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Special Educators' Perspectives of Aligning Individual Education Program Goals of Students with Severe Disabilities with the General Education Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Special Educators' Perspectives of Aligning Individual Education Program Goals of Students

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Aligning Individual Education Program (IEP) goals of students with severe disabilities with the general education curriculum is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA). This study sought to determine the perspectives of special educators regarding this requirement. Special educators from three school districts participated in focus groups to offer their perspectives in aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum. The researchers also sought the special educators' perspectives with regards to providing access to the general education curriculum. The study found that special educators are striving to align IEP goals through the use of general education classes, the extended core, and portfolios. The main approaches to providing access to the core curriculum were general education classes, peer tutors, and adapted curriculum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) governs the education of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have not always been granted the right to a free and appropriate public education. IDEIA grants this right to students with disabilities and requires that the students receive access to the general education curriculum. Providing appropriate access to the general education curriculum for students with severe cognitive disabilities can be a challenge due to the discrepancy between student achievement and the standards. Each student with a disability has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) under IDEIA. The IEP contains measureable annual goals that guide the educational progress of the student. The goals outlined in the student's IEP should be aligned with the general education curriculum. Further, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) establishes the academic standards that *all* students must reach to show adequate yearly progress.

Special educators face a challenge of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum while ensuring that the individual needs of their students are met. This alignment is especially challenging for teachers of students with severe disabilities because the students are generally functioning at academic levels significantly below their assigned grade level in the general curriculum. The discrepancy between ability level and assigned grade level is greater at the secondary level than at the elementary level. It is a significant challenge to align IEP goals to the 12th grade general education curriculum for a 17-year-old student who is functioning academically at a first-grade level. Except for one percent of students with the most severe disabilities, aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum is a requirement of IDEIA (Title I (B)(614)(d)(II)(aa)). Teachers thus need to determine how to meet the requirements of the law while still meeting the individual needs of the students.

Statement of Problem

Aligning IEP goals for students with severe disabilities presents a significant challenge to special educators. Many authors have researched what needs to be done to meet the needs of the students and comply with the law (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Clark, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2004; Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005; Dymond & Orelove, 2001; Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, & Agran, 2004; Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006). However, it is not clear how to address the developmental ability of the student while aligning to the general education curriculum. Thus further research is needed to clarify how to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum while still meeting the individual needs of students with severe disabilities.

Courtade-Little and Browder (2005) suggest six guidelines for aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum: (1) "become familiar with state standards" (p. 14), (2) "become familiar with the state's approach to alternate achievement standards" (p. 18), (3) "keep the planning student-focused" (p. 19), (4) "consider both specific academic goals and broad access goals" (p. 20), (5) "ask the question, 'Is it really reading and really math?'" (p. 22), and (6) "do not 'force fit' all IEP objectives into alignment with academic standards" (p. 24). Four approaches have documented support, including "peer supports, self-determination, universal design for learning, and teaching and assessing content standards" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 278). These authors suggest various methods of providing access to the general education curriculum. However, it is not clear that educators are employing these methods to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

This problem affects educators, students, and parents. Educators are impacted because they are required to create the alignment between IEP goals and the general education curriculum. This is a great challenge that many special educators may not know how to

approach. Students with disabilities are impacted because their education is guided by their IEPs. The goals in the IEP need to meet their needs as well as give them access to the general education curriculum (IDEIA, TITLE I)(D)(662)(b)(2)(A)(ii)). To make it more complicated, the needs of each student will vary greatly, since each disability affects each student differently. Parents of students with severe disabilities are affected because their child's education is guided by the IEP, which in turn can determine the direction of their child's life. Many parents want their child to receive an appropriate education and be successful. Their child's education greatly impacts how successful they will be when they exit the educational system. Aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum is intended to help improve their child's educational outcomes.

