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Teaching Students With Moderate to Severe Intellectual Disabilities in General Education Classrooms

Foundational Beliefs

KEY CONCEPTS

- Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities can learn and acquire many skills.

- Progress has been made toward the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education, but considerable work remains.

- Inclusive education ensures access to the core curriculum and active participation in the general education lesson with the necessary supports and services.

- Skilled teachers with high expectations are needed to help maximize learning potential.

- Recommended educational practices include the presumption of competence, inclusive education, strong family involvement, positive behavior support, and self-determination training.

Education should support students' learning and ability to learn. For students with severe disabilities, this learning can occur in either special education rooms or general education rooms with peers without disabilities. While inclusive education for students with severe disabilities is strongly supported by the research (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Idol, 2006), in actual practice, considerable inexperience and lack

of knowledge hinder its effectiveness for students. Many educators in special and general education have never experienced inclusive education and may question how they would provide quality instruction.

Once all educators become comfortable in their ability to make the curriculum meaningful to all students, regardless of ability, students once considered unable to benefit from general education will have more opportunities to realize their potential. Although we have made considerable gains in the education of students with severe disabilities as described in the following section, there is much to learn and improve upon. However, the original and false presumption of students with severe disabilities being unable to learn has been replaced with the knowledge that these students can and do learn. Instead of blaming the student for lack of progress, the need to change learning environments and instructional strategies has received greater attention. Teachers can learn and grow in their instructional ability and in turn, students will reflect that increase in competence to help them learn. We need to learn from our past efforts and continue to push boundaries to discover new and more effective techniques.

■ A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: WHERE WE CAME FROM

The education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities has evolved substantially from initial and traditional beliefs. Originally, individuals with intellectual disabilities were considered unable to learn and were systematically assigned to institutions for care but not for learning (Blatt, 1981). Families were advised to place their children with moderate or severe disabilities into these congregate institutions shortly after birth to avoid any ill effect on the family group and society (Ferguson, 2008; Singer & Irvin, 1991). However, as early as the late 1960s and early 1970s, teachers in the field of special education began questioning the institutionalization of individuals, especially children, calling for a continuum of services offered to students from least to most restrictive in placement (Reynolds, 1962; Taylor, 1982). In addition, family members began questioning the practice of removing their children from the home to be cared for by strangers with no effort made to teach skills.

Banding together, families became a recognizable force opposing institutional placement and instigated court actions demanding educational rights for their children. Their advocacy led to the early court cases, in particular *Mills v. Board of Education* (1982) and *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971, 1972), that ensured educational opportunities for children with developmental disabilities. Such federal court cases impacted the education for all students in the United States and resulted in Congress endorsing the least restrictive environment (LRE) concept in P.L. (Public Law) 94–142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. With the passage of this federal act, the placement of students with disabilities in general education settings was clearly the preference. However, the practice of segregating students with intellectual disabilities, especially those with more severe forms of disability, continues (McLeskey & Henry, 1999).

A Developmental Approach

When educators first were faced with the responsibility to educate students previously unknown to the public school system, initial efforts reflected a developmental approach to learning. Regardless of chronological age, students were tested on standardized tests for those who are typically developing and instruction began where students failed to perform. As a result, instruction bore little resemblance to the student's chronological age and created learning environments that looked very juvenile. Educational placement remained very specialized with students attending special education classrooms physically apart from students without disabilities. Placement either occurred in a completely separate, special school serving only students with disabilities or in a self-contained room in a public school. There was little if any interaction between students with and without disabilities and the curricula did not overlap.

The Functional Era

In the late 1970s, psychologists began to question the developmental programming for students. Educational outcomes were relatively bleak, with students leaving the school program with limited skills to enter the mainstream of adult life. Following a developmental model of education, most students with severe disabilities could not remain in school long enough to learn the skills that would most benefit them as young adults. Brown, Nietupski, and Hamre-Nietupski (1976) published a seminal work questioning the current practice of developmental teaching and proposed a new approach. This new approach adopted a top-down strategy where students' chronological age was a prime consideration in determining the most critical and functional skills for the student (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, et al., 1979). This functional approach highlighted the belief that students not only could learn but also could learn meaningful skills that would improve their quality of life by providing them with critical skills to be as independent and interdependent as possible. Age-appropriate skills in the areas of self-care, safety, community access, social, recreation, and communication replaced age-inappropriate skills of stringing beads, repeating simple sounds (ba ba), coloring, and doing two-piece puzzles that were typical of the developmental approach. Students learned such life skills as doing laundry (Taylor, Collins, Schuster, & Kleinert, 2002); getting dressed (Hughes, Schuster, & Nelson, 1993); and accessing the community by riding buses, demonstrating street-crossing safely, and ordering food (Brown et al., 1983). Instruction in these areas was designed to improve students' performance in typical environments upon graduation.

