr. Becker said that every class included a 20 minute “teacher lectures, students take notes” segment. So “all students are taking notes during a teacher lecture” is written in column one of a Beyond Access routines-based planning form (Figure 1).