All special educators must comply with IDEIA. It is their responsibility to determine how to write IEP goals that will meet the requirements of aligning to the general education curriculum and the individual needs of the students. Since educators implement instruction, they therefore determine what to teach and must give students with an IEP access to the same standards and objectives in special education as in general education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of special educators of students with severe disabilities regarding aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. We want to know about their knowledge of the requirement to align IEP goals with the general curriculum. We also want to know their perceptions of meeting the government's requirement of accessing the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities. What are these educators doing to teach their students important functional skills while addressing the standards of the general education curriculum? In our association with colleagues, we have found that there

are many who are struggling with this challenge. Therefore, we would also like to know the barriers special educators are facing in meeting these requirements.

Research Questions

In order to meet the purposes of this research, the following questions will be answered:

1. What are the perceptions of special educators of secondary students with severe disabilities regarding the alignment of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals to the general education curriculum?

2. How are special educators meeting the requirement of giving students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum?

It is anticipated that we will discover the barriers special educators are facing when striving to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum. If we can identify the barriers, perhaps we will find possible solutions or can suggest further research that is needed to help special educators overcome these barriers.

Review of the Literature

General Background

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) outlines the standards that all students, including those with disabilities, must meet to show adequate yearly progress (AYP) and proficiency. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) is the federal law that currently governs special education and outlines the requirements to educate students with disabilities. When IDEIA was reauthorized in 2004, Congress attempted to align IDEIA to the standards of NCLB. The alignment of these two laws has created a conflict of expectations, especially for students with severe disabilities. Under IDEIA students with disabilities have an Individual Education Program (IEP) that outlines the individual needs and educational program of each student, which must be also aligned with the general education curriculum. According to NCLB, all students must show progress and proficiency based on their performance on standardized state assessments. Prior to NCLB, students with disabilities showed progress through their performance on their individual goals outlined in their IEP. Students with severe disabilities are now expected to meet the same standards as their non-disabled peers (Ratcliffe & Willard, 2006). However, IDEIA does provide for one percent of students with the most severe disabilities to show academic progress through an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (Federal Register, Rules and Regulations, 72, 67, 2007).

IDEIA defines a student with a disability as a child with [intellectual disability], hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, … orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health

impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services (IDEIA, Section 602(3)(A)(i)(ii)).

Students with a mild-to-moderate disability generally includes students with a learning disability, communication disorder, emotional disorder, or behavior disorder and require minimal accommodations to access the general education curriculum. A student with a severe disability generally includes students who require significant accommodations and adaptations to gain access to the general education curriculum or students who may require an alternative curriculum. The following disabilities are generally considered part of the severe spectrum: intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, autism, significant hearing impairments, or vision impairments. Some disabilities such as autism, learning disabilities, or intellectual disabilities, could span the entire spectrum from mild to severe. The cognitive ability and the adaptations required will most likely determine if the student's disability is mild, moderate, or severe (Carter, Prater, & Dyches, 2009).

The general education curriculum is defined as the essential knowledge and skills all students must learn. It is a course of study that is outlined by each state (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006). The curriculum can contain academic content standards and achievement standards. Content standards define what students should know; achievement standards are how students show mastery of the content (Spooner & Browder, 2006).

Laws Governing Access to the General Curriculum

The No Child Left Behind Act. When IDEIA was reauthorized in 2004, it was aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act, which has five underlying principles: accountability, highly qualified teachers, scientifically-based instruction, local flexibility, and safe schools (Turnbull, 2005). Each of these principles will be discussed briefly.

NCLB holds schools accountable for student progress and learning. Students are assessed annually and must meet standards-based criteria to demonstrate that schools are effective. If students fail to make adequate yearly progress, schools can be penalized and lose funding.

All teachers must be highly qualified in the subjects they teach. This means that a teacher must hold a bachelor's degree in the academic subject area they are teaching and demonstrate a high level of competency in it. Competency can be demonstrated by passing a state test or by "successful completion, in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, of an academic major, a graduate degree, coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major, or advanced certification or credentialing" (NCLB, Title IX, Part A, sec. 9101, 23, B, ii, II).

Teachers are required to use scientifically based research to guide instruction and practice. Scientifically based research means "research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs" (NCLB, Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101, 37). This applies to the programs, curriculum, and methods used by teachers. The purpose of using scientifically based research is to ensure that teachers are using reliable and valid methods of instruction.