The Least Restrictive Environment:
A Problem With Interpretation

Despite the legal mandate to avoid infringing on the student's civil rights through placement in the LRE, schools and school districts have struggled with the principle and the imprecise definition of LRE. The continuum of placement options originally developed by Reynolds (1962) offered ten potential placements

from hospitals and treatment centers (most restrictive) to regular classroom with consultation (least restrictive). Unfortunately, despite criticism of the continuum model (which preceded the mandate) for placement (see Taylor, 1988), students with severe disabilities typically were placed in special schools and special classrooms in regular schools (McLeskey & Henry, 1999). Taylor (1988) criticized the use of a continuum of placements, especially for students with severe disabilities, stating that the continuum confused services with a physical place (with more intensive services equating to more restrictive environments) and that it forced students to earn the right to move up the continuum through demonstration of readiness skills that were taught in a segregated setting. Trying to demonstrate competency to learn in a general education environment was particularly challenging when the life skills approach to these specialized settings did not address the academic curriculum typically taught in regular classrooms.

The Era of Integration

However, as students acquired more meaningful skills, attention was drawn to the positive impact that students without disabilities could have. Students without disabilities provided positive role models for communication, behavior, and social skills. Following the reauthorization of P.L. 94–142 and the renaming of the law to reflect person-first language (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990) efforts were made to physically increase the time that students with and without severe disabilities spent together during nonacademic times such as recess, lunch, music, nutrition breaks, and assemblies. The integration of students with moderate and severe disabilities gained some prominence during this time with the focus on the social benefits to the students with disabilities (Brown et al., 1983; Taylor, 1982). While students spent the majority of their school day in specialized settings working on functional skills, they also were spending a small part of the day physically close to same-age or younger students without disabilities. Through social integration, students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities could model appropriate behavior, have access to competent communication partners, and be exposed to a much broader base for social relationships to emerge (Ford & Davern, 1989).

While functional skills were supporting their independent performance as adults, outcomes indicated that students were not making friends and not engaging in activities after school (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Johnson, et al., 1979). Students with disabilities, especially moderate to profound intellectual disabilities, were not gaining membership at their schools but were perceived as infrequent visitors to certain aspects of school life (e.g., assemblies, library time). Such visitation status was evident even when students with severe disabilities spent up to 50% of their school day in general education classrooms (Schnorr, 1990).

Currently, schools are in the process of opening their classrooms to all students at all times, including those with the most challenging types of disabilities. There is a growing recognition that all students should have equal access to the core academic curriculum that may not be possible when students, especially those with severe disabilities, are educated in separate classrooms (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). However, the trend to include all students, including

those with the most severe disabilities, in general education classrooms is uneven at best and successful implementation rests heavily on individual teams at different schools around the country. Nationally, this is a learning phase and much work needs to be done before it can be considered universally successful for all students.

THE PRESENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGE ■

Reauthorization of the original Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 led to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, 1997, and most currently, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). With each reauthorization, greater emphasis was placed on the rights of students with disabilities to learn and to be educated with students without disabilities and by highly qualified teachers. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has heightened awareness of the need to challenge all students and to stress the importance of all students learning core curriculum content (Browder & Spooner, 2006). Teachers are being held increasingly accountable for the learning of their students. Both of these educational acts (IDEIA and NCLB) support the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms with access to core curriculum.

