

Southeast Regional  
Personnel Development Partnership  
(SR-PDP)

Educating Students with Low Incidence Disabilities  
Engineering the Classroom

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### Educating Students with Low Incidence Disabilities

#### *Students with severe disabilities*

The population of students described by the term severe disability is quite broad. It includes diverse subpopulations such as children with autism; people with intellectual disabilities (the term mental retardation has been used in the past); children who are deaf and blind; and students with intellectual disabilities who also have physical or sensory impairments (Wolery & Haring, 1990). The varying definitions and labels used to identify students with severe disabilities have evolved over time. A number of events in history have contributed to the way students with severe disabilities have been viewed and educated. The passage of P. L. 94-142 and the current version of the legislation, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), have heavily influenced the manner in which students with severe disabilities are discussed (i.e., people first language) and the programs and interventions chosen. The idea that students with severe disabilities are people first, can benefit from an effective education, and require the same social networks as those without disabilities characterize the most significant shifts in thinking concerning students with severe disabilities. Legislation and advancement in educational programming and intervention have resulted in numerous examples of the significant impact educators, families, and communities can have on the lives of students with severe disabilities.

In the past, students with severe disabilities have largely been characterized by their lack of skills and bleak educational outcomes (see Justen, 1976). A number of authors have abandoned this “deficit model” in favor of descriptions that emphasize a system of support provided in inclusive settings (Snell, 1991; Westling and Fox, 2000). TASH (formerly the

Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) proposed a definition of severe disabilities that emphasizes the need for extensive ongoing support in inclusive settings across the life span of the individual. People with severe disabilities:

...include individuals with disabilities of all ages, races, creeds, national origins, genders and sexual orientation who require ongoing support in one or more major life activities in order to participate in an integrated community and enjoy a quality of life similar to that available to all citizens. Support may be required for life activities such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning as necessary for community living, employment, and self-sufficiency (TASH, 2000).

The presence of severe disability in no way diminishes one's need to and right to receive the same effective educational programming and interventions that currently drive educational practice. Educating students with severe disabilities ultimately represents opportunities for educators to provide quality educational experiences.

### *The impact of inclusive education*

The broad and varying needs of students with severe disabilities indicate for some a necessity to segregate students into separate groups. This "propensity to separate" seems to stem from the assumption that students with severe disabilities do not and further can not benefit from access to the general curriculum. This notion has been dispelled by a number of inclusive programs that bring together students with severe disabilities and students without disabilities. Students with disabilities simply need consistent access to the general curriculum coupled with effective educational programming and intervention. Ryndak and Billingsley state the importance of access to the general curriculum, "one cannot learn culturally normative, important behaviors in the absence of participation in the environments and activities that are culturally normative and important," (2004, p. 37). Creating inclusive educational environments

in which students with severe disabilities receive services and support reflect a common phenomenon in our society. Individuals without disabilities derive a significant amount of support in coping with the demands of daily life from friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers (McDonnell, Hardman, and McDonnell, 2003). In short, even individuals without disabilities benefit from the support and assistance from those individuals in their lives. The same is true for students with severe disabilities who have who have access to the general curriculum in an inclusive environment. Teachers and students who work together to create fulfilling educational experiences can benefit all students.

The meaning and intent of inclusive education has been misunderstood by many educators and parents. Inclusion is not a place or a method of delivering instruction; it is a philosophy of supporting children in their learning with a byproduct of strengthening the entire system (Zaino, 1999). Proponents of inclusive education seek the most effective methods to provide quality educational experiences to all students. In addition to the theme of “effective methods for all students,” advocates of inclusive education adhere to a certain line of thinking that promotes effective programming and intervention for all students. Kennedy identified the following assumptions that can help improve educational practices for students with severe disabilities: (1) effective educators focus on abilities as well as needs, (2) all students can learn, and (3) all students can make meaningful contributions to their educational environments (2004, p. 11). A commitment to the previous assumptions can go a long way toward creating educational environments that take into account the needs and desires of all students leading to quality educational outcomes for all.