The Local Education Authority (LEA) and State Education Authority (SEA) are given more flexibility in the allocation of funds and programs to facilitate accountability for their outcomes. The local flexibility demonstration agreement needs to include a five-year plan illustrating how the LEA plans to use funds to improve student achievement (NCLB, Chp B, Sec 6141, c, 4).   The LEA and SEA can allocate funds to the programs they find necessary to achieve adequate yearly progress, improve student achievement and narrow the achievement gap.

NCLB seeks to create safe schools because teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn in a hostile, volatile environment. Striving for safe schools is an important part of NCLB. A

variety of programs are included in the law which help provide "safe and healthy learning environments where violence, gangs and drugs are not present and school staff are prepared to respond to crisis situations" (US Department of Education, 2005, p. 6).

The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act. IDEIA is founded on six principles. The first principle is Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), which is defined as

> special education and related services that (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and directions, and without charge; (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(d) (Section 602(9)).

The second principle is appropriate evaluation. Appropriate evaluation is the process of a multi-disciplinary team gathering appropriate data to determine if the student has a disability that adversely affects his or her educational progress in the general curriculum and, by reason thereof, needs specialized education (Gibb & Dyches, 2007; Utah Program Improvement Planning System, 2006). Appropriate evaluation includes reliance on more than one technically sound, valid, and reliable measure that is selected and administered to avoid cultural or racial discrimination and assesses the student in all the domains of the suspected disability (Gibb & Dyches).

The third principle is an Individual Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a written legal document outlining how the child's disability adversely affects their progress in the general education curriculum and how the child will gain access to the general education curriculum. There are several components that must be included in an IEP. There must be a statement that

outlines the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance. IEPs must also include academic and functional goals designed to "meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum" (Section 614 (II)(aa)). For students taking alternate achievement assessments an IEP must also include a statement describing benchmarks or short-term objectives (Title I (B)(614)(d)(1)(A)).

The fourth principle is Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE is the extent to which a student with a disability is educated in a general education classroom or a more restrictive setting. Students with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers as often as is appropriate. This decision is made by the IEP team based upon the severity and nature of a student's disability. Removal from the general education environment should only occur when achievement is not obtained with the use of appropriate supplementary aids and services (Gibb & Dyches, 2007).

The fifth principle is parental and student participation. Parents and students must be included in all decisions regarding the education of the student with disabilities. They are vital members of the IEP team and must be invited to all IEP meetings.

The sixth principle is procedural safeguards. Schools are required to establish and monitor procedures to guarantee parents their procedural safeguards in the special education process. Procedural safeguards provide parents and students with the information necessary to make appropriate decisions regarding the special education process. The procedural safeguards include the rights that the parents and students have in obtaining a free and appropriate education. It also includes information regarding the process to resolve a dispute if necessary (UPIPS, 2006). It also means that parents have access to their child's educational records and

must receive written notice and provide written consent before action is taken regarding their child's education (Gibb & Dyches, 2007).

Conflicts between NCLB and IDEIA. Multiple difficulties arise with the aligning of NCLB and IDEIA, especially for students with severe cognitive disabilities. It has been suggested that the alignment of these two laws shows "how very universalistic and less exceptionalistic IDEA has become. It is 'mainstream' disability policy, of course, but it also has become part of the mainstream of education policy" (Turnbull, 2005, p. 323). As IDEIA becomes mainstream education policy, there is conflict between NCLB and IDEIA in the definition of 'proficient,' in meeting eligibility criteria, and in expected growth.

NCLB requires *all* children to meet standards of proficiency. Proficiency is defined differently in NCLB and IDEIA. NCLB defines proficiency according to a student's math and reading scores on standardized state assessments. Special educators and IDEIA define proficiency according to multiple factors, not just academic performance and test scores. It is suggested that, "so long as NCLB measures 'success' as a fixed point of achievement on a scale, students with disabilities–as a subgroup–will not be considered 'proficient'" (Ratcliffe & Willard, 2006, p. 3). If proficiency is determined exclusively by reading and math scores it "fails to address skills and abilities that lead to proficiency as adults in the community and as participants in higher education or the workforce, not only for students with disabilities, but for other students as well" (Ratcliffe & Willard, p. 5).