While students with moderate to severe disabilities may be gaining physical placement in age-appropriate general education classrooms, questions remain as to how to teach students in these rooms, especially during large group discussion or lecture times. Such teaching arrangements pose particular challenges for students with certain intellectual disabilities due to their heavy emphasis on verbal skills, ability to recall information quickly, and the ability to focus on a teacher standing at the front of the room. Teachers who pursue inclusive education for their students with intellectual disabilities need to know strategies to use to provide the necessary individualized and systematic instruction in general education, especially when the learning arrangement is least conducive to active participation by their students. Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities can learn in general education environments, but they need skilled teachers to provide the adaptations and accommodations that they need to be successful.

Considerable research has been completed on effective teaching strategies for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities (Barudin & Hourcade, 1990; Biederman, Fairhall, Raven, & Davey, 1998; Post & Storey, 2002). Some of these practices include task analysis, constant or progressive time delay, simultaneous prompting, and least to most instructional prompting. Such practices have been shown to be effective for teaching such skills as communication (Angell, Bailey, & Larson, 2008; Light & Binger, 1998), literacy (Ault, Gast, & Wolery, 1988; Bradford, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, & Flores, 2006), and community skills (Hughes & Agran, 1993; Zhang, Gast, Horvat, & Dattilo, 1995). What is less in evidence is the implementation of these recognized strategies within general education classes.

Most experts in the area of moderate to severe intellectual disabilities stress the need for systematic teaching procedures for these students to learn (Bradford et al., 2006; Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007; Copeland, Hughes, Agran, Wehmeyer,

Fowler, 2002; Duker, Didden, & Sigafoos, 2004). Systematic instruction refers to carefully planned and direct strategies used to teach new behaviors and skills, maintain skills, and generalize skills to other environments, activities, and people. The challenge for teachers is to provide high quality systematic instruction to individual students when they are taught in general education classrooms. Instead of having control over their own special education rooms, special educators, paraprofessionals, and related service providers must share learning space with general educators and in such a way as to blend highly specialized instruction into the general education class activities. In other words, teachers have to apply what is known about the learning of students with moderate to severe disabilities within the specifications of a fully inclusive environment.

■ WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Inclusive education is full-time membership of students with disabilities in their chronologically age-appropriate classrooms with the necessary supports and services to benefit from educational activities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1992; Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000). Students do not need to be demonstrating grade-level performance but can gain valuable academic and nonacademic skills from participation in grade-level lessons. Supports and services include a wide variety of material adaptations and instructional accommodations, such as tactile or pictorial information, slant boards to hold materials upright, information made simpler and repeated verbally or signed, related service providers, and additional time to explore concrete items that are part of a lecture. Such supports are individualized to meet the unique learning needs of students having a wide range of moderate or severe disabilities and are embedded into the activities typically occurring in the classroom. The student is supported to learn in an environment with high expectations and is expected to be actively engaged in all learning opportunities. While the student may not be expected to learn the exact same content nor in the same manner as classmates, he or she should be challenged to learn as much as possible. Figure 1.1 highlights this expectation by showing a high school student giving a presentation to his class with the support of a peer.

Collaboration of team members is a hallmark of inclusive education. General educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and all critical team members share the responsibility for teaching students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in typical learning environments (Downing, 2008; Idol, 2002; Snell & Janney, 2005). Team members do not work in isolation or remove the student from class activities to address skills unrelated to the core curriculum. Instead, areas of need are addressed during typical class activities by various support persons who are highly qualified.

This collaborative approach entails preplanning for lessons that take into consideration the needs of the student and how the lesson will be taught. Planning so that all students of diverse needs and abilities can have access to and actively participate in class activities is termed *universal design for learning* (UDL; Rose & Meyer, 2002). Through this process of collaborative teaming to

| **Figure 1.1** | A high school peer tutor supports another student giving a presentation |

Photographer: Antonia Pond

involve all students in class lessons and activities, accommodations are considered with regard to presentation of material, learning arrangements, demonstration of knowledge learned, and evaluation from the onset of the lesson and not as an add-on piece. The intent is to value and respect different ways that students learn so that all students have access to the material presented.

