
Introduction

When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) was passed in 1975, provisions were established to guarantee that students with disabilities would be educated with, not apart from, their peers—that is, they were to have access to and be educated in the same *place* as their normal-achieving peers. In the 1990s, the access component of this legislation was expanded beyond place to include access to the *general education curriculum*. In other words, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts (IDEA) of the 1990s and beyond have provided that students with disabilities should have full access to the same learning experiences, materials, and curriculum elements as their normal-achieving peers. Hence, they are not merely to be in the same physical location as their peers; they are to experience the same curriculum as their peers. Although this expansion of the legislation was heralded as a philosophical and moral victory for individuals with disabilities, it presented some very significant instructional challenges to teachers and administrators—especially to those working with adolescents in high school settings.

One of the major challenges faced by school personnel relates to the skill deficits of these students. For most adolescents with disabilities, there is a large gap between their current level of performance and the demands of the curriculum they are expected to meet. Unless students have mastered the necessary skills and strategies to respond to the heavy curriculum demands of rigorous subject-matter classes, they will encounter failure and great frustration. Figure I.1 on the next page illustrates the challenge faced by teachers and students in today's high schools. The upper, straight line represents the path of "normal" acquisition of knowledge or skills by typical students. That is, at the conclusion of one year of instruction, on average, students should have acquired "one year's worth" of knowledge and skills, represented by Point A on that line. At the end of the second year, they should be performing at the level of Point B, and so on. Students who acquire skills and knowledge at this pace are, in turn, able to successfully deal with the curriculum demands that are presented to them. In other words, they can successfully "access the curriculum."

The performance of students with disabilities, on the other hand, does not usually follow this line of progress. On average, they perform at the level of Point A at the end of one year of schooling and travel a path

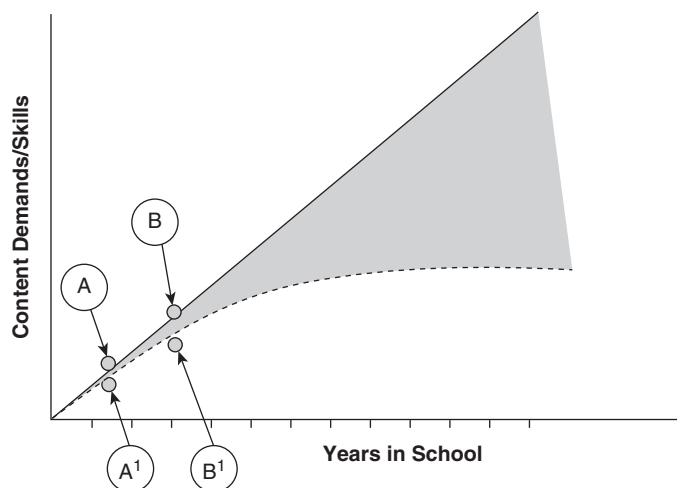
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similar to the one depicted by the dotted curved line. The area between the solid line (representing normal achievement) and the dotted line (representing underachievement) depicts the “performance gap,” the gap between what students with disabilities are expected to do and what they actually can do. Over time, this gap grows larger and larger, and it is especially exacerbated in the later grades, when the academic growth of students with disabilities plateaus. As a result of this performance gap, these students are unable to access the general education curriculum and meet the demands of required courses for graduation from high school. Their resulting failure leads to discouragement and disengagement from school, and, for too many, this disengagement manifests itself in dropping out of school altogether.

Significantly, the dotted line in the figure (and the achievement of students with disabilities) tends to plateau by the time these students reach the seventh grade in school. Hence, the magnitude of the gap grows exponentially because the demands of the curriculum that students encounter during their middle and high school years increase dramatically because of the volume of content covered, its complexity, and, in many instances, its abstract nature. Assignments and tests associated with this content become more complex as well.

Although this figure helps to profile the challenges faced by adolescents with disabilities, its greatest value is in providing a focus for interventions that should be employed to close the performance gap to a point where students are able to truly access and benefit from the general education curriculum. Given the shortage of instructional time available to secondary

Figure I.1 The Performance Gap



teachers, they need well-designed instructional interventions and materials that have been validated through research studies demonstrating that when they are used with fidelity and sufficient intensity, significant gains will result that effectively close the gap.

The purpose of this book is to provide classroom teachers and administrators with a comprehensive review of research-validated practices that have been shown to be effective with adolescents with disabilities. The chapters in this book emerged as part of a research grant funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (PR#324S990001) to study ways to improve access to the general education curriculum for adolescents with disabilities in high schools. The students who were the target of the project were those who had the capacity, given high-quality instruction associated with well-designed interventions, to successfully complete high school and receive a standard high school diploma.

The first chapter describes the extraordinarily complex context within which teaching adolescents with disabilities must occur. Each of the remaining chapters describes specific research-validated practices that are available to classroom teachers. Each chapter deals with a critical component of the instructional process that must be considered in constructing comprehensive and well-designed instructional programs for adolescents with disabilities. Additionally, each chapter points out what instructional practices have some grounding in research, as well as areas where there is a shortage or complete absence of supporting research. However, in spite of the many questions that remain to be answered, there is much that is known and that can be effectively leveraged to dramatically improve outcomes for adolescents with disabilities and to put them on the road to successfully completing their high school education.

Specifically, Chapters 2 through 7 address the following topics, all of which can play an important role in facilitating access to and success in learning the general education curriculum for adolescents with disabilities. Specifically, Chapter 2 provides an in-depth analysis of the various dimensions of teacher planning. How general education classroom teachers make instructional plans in light of the academic diversity of students in their classes, as well as the large amounts of complex content, is a critical first step in enabling the type of instruction that can be understood by students with disabilities. Chapter 3 describes a broad array of instructional practices that can be used, primarily by the subject-matter teacher, to facilitate the mastery of critical content within the context of the general education classroom. Chapter 4 focuses on specific learning strategies that can be taught to adolescents for the purpose of changing how they think about and approach problems that they need to solve and how they work on assignments they are given. In short, this chapter reviews what is known about teaching adolescents with disabilities how to learn. Chapter 5 addresses one of the biggest barriers to academic success for students with disabilities—namely, instructional materials that are “inconsiderate” and

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not sensitive to the information-processing difficulties of many students with disabilities. Specifically, this chapter discusses how to optimally design instructional materials and teaching sequences to maximize student outcomes. Chapter 6 describes how technology, as an instructional tool, can help teachers provide needed supports for struggling learners, including how it can facilitate guided practice, instructional reinforcement, and assisting teachers to effectively leverage their personal attention to targeted learners at strategic times during the lesson. The final chapter addresses an array of instructional practices that are central to enhancing nonacademic growth and outcomes. Among the critical topics covered in this chapter are self-determination, transition planning, and social-skill instruction.

In short, this book will provide the reader with a thorough understanding of

- the context in which adolescents with disabilities are educated,
- the principles leading to instructional plans that help teachers effectively differentiate their instruction for all learners in their class,
- instructional practices that teachers can use to promote commensurate instructional gains for *all* subgroups within subject-matter classes (including students with disabilities),
- methods for changing the way that students learn and perform tasks by teaching them specific learning strategies that enable them to be more independent in performing their schoolwork,
- ways to choose and design instructional tools that will optimize student outcomes,
- the principles for effectively leveraging the rapidly growing benefits of technology to enhance the instructional environment, and
- strategies for enhancing nonacademic outcomes for students with disabilities.