ABSTRACT

Academic Content and Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: How Teacher Interpretation and Choice Impact Access to the General Education Curriculum
A Dissertation Proposal Presented to the Faculty of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
By
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The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulates students with significant cognitive disabilities receive access to the general education curriculum and be assessed on progress and achievement on state academic content standards. Students with significant cognitive disabilities traditionally had little access to the academic content taught to other students, were held to lower expectations, and were more likely to be educated in separate classrooms (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003). IDEA provides the legal basis for students with disabilities being part of regular schools and classrooms. State policy provides minimal guidance and special educators are left to interpret, define, and create how access to the general education curriculum is manifested. There is little research on how teachers of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities choose and prioritize academic content to enable their access.

Because little is known about teacher decision making in the context of academics and significant cognitive disability, a qualitative design utilizing a theoretical framework from public policy, street level bureaucracy, will be used to explore teachers’ policy interpretation and choices of academic curriculum. Rather than seeing workers as the last link in a linear policy chain, simply carrying out what others have designed and ratified, street level theory suggests workers create and shape policy outcomes as they organize their work (Lipsky, 1980). The three aims of this study are to: (1) discover how teachers interpret their role and responsibility to create academic access, (2) understand how teacher interpretation of access and choice of academic content creates anticipated and unexpected policy outcomes, and (3) explore the relationship between teachers’ curricular decisions and the state education policy context within which teachers work.

The proposed study will employ a qualitative design in order to generate detailed and nuanced data from three sources. Data will be collected through in depth semi-structured interviews with special educators in public k-12 schools in Maine, Maine Department of Education personnel, and graduate instructors in the University of Maine system. Results will combine deductive analysis on a priori concepts from street level bureaucracy and the special education literature, with inductive theory building. First steps will involve immersion in the data, listening to the interview recordings and reviewing notes and then move from concrete steps of coding the transcripts to more abstract steps of interpretation and synthesis of themes and relationships.
This study will generate new knowledge about access to academic content for students with significant cognitive disabilities. It will provide insight into how policy is received, interpreted and used by teachers who are expected to implement it. Results will inform policymakers interested in ensuring that students with significant cognitive disabilities have access to and benefit from the general curriculum. These findings will also inform professional development for teachers, potential curriculum revisions, state policy guidance and personnel preparation.

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