Inclusive education also ensures access to the core academic curriculum for the student with moderate or severe disabilities, which is a legal mandate as per IDEIA (2004) and NCLB (2001; Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007). When students are educated in general education classrooms, they have immediate access to the grade-level core curriculum that the entire class receives. Such access is much harder to ensure when students are educated in specialized settings with special educators who are not as knowledgeable about different grade-level standards. Soukup et al. (2007) found that instruction in self-contained special education rooms was not linked to the general education curriculum and concluded that the best place for students with disabilities to gain access to general education curriculum was in general education classrooms. Therefore, inclusive education is the process of students learning challenging material made meaningful and appropriate for their individual needs in general education rooms alongside their classmates with no disabilities.

■ WHAT IS NOT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education does not mean physically placing students in general education classrooms without the necessary supports and services. For instance, having a student with significant cognitive disabilities listen to a lecture in a high school physics class without simplifying the information, presenting it in an accessible manner, and relating it to the student's life is not what is meant by inclusive education. Unfortunately, such a practice has been associated with inclusion. As a result, it is no wonder that some educators fear its implementation in their schools (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

Inclusive education also is not hiring a paraprofessional to be with the student with moderate or severe disabilities throughout the day, getting materials for the student, telling the student what to do, assisting the student to perform tasks, and removing the student from the classroom when the student vocalizes distress. This hovering nature of paraprofessionals can lead to isolation by the student and an overdependence on an adult's assistance for all tasks (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005). Such a situation often occurs when the paraprofessional is not trained appropriately and is unsure of the goal of inclusive education or of the IEP goals for the student. The paraprofessional may feel the need to keep the student quiet, turn in correct work, and meet basic needs. However, when an adult is overly involved in the process and product of the student's education, learned helplessness on the part of the student can emerge (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2005). Once learned helplessness has been acquired, the student may not feel that he or she can perform a task without the support of an adult. Rather, the student is entitled to instruction from a highly qualified educator, which must be an important component of inclusive education.

In addition, inclusive education does not have the student sitting near the door or at the back of the room working with another adult on material that is unrelated to the class activity. Such a scenario occurs when teaming for a lesson is not occurring and the general educator has no ownership of the student with moderate or severe disabilities. The IEP for the student has been created with no attention to content standards for a particular grade and is comprised of unrelated skills that must be worked on separately from the class. In a truly inclusive classroom, the student should be an integral part of the class, actively participating in activities with peers to the maximum extent possible.

Having a student with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities visit a particular classroom for a period of time, from 30 minutes a week to several hours a day, also is not what is intended as inclusive education. Often, such visitations mean that the student comes to class when he or she can "handle" the coursework (e.g., art, music, library time) and therefore, very few if any accommodations are necessary. When a student is a visitor to a class, the manner in which the lesson is being taught may not have considered the unique adaptations and accommodations that are necessary to fully include the student. Expectations may be for the student to be physically present, quiet, and partially involved when possible. Such an arrangement does not reflect truly inclusive practices, and benefits related to inclusion are not likely to be realized. For

instance, when Schnorr (1990) studied the practice of "including" a young first grader with severe disabilities for a large part of the day, she found that the other first graders did not perceive him as a member of the class but rather more of a visitor. To obtain true membership for students with moderate to severe disabilities, full-time placement in chronologically age-appropriate classrooms is recommended. For elementary students, this means full-time placement in the age-appropriate class, and for middle school and high school students, it means attending different classes with peers as determined by a combination of required courses and electives.

TARGETED STUDENTS FOR THIS TEXT ■

While all students with and without disabilities can be educated together in general education age-appropriate classrooms, the focus of this book is on those students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities who often are denied general education access. These students, ages five to twenty-two, often have cognitive disabilities that make it quite difficult to acquire new information. They may require considerable and repeated exposure to concepts and materials so that they can recognize and make use of the information (Giangreco, 2006; Ryndak & Alper, 2003). Many of these students may not have a formal language and may be in the emergent stages of both communication and literacy. Students also may have physical disabilities (mild to severe), sensory impairments (visual and/or auditory), and/or behavior challenges. For example, Jacob is a third grader who is Jewish and lives at home with his father, mother, two brothers, and one sister. Jacob loves his pet dog and most things connected with Disney and Disneyland. He has a severe cortical visual impairment that makes it very difficult for him to recognize and interpret visual information. He uses a wheelchair and cannot stand unassisted. He has some use of his hands, but struggles with any task requiring fine motor dexterity. He is nonverbal and makes use of facial expressions, some vocalizations, body movements, and some objects and parts of objects to communicate. When he can't convey what he is trying to say, he can become very agitated, spitting at others, and biting his arm. He relies on others to help him convey his thoughts and needs. Jacob also experiences seizure activity and has other health impairments (e.g., allergies). While Jacob has numerous adults involved in his educational program (e.g., general educator, special educator, occupational therapist, vision teacher, etc.), he struggles to make friends with peers.

