

Foreword

It is with a sense of honor that I write the foreword for this book! In case you are unaware of it, let me inform you that not only is June Downing one of the preeminent scholars in the field of significant disabilities, but all of her work is grounded in the reality of both the lives of students with significant disabilities and the day-to-day operational tempo of schools. Both are replete with daily frustrations and challenges that must be met with expertise, creativity, enthusiasm, and perseverance. Each of these characteristics is evident in each chapter of this book in the explanations of practices, the importance of each practice for students with significant disabilities, and strategies for educational teams to implement each practice in their own school. Just as important, this information comes at time that is crucial for the future of students with significant disabilities. Let me explain why.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the latest reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), which mandates that all students have access to the general curriculum, have changed the dialogue related to services for students with significant disabilities in the education community. Specifically, school administrators, teachers, parents, researchers, and teacher educators are interpreting these mandates in different ways. On the one hand, some of these personnel are interpreting the mandates as being limited to a focus on the content of the formal general curriculum (i.e., core curriculum; state standards). This selective focus allows discussion of both group and one-to-one instruction on that curriculum content without regard for context. Personnel, therefore, do not comprehend the importance of context and do not call to question the instruction of students with significant disabilities in self-contained classes and schools. The logic used to support this interpretation is belief that the essence of these mandates relates only to the explicit content of the general curriculum at any grade level. This interpretation, however, does not consider several variables that inform us about effective instructional practices for students with significant disabilities. For instance, one such variable is the learning needs of students with significant disabilities. Research tells us to teach these students during naturally occurring activities in contexts that are meaningful and important to each student. Said another way, students with significant disabilities learn more content, and learn that content more quickly, when their instruction is embedded within activities that naturally occur in contexts that are naturally experienced by students of the same age and grade level. From preschool through 12th grade, this context is that of general education, including classes, school environments, curriculum content, instructional and noninstructional activities, and classmates; basically, all of the components that make up the general education experience for students who do not have disabilities at any given grade level. No self-contained setting (i.e., class or school) can replicate this general education context or, therefore, replicate the activities and experiences that are inherent within general education contexts.

A second variable that informs us about effective instructional practices for students with significant disabilities is the outcome data available from services previously provided for students with significant disabilities in self-contained settings. These longitudinal data tell us that teaching in self-contained classes and schools did not result in graduates having the desired type of high-quality life that reflects meaningful interdependence with individuals who are naturally present across real-life contexts. Such desired outcomes might be reflected in long-term employment in the competitive workplace, living in situations that are similar to those of most adults in the individual's home community, frequent access of the community consistent with the access of most adults in the individual's home community, and a natural support network that is consistent with networks of most individuals without disabilities. Neither such poor outcomes nor the type of services that historically have resulted in those outcomes (i.e., services in self-contained classes and schools) would be acceptable for general education students; for that reason they are not acceptable for any students, including students with significant disabilities. Consequently, efforts to provide access to the general curriculum must be grounded in meaningful participation in general education contexts.

A third variable that informs us about effective instructional practices for students with significant disabilities is the body of research related to educational services for students with significant disabilities. This body of research tells us that (a) students with significant disabilities can and do learn, including content from the general curriculum; (b) instructional strategies that are effective for students with significant disabilities have been identified and can be embedded in both instructional and noninstructional activities that naturally occur in contexts in which general education students are engaged (i.e., general education contexts); and (c) embedding instruction for students with significant disabilities in general education contexts results in more acquisition and use of content from the general curriculum of skills required to participate in general education contexts. Instruction, therefore, does not need to be provided using a one-to-one format and does not need to be provided in self-contained settings that are believed to limit distractions and focus students on an adult instead of other students. Not only is this type of instruction not provided in the least restrictive environment, but it also eliminates the motivation inherently present by the proximity of general education classmates and participation in the same activities as those classmates. It ignores the importance of peers, peer pressure, and the desire to be a "member of a group" with peers. It also eliminates the student's equal opportunity for incidental learning opportunities that are present for general education students across the school day.

In contrast, a second interpretation of the legislative mandates for access to the general curriculum uses a broader conceptualization of general curriculum, believing that the general curriculum extends beyond the explicit content (i.e., core; standards) and incorporates the contexts in which the explicit curriculum is taught. Such contexts are comprised of the expertise of a highly qualified general education teacher, the general education instructional strategies and activities implemented and evaluated by that teacher, the materials used during those instructional activities, and the instructional and noninstructional experiences of

the general education students. The logic used to support this interpretation is that, when the three variables discussed above (i.e., students' learning needs, outcome data, and research findings) are considered both independently and collectively, the importance and interrelatedness of curriculum, context, and instruction for students with significant disabilities become apparent (see Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer [in press] and Ryndak, Moore, & Delano [in press] for further discussion of the importance and interrelatedness of curriculum, context, and instruction). It becomes impossible to discuss curriculum in isolation from context, or context in isolation from instruction, or instruction in isolation from curriculum. Each influences the others, and each is intertwined with practices related to the others. Thus, to meet the mandates for access to the general curriculum, educational teams must embrace the provision of effective instructional practices in general education contexts and embedded within general education instruction and experiences. Interestingly, these concepts also are consistent with the findings of a study we conducted a decade ago about the components of definitions of inclusive education submitted by experts in the field of significant disabilities (see Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000). The content analysis of the submitted definitions indicated that instruction for students with significant disabilities in general education contexts does not occur on the sidelines of the class or separate from the class activities. Rather, the systematic instruction needed by students with significant disabilities can occur in the center of general education instruction, allowing all students to share experiences (i.e., the positive and the negative; the successes and the struggles) and learn general education content.

The information and strategies provided in this book for developing and implementing effective instruction in general education contexts for students with significant disabilities are based in the understanding of the importance and interrelatedness of curriculum, context, and instruction for all students but especially for students with significant disabilities. In addition, the information and strategies are grounded solidly in general education practices observed in classrooms across the country. School administrators and teachers will recognize the instructional contexts and practices described and will be able to envision how the educational team strategies will complement, rather than conflict with, their current practices. June Downing offers a wealth of expertise and experience for educational teams seeking to provide true access to the entire general curriculum for all students. Enjoy reading this book, and relish the experience of implementing its strategies and seeing the difference in your students' learning and outcomes!

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