Creating Opportunities for Intensive Intervention for Students With Learning Disabilities

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With the last reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as No Child Left Behind or NCLB), special education research exerted a major influence on general education. We see this influence in a variety of ways. For example, the explicitness of reading instruction in the primary grades increased substantially, with prominent special education researchers authoring many of the major commercially published core reading programs. Also, multilevel prevention systems championed by special education policy makers, administrators, and researchers were introduced within responsiveness to intervention (RTI) and Reading First, which restructured service delivery toward the prevention of reading difficulties. In addition, the use of curriculum-based measurement became widespread for screening to identify academic risk and for progress monitoring to assess responsiveness to instruction. You might say that special educators have been busy in the last decade reforming general education. And as special educators, we should take satisfaction in having played an important role in shaping recent education reform in this country. At the same time, the education of students with disabilities has benefitted in important ways from the reading instruction innovations associated with NCLB and Reading First, from IDEA’s early intervening prevention services, and from IDEA’s emphasis on the general education curriculum.

Even so, the academic outcomes of students with learning disabilities (LD), who are the focus of this article, are far from satisfactory. Consider the following data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2; Wagner, Marder et al., 2003; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2003).

- Forty percent of students with LD have general education teachers who receive no information about their instructional needs, and only 11% of students with LD receive substantial modifications to the general education curriculum.
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- This is the case despite that the academic achievement of students with LD is dramatically below grade level in reading and math. On average, by the time they are at the secondary level, they are 3.4 years behind their grade-level in reading; 3.2 years behind in math. Clearly, the magnitude of these academic deficiencies raises important questions about the lack of important substantive accommodations to the general education curriculum and the lack of guidance provided to general education teachers in meeting students’ needs.
- It is not surprising, therefore, that in 2007, one quarter of students with LD dropped out of school.
- And concern about this unacceptable graduation rate seems appropriate as the proportion of jobs that require at least some postsecondary education is steadily increasing. In fact, in 2007, only 46% of students with LD had regular paid employment within 2 years of leaving school.

These sobering data, which are echoed in the 2008 Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) report (Schiller, Sanford, & Blackorby, 2008), are corroborated by some projections that, with implementation of alternate assessments based on modified academic standards (AA-MAS), some states anticipate that 45% of students with disabilities are likely to qualify and take the AA-MAS (Steve Elliott, personal communication, August 20, 2009); this is roughly the equivalent of 6% of the general population of students participating in this new feature of the accountability system. And this 6% is projected even though the federal government prohibits states from reporting annual yearly progress for more than 2% of students as proficient or advanced based on the AA-MAS. Although stu-
Policy makers must weigh the challenges associated with providing intensive services against the negative consequences of exiting school without knowing how to read or perform math competently.
panel of experts, who systematically reviewed the literature, concluded this:

The panel believes that alignment with the core curriculum is not as critical as ensuring that instruction builds students’ foundational proficiencies. Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction must focus on foundational and often prerequisite skills that are determined by the students’ rate of progress. In the opinion of the panel, acquiring these skills will be necessary for future achievement. (p. 20)

So how might the ESEA and IDEA reauthorizations be shaped to ensure that students with LD receive the instructional intensity they require? Here are some thoughts. First, schools need clarification about what access to the general education curriculum means. Educators need permission and guidance to be thoughtful and flexible about how to provide instructional opportunities to students with LD in ways that narrow the achievement gap. This undoubtedly requires intensive intervention focused on the student’s instructional level material, even if it departs from grade-level content.

Moreover, to create such opportunity for intensive intervention means to miss some portions of the general education program, and educators need guidance about what portions of the general education program are unlikely to benefit students with LD who suffer large skill deficits. In effect, we need clarifying language about what alignment with the general education curriculum means to permit teachers to practice what we know about student learning. In doing so, we need to be sensitive to the understandable concern that we not revert to a time when students with disabilities were excluded from the components of the general education program from which they in fact do benefit. However, it’s time to create a national dialogue that discourages ideological commitment to an inflexible interpretation of access, which inadvertently eliminates opportunities for students with LD to receive the education they require and deserve.

A second implication is the need to clarify what it means to be a highly qualified special educator for a student with a learning disability: a teacher who not only understands the general education curriculum but also is well prepared to implement a range of specialized intervention and assessment methods. Highly qualified special educators are knowledgeable about (a) the general education curriculum; (b) validated interventions; (c) how to use ongoing progress monitoring in an experimental teaching process to meaningfully individualize programs; (d) how to conduct specialized, validated intervention at instructional levels in ways that explicitly build toward competence in the general education curriculum; and (e) what components of the general education program will and will not benefit a given student. We need legislative language to encourage the development of this notion of a highly qualified special educator, and we need reauthorization of discretionary personnel preparation, targeted at teachers of students with LD to produce a special education workforce that possesses these skills.

So, as we began, in the last reauthorizations of IDEA and ESEA, special education research exerted a major influence on the practice of general education. This is an important accomplishment. In the next set of reauthorizations and in our related efforts over the upcoming decade, we should continue to exert our influence on general education, with the continued goal of enhancing the education outcomes of students with and without disabilities alike. At the same time, while we continue to reform general education, we should also focus our considerable talents at reforming special education, making it an important, distinctive, and valued resource in schools for increasing the likelihood that all students with LD will exit school possessing the reading, math, and writing skills they need to succeed in life. Reforming special education will require reauthorization of laws that upgrade opportunities for intensive intervention for students with LD.

References


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