Students like Jacob typically fare poorly on standardized intelligence tests and may not demonstrate early cognitive skills, such as object permanence, cause-effect, or imitation. On a superficial level, it may appear that accessing age-level core curriculum, for these students, may be very challenging. However, those students have a legal right to access the core curriculum and will never be able to acquire related skills unless provided with the opportunity. For the most part, such students have been denied access based on negative perceptions of their potential for academics (Browder & Spooner, 2006). Students with such severe disabilities, however, are being educated in general

education classrooms in schools all over the country, and they are benefiting from this placement (Idol, 2006; Schwarz, 2006). It is hopeful that this trend will continue to grow for the benefit of students with and without disabilities. Placement, however, is insufficient in and of itself. We must first ensure that *all* students have the necessary opportunities to learn, and then, we need to make sure that we know *how* to teach them.

■ RECOMMENDED PRACTICES AS A PREMISE OF THE TEXT

This book is written with certain foundational beliefs regarding the education of students having moderate to severe disabilities. While all of these foundational beliefs may not be in evidence at a particular school, they are recommended practices and can serve as meaningful goals to reach. The main focus of this book is on the recommended practice of individualized and systematic instruction. The chapters that follow deal with such instruction. The other obvious values apparent in this book are that of presumed competence, inclusive education for all students, family involvement, positive behavior support, and self-determination. The rationale for these fundamental beliefs is presented briefly in the following pages.

Presumed Competence

One primary premise of this text is that *all* children can and do learn. No student is considered too disabled to benefit from quality instruction. At times, the severity and complexity of some students' disabilities seem to overshadow who they are as learners. When students have limited communication skills, limited physical movement, health issues, and other disabilities, such as a severe visual impairment or hearing impairment, their ability to demonstrate what they know is severely compromised. If teachers and others on their educational team equate their challenge with self-expression with an inability to learn, then students are likely to reach this limiting expectation.

A recommended practice in the field is to assume competence and teach to that assumption (Jorgensen, 2005; Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2007). Since we can never be sure of what students can learn, assuming competence is the least dangerous assumption. When students are assumed to be competent, they gain access to age-level experiences and information. If assumed to not be competent, those around them can limit their access to materials, information, and experiences. The tendency may be to restrict activities to those that teachers feel students can understand and demonstrate that understanding. The danger of such an approach is that students can be denied access to a number of learning and social activities and environments, which in turn limits their ability to learn. This "catch-22" situation is best avoided by supporting all students in rich learning environments and age-appropriate activities. Furthermore, when presuming competence, the student with severe disabilities is likely to be treated with respect and not demeaned (e.g., using infantile speech patterns with an elementary, middle school–, or high school–aged student).

Concomitant with the basic principles that all students can and do learn and should be respected as competent learners is the belief that they need and deserve quality instruction to help them reach their greatest potential. In addition to curricular adaptations, they will need individualized teaching support that considers both their challenges to learning as well as their strengths. When teachers differentiate their instruction to involve all learners, students of quite different abilities will be able to demonstrate what they know (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007).

Inclusive Education

The strategies discussed in this text are specifically designed to be used in general education classes. Strategies designed to separate students based on ability are not progressive in nature nor are they recommended. Strategies that support learning in typical school, home, and community environments are more worthwhile to pursue. Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities need ongoing opportunities to learn from their peers without disabilities. They need regular and close contact to acquire typical interactive behaviors, typical speech patterns where possible, and appropriate behaviors in general (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Copeland et al., 2004; Hughes, Carter, Hughes, Bradford, & Copeland, 2002). They also need to learn in close proximity to their same age peers without disabilities to receive the benefit of peer modeling and tutoring (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009; Hughes et al., 2002). Above all, they need and have a right to access grade-level content that has been made meaningful to individual needs. With no access, these learners automatically face the discrimination of low expectations and no opportunity.