### *The need for systematic instruction*

With inclusive education as a guide, educators can go about developing and maintaining effective programming and selecting effective interventions. One of the most daunting challenges for educators is the selection of appropriate and effective interventions. Halle and colleagues have delineated a number of guiding principles to help educators design systematic instructional programs: (a) teaching meaningful and functional skills, (b) errorless learning, (c) facilitating attention to relevant stimuli, (d) providing frequent opportunities to respond and (e) providing a positive learning environment (2003, pp. 55 – 56). These guiding principles provide a framework for educators to “build” an inclusive program serving the needs of all students.

The school curriculum is sometimes characterized as all events taking place in school. This comprehensive notion about school implies that all students will be exposed to a number of experiences and learn a number of varied skills in school. This notion is not lost on the educational programming for students with severe disabilities. According to Wolery and Haring (1990) students with severe disabilities require instruction in (1) social skills needed for participation with students without disabilities, (2) community living, (3) vocational skills, (4) communication skills, (5) basic self-help skills, (6) recreation and leisure skills, and (7) domestic living skills (p. 246). This comprehensive approach to programming for students with disabilities can leave a number of educators searching for a systematic method to include all the necessary components in an inclusive program.

### *The benefit of the Low Incidence Instructional Checklist*

Educators who are charged with providing programming and interventions for students with severe disabilities have quite a challenge. For experienced and beginning educators alike creating or simply maintaining quality educational programming for students with severe disabilities can be a difficult task. This task is often magnified for those professionals providing services for students with disabilities as these students are perceived as less than able and needing “highly specialized” services. While it is true students with severe disabilities do need specialized services, it not true that it is impossible to provide these services in general education environments by educators with a variety of experience levels. This checklist is designed to help educators begin the process of developing a program for students with severe disabilities.

The checklist will assist educators understand the basic foundation necessary to create and maintain a quality program for students with severe disabilities. Educators using this checklist will be able to best determine the necessary components to not only provide a quality program, but also to create a “fit” between the needs of the students and the current state of the school curriculum.

Prior to utilizing the checklist, a task analysis by the IEP team to determine individual objectives utilizing Sunshine State Standards for ESE students must occur.

Following this, these questions should be addressed to determine where objectives for instruction are to be delivered (e.g., regular classroom, resource classroom, self-contained classroom).

## QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

### Curriculum and Instruction

1. Can the student be successful with the same activity as is? If no, then ...
2. Is the activity appropriate for the student if accommodations are made? If no, then...
3. Is the activity appropriate for the student with modifications to goals, expectations, or assessment?

### Personal Support

1. Can the student participate in the activity without personal assistance? If no, then...
2. Can the student participate in the activity with assistive technology? If no, then...
3. Is the activity appropriate for the student with personal assistance?  
Is the student able to participate among his peers in the general education classroom?  
If no, then...

### Location

1. Is the student able to participate in instruction in another part of the classroom? If no, then...
2. Is the student able to participate in instruction in another part of the school?

\*Collaborative Planning and Teaching: Flexible Supports for Inclusive Classrooms (pp. 50-52). Staff Development Activities Developed by the Florida Inclusive Network. Florida Department of Education. Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services. Funded by IDEA, Part B

## EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH LOW INCIDENCE DISABILITIES

### LOW INCIDENCE INSTRUCTIONAL CHECKLIST

#### OBJECTIVES

Observed	Observed	Not
1. Curriculum		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on Outcomes/Sunshine State Standards for</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Students with Disabilities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson Plans note functional skills objectives</li> <li>• Evaluation and measurement methods for goals</li> <li>• Collaboration OT, PT, Regular education, SLP, evidence in record-keeping</li> <li>• Age appropriate skills</li> <li>• Documented assessment of level of functioning</li> <li>• Clear directions for instruction with appropriate feedback</li> <li>• Clear expectations/monitor objectives toward achievement</li> <li>• Challenging curriculum, active learning with choices</li> <li>• IEP goals in evidence in lesson</li> <li>• Schedule displayed – picture cues</li> <li>• Portfolio of student’s work available</li> <li>• Learning centers labeled</li> <li>• Individualized, thematic</li> <li>• Prompts</li> <li>• Materials accessible – designed to meet needs of individuals</li> </ul>		
2. Social/Emotional		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proximity to regular education students</li> <li>• Positive reinforcement and reward</li> <li>• FBA &amp; BIP data collection at intervals during day</li> <li>• Highly structured behavior management and instruction</li> <li>• Strategies to achieve behavior goals including choices</li> <li>• Peer tutors or buddies</li> <li>• Promote social acceptance by age appropriate peers</li> <li>• Visual strategies to enhance meaningful comprehension</li> </ul>		

Low Incidence Instructional Checklist

Page 2

	Observed	Not Observed
3. Independent Functioning		
• Self-regulatory		
• Self-advocacy		
• Socialization with age appropriate peers		
• Supervise mobility for physical safety and behavior		
• Environmental transportation and emergency plan evident		
• Community-based instruction from initial to transition (on-the-job training)		
• Transition goals evident		
• Encourage participation		
• Adaptive equipment for individuals		
• Devices accessible		
4. Health Care		
• Daily medication/feeding toileting monitoring		
• Assistants trained in needs of students		
• Clear delineation of support personnel		
• Absence plan for employee coverage of student needs		
• Facility accessible		
• Dignity maintained		
• Rest room facilities – changing tables, privacy screen, Wheelchair		
• Clear medical plan		
• Protocol for medical procedures evident		
5. Communication		
• All staff in classroom talk to students		
• Integrated curriculum		
• Daily notebook report to agency/parent and school		
• Mode of communication clearly identified		
• Sign language, communication device, picture schedule		
• Extra batteries or tools available		
• Protocol for delivery		

### **Classroom Items for Low Incidence Disabilities**

1. Large spacious room with multiple electrical outlets on each wall, preferably located halfway up the wall instead of the floor level.
2. Kitchen sink with hot and cold water.
3. Handicap bathroom with shower and wall grips around toilet area.
4. Toilet accessible on all three sides. Ability to get wheelchair to it on either side or the front. (Toilet not close to sink, tub, counter, or changing table.)
5. Changing area with changing table or electric changing bed to be lowered and raised to appropriate height for changing and adjusting to hooyer lifts located in the handicap bathroom, if possible.
6. Privacy curtain on wheels or attached to the ceiling to be drawn for privacy, if changing area is not located in the bathroom.
7. Hoyer lift, if needed for older/heavier students.
8. "Cubbies" or lockers for each student to keep personal items (extra clothes, diapers, wipes, change of clothes.)
9. Dishwasher to wash and sterilize dishes, toys, feeding tubes used in the classroom.
10. Blender, food processor, microwave, refrigerator.
11. Adaptive feeding utensils.
12. Adaptive cups, plates, bowls.
13. Cabinets to hold all feeding supplies, dishes, etc.
14. Large round or square table(s) for group activities (numbers would depend on class size).
15. Smaller tables used for individual activities such as computer station, music station, reading station, etc.
16. Adaptive positioning equipment: mat table, wedges, soft pillows, tumbleform equipment for positioning and sitting, Rifton chairs with trays on wheels, standers, etc.
17. Telephone.
18. Radio or walkie-talkie for immediate assistance from other staff.
19. Windows for natural light.
20. Gloves, never-ending supply!
21. Easels, slant boards, CD players, tape players, computers, printers, digital camera, art supplies, curriculum software, radios, video player, TV, headphones, Velcro.
22. Large floor mats.
23. Stove and all kitchen utensils, cookware, pots, pans, storage containers, silverware, dishes, washer/dryer.

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