The benefits of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities have been well established (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cole et al., 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & Smyth-King, 2004; Idol, 2006; Meyer, 2001). Communication and social skills have increased when students are educated in inclusive settings (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Foreman et al., 2004; Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; Naraian, 2008). Enhanced academic skills also have been noted for students with moderate to severe disabilities educated in general education classrooms (Cole et al., 2004; Hedeen & Ayres, 2002; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999; Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003).

Benefits for students without disabilities include greater awareness of and appreciation for differences (Copeland et al., 2004; Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004). Students without disabilities have acquired skills related to teaching others, using assistive technology, and understanding different ways to learn (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Dymond et al., 2006). Besides learning about human differences, there has been no reported negative impact on student learning (Cole et al., 2004). Hunt, Staub, Alwell, and Goetz (1994) found that the presence of a student with severe and multiple disabilities in a cooperative learning group for math resulted in no differences in academic achievement for students without disabilities compared to cooperative learning groups that had no students with such disabilities. Idol (2006) surveyed teachers, principals, and paraprofessionals at eight schools moving toward more inclusive education. At the four elementary schools,

no negative impact on students without disabilities was reported, and several reported that there had been improvement. At the two middle schools and two high schools investigated, 58% stated that there was no negative impact on students without disabilities and 24% said that there was improvement across seven variables. With regard to test scores, 58% to 68% of respondents said that test scores stayed the same following inclusion and 5% to 19% said students without disabilities performed better following inclusion.

Cushing and Kennedy (1997) addressed the issue of students without disabilities falling behind academically if allowed to support a classmate with severe disabilities. What they found was just the opposite. Students who were struggling to achieve academically showed improvement of enhanced letter grades as a result of working with a classmate with severe intellectual disabilities. These researchers suggested that the additional feedback from a teacher or paraprofessional while serving in a support role may have positively influenced their performance overall. Carter and Kennedy (2006) also reported that at-risk students who supported students with severe disabilities improved their academic skill level.

In general, research findings to date support the practice of bringing students of different abilities together to learn. Benefits have been documented for all involved with minimal if any detrimental impact. Teachers have reported learning more skills and knowledge to use with an increasingly diverse student population (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Spooner, Baker, Harris, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Browder, 2007). Special and general education teachers working together to make core curriculum accessible for all students makes more intuitive sense than the same teachers trying to do this on their own. Ensuring access to core curriculum becomes quite challenging when special educators have students of several different grade levels in one special education room, which is typical. Making use of the skills and expertise of differently trained teachers working together in inclusive classrooms can support the learning and achievement of all students. This collaboration will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this text.

Family Involvement

A strong premise of this book is that families will be actively involved (to the degree they prefer) in their child's education. Family input is critical, as family members supply considerable information on student strengths, preference, dislikes, responses to past intervention, as well as their goals and hopes for the future. Cultural and religious values also can be shared so that these will not be compromised unknowingly by the educational staff (King, Baxter, Rosenbaum, Zwaigenbaum, & Bates, 2009; Poston & Turnbull, 2004). Without strong family input and involvement, educational teams could easily get off track with regard to critical learning needs and the most appropriate academic goals to pursue (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, & Beegle, 2004; Lynch & Hanson, 2004).

Families come in a variety of configurations, sizes, linguistic backgrounds, cultural experiences, religious beliefs, and racial experiences. As a result, unique family interpretations of the educational experience for their child are essential to obtain and make appropriate use of in the planning and implementation of

any educational program. Families know what and how their child has been taught in the past and can provide critical information regarding what has been most successful with their child and what strategies should be avoided. They know what motivates their child to perform and what situations create the most difficulty for their child. As a result, teachers can save considerable time developing a program for a student by talking to family members about the educational program at the outset.

Of particular importance are the goals and dreams that family members hold for their family member. The educational team needs to know what the family hopes their child will achieve. They also need to understand what the family holds little value for. For example, a teacher may feel that it is imperative that a student learn the names of colors and may spend considerable time on this one skill. However, in talking to the family, it is discovered that they place relatively little importance on this skill and would much rather that he learn how to handle money or read. The student may actually make use of colors (e.g., putting like color items together or matching an outfit to wear) but cannot name them. Family members may feel that other skills are much more important for their child and would rather that the educational team address those skills. Since teachers have limited time to teach a large number of important skills, it makes sense to listen to families to determine where the majority of instructional time should be spent. Differences in anticipated educational outcomes can be particularly impacted by cultural aspects. Expectations for certain behavioral and social outcomes can be quite different as well as the strategies used to achieve them (Rogers-Atkinson, Ochoa, & Delgado, 2003).

Family involvement and input are of particular importance during transitional times when changes in schools or graduation occur. Carter, Clark, Cushing, and Kennedy (2007) reported a strong link between parent involvement and student achievement, especially as the student transitioned from elementary to middle school. These authors stressed the need to encourage active parent involvement especially as it may wane during secondary school. As students age, their interests and skills may change. In addition, family situations may change, impacting desired educational outcomes for the student. Ensuring the involvement of family members in educational planning helps to keep the educational team on track.

Positive Behavior Support

A strong foundational belief of this text is that all interactions with students are positive and respectful and reflect the premises of positive behavior support (PBS; see Horner, Albin, Todd, & Sprague, 2006). Although detailed information on the components of positive behavior support will not be discussed in this text, some general information will be provided on schoolwide positive behavior support. PBS represents a comprehensive, systematic, and positive approach to helping all students engage in desired school behavior (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008; Sugai, Simonsen, & Horner, 2008).

According to Horner, Sugai, Todd, and Lewis-Palmer (2005) PBS that is schoolwide is a three-tiered system. The majority of all students in a school

generally respond well to a positive, supportive, and nurturing environment that praises desired behavior, teaches appropriate ways of interacting, and arranges the learning environment to prevent behavior problems (first tier). For the 15% or so of students who need more than this primary support base, a secondary level of support is provided to directly teach desired social skills and ways of dealing with frustration and anger. At the tertiary level, individualized intervention based on specific data is designed for those few students who need this level of intensive behavioral supports. With respect to the student with moderate to severe disabilities who demonstrates very challenging behavior, nondesired behavior is not perceived as negative but as efforts by the student to communicate. A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is recommended to determine what may be initiating and maintaining the behavior for the student (Horner et al., 2006). Environments are carefully analyzed to determine potential impact on behavior. Comprehensive data are then collected on the behavior in question to determine when and where it occurs and under what conditions. The data are analyzed to determine a hypothesis regarding the intent or intents of the behavior for the student. The reason for the student to engage in the behavior (the functions it serves for the student) is then used to adjust the physical and social environment to reduce the need and/or the student is taught another way to obtain what is needed.

This assessment procedure can be lengthy and time consuming but is essential for understanding the behavior and helping the student meet specified needs in a more acceptable manner. For example, when Wyatt kept falling on the floor and screaming in his seventh-grade math class, it was not labeled as "bad" behavior. Instead, his team collected data related to the behavior, such as the time of day, activity in progress, location in the room, preceding events, consequences of the behavior, and information from home (illness, sleep patterns, etc.). The team asked what Wyatt's behavior gained for him and determined that it often followed the presentation of a math task he did not want to do. They hypothesized that the behavior was his means of commenting negatively on the task and escaping from it. To test this hypothesis, they let him choose math activities to do as well as his choice of materials to use, provided considerable support to increase his success at math, and taught him a way to say that he hated certain things (by pressing a voice output device with a pictorial symbol on it). When Wyatt's behavior improved during this class period, it was determined that the hypothesis was correct and that Wyatt needed more control over how and what he learned, as well as more support when the task was challenging.

Respect for student interest is a fundamental premise of this text. Students are not meant to be physically manipulated or forced to perform tasks, especially those for which they see no value. Rather, motivating the student to learn involves incorporating interests of the student into lessons, reinforcing positive behavior and approximations of desired behavior, and recognizing the importance of and offering the student numerous choices (Sigafoos, Arthur-Kelly, & Butterfield, 2006). For example, a student who dislikes math will be given multiple choices involving who to work with, where to work, what materials to work with, and order of activities. The student's interest in insects will be used

in math for counting, recognizing amounts, comparing amounts, and ordering numbered insects sequentially. See the book by Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwarz (2008) on using the interests and passions of students to support learning.

Self-Determination

A final premise of this book relates to positive behavior support and deals with empowering the student and demonstrating respect for individual preferences. Students, despite difficulties with communication, must be listened to and must be supported in their efforts to become self-determined. Helping students experience the world to develop their interests is a critical aspect of self-determination so that students can advocate for what they desire. Instead of forcing students to learn the same material in the same way, respecting the individual student's unique interests and strengths can encourage a greater partnership in learning between teacher and student.

Self-determination skills include (but are not limited to) choice making, problem solving, self-monitoring, decision making, goal setting, and self-advocacy. The desired outcome of self-determination is that students gain and maintain as much say as possible over their lives. Some bias may exist against students with moderate to severe disabilities who have limited communication skills and who have traditionally had minimal control over their lives (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2003). To counter this bias, every effort should be made to teach these students as many self-determination skills as possible and to give them every opportunity to practice and hone these important skills.

Much has been written about the importance of self-determination for students with disabilities (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Woodruff, & Dixon, 2005; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). In addition, benefits of self-determination for these students, which includes improved behavior, enhanced productivity, and increased contribution in class, have been noted (Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer, & Hughes, 2002; Brooks, Todd, Tofflemoyer, & Horner, 2003; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). While most self-determination studies have involved students with learning disabilities, emotional disorders, and mild intellectual impairments, the importance for all students is clear. Fowler, Konrad, Walker, Test, and Wood (2007) completed a literature review of the impact of the teaching of self-determination skills on academic skills of students with developmental disabilities. From the 11 studies reviewed, findings indicated that self-determination instruction strongly improved organizational skills for academic work and also provided some direct support for math and spelling skills. For students with significant cognitive disabilities, initial aspects of teaching self-determination involve respecting student interests and providing choices for students (Cannella, O'Reilly, & Lancioni, 2005; Realon, Favell, & Lowerre, 1990). Students without speech make their preferences known to others through their use of pictures, objects, or actions in general. There is no need to wait for formal communication or language to develop to teach self-determination.

Supporting students to advocate for themselves and their interests occurs when students are given choices of materials, sequence of activities, locations,

and so on that do not deter from the lesson but that motivate the student to learn. Starting with simple choices that lead to immediate and positive consequences for the student (e.g., choice of where to sit or stand, rewards, food, partner to work with), the student learns the skills needed to make more complex and difficult choices regarding future events (e.g., choosing to work for a reward later in the day or week). Teachers can support the development of choice making (as an early step toward self-determination) by relinquishing some control to the student. In other words, instead of giving materials to a student to work with, the teacher can present several options to the student and then honor the one(s) chosen. The student needs to learn that choices he makes will be honored by those around him, thus empowering him to make other, more complex decisions. By starting this practice in the early years of preschool and continuing to build on these skills as the student progresses through each grade, students leaving high school should have considerable practice honing these skills to be used as adults.

■ SUMMARY

This chapter introduces the topic of the text, with an emphasis on its importance in the field. While considerable change has occurred in the field with support from judicial, legislative, and advocacy areas, many students with moderate to severe disabilities are still waiting to receive a high-quality and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. It is insufficient for students with moderate or severe disabilities to be physically present in general education classrooms without receiving the individualized and systematic instruction that is needed to learn. Curricular adaptations are essential to allow cognitive, physical, sensory, and motivational access, but specific instruction for each student is also needed to ensure that learning occurs, and students are truly a part of the learning community.

Certain premises of the text have been highlighted in this chapter and will be assumed throughout the remainder of the text. These assumptions include presumed competence of all learners, the benefits of students learning together, the critical role that family members play in the education and assessment of their child, the use of a positive behavioral approach in all interactions with students, and the belief that students should be encouraged to advocate for themselves (self-determination). Such assumptions are considered critical to attaining a high-quality education for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

In Chapter 2, strategies that have been found to be effective in the teaching of students having moderate to severe intellectual disabilities will be described even though some of these strategies have been tested and employed in special education environments only. Considerable support exists for several different intervention strategies for students with moderate to severe disabilities that have helped these students learn. The importance of applying such strategies in inclusive classrooms will be stressed.