On the other hand, IDEIA does provide for one percent of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to show proficiency through an alternate assessment aligned with modified achievement standards. However, this does not limit the number of students who can participate in an alternate assessment, only the number of students whose scores can count towards AYP (Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 67, 2007). This exception allows students with

severe disabilities to show their progress and learning through an alternate route, which can be beneficial for them.

In order for a child to qualify for services under IDEIA, they must exhibit a disability that adversely affects their progress and achievement in the general education curriculum. However, NCLB requires all students to meet grade-level standards in order to show proficiency. Meeting the requirements for NCLB would seem to disqualify them for IDEIA. It has been suggested that the two laws are "diametrically opposed" (Ratcliffe & Willard, 2006, p. 1) because students with severe cognitive disabilities that adversely affect progress in the general curriculum may experience extreme difficulty in meeting the same standards as students without disabilities.

Ratcliffe and Willard (2006) suggest other options to show proficiency. Policymakers could provide stipulations that allow students with disabilities to show progress based on their growth from year to year rather than requiring them to reach a certain standard on a proficiency scale. It is suggested that it would also be beneficial for students with disabilities if they could demonstrate proficiency in multiple areas such as social, emotional, and functional life skills. If states could include other types of data to determine proficiency, then students with disabilities may be more able to show progress and demonstrate proficiency.

One of the purposes of NCLB is to close the achievement gap. This is a noble principle and goal. Many students have benefited from an increased focus on standards-based achievement. However, it is suggested that students with disabilities, especially students with severe disabilities, are so far behind their non-disabled peers that they would have to achieve "one year of growth or multiple years of growth in one year to close the achievement gap. This expectation is not supported by any research or data developed since the inception of the federal special education mandate" (Ratcliffe & Willard, 2006, p. 3).

Benefits of aligning NCLB and IDEIA. Although there are conflicts with the alignment of NCLB and IDEIA, the mandate does have benefits. Students with significant disabilities now have the potential to "access, participate and progress in the general education curriculum" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 280). This access can broaden the horizons of students with significant cognitive disabilities by giving them access to knowledge and skills they may not have had previously. They are now "included in school reform and accountability efforts, thus increasing the focus of education on meeting the needs of all students" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 280).

Benefits of accessing the general education curriculum. Increasing access to the general education curriculum has been promoted to help prepare students for adult living in the community. Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, and Karvonen (2007) offer four reasons why access to the general education curriculum is beneficial for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

First, the purpose of education reform for all students is to increase adult competence. Standards-based reform was inspired by *A Nation at Risk,* published in 1983. This publication criticized the education system of the United States for not properly preparing their youth to be competent adults. Standards-based reform then began to clearly outline the skills each student should obtain in hopes to "improve the activity of life" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 3).

Second, educators have continually increased their expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. In the 1980s, educators believed that students with significant cognitive disabilities could gain the skills necessary to prepare them for life in the community. While not many students have achieved complete independence, many individuals have increased community access. "The most recent expectation is that this population can learn academic content that is related to grade-level standards and that is beneficial to their lives" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 3). Although not all of the students will make vast improvements, it can

be expected that more can make academic progress if they are given opportunities to learn from the general curriculum (Browder, et al., 2007).

Third, students with significant cognitive disabilities deserve an "equal educational opportunity. Historically, reading instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities has been underemphasized" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 3). Reading instruction has frequently focused on sight words, often grocery words, and not on other academic skills. In the past, this population has received little instruction in academic content. "No research exists indicating that mastering a certain number of functional life skills is a prerequisite to academic learning or that academic instruction will compete with this ongoing priority" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 4).

Fourth, teachers are encouraged to "give students increased means and opportunities for self-determination" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 4). Making choices and expressing preferences are valued rights in U.S. society. "For students with limited communication abilities, preferences often must be inferred from responses to activities and opportunities" (Browder et al., 2007, p. 4). When a student is not given the exposure to academic content, there is no way of knowing if they might enjoy or excel in it. Increasing students' skills gives them greater power in expressing their preferences and interests.

The problem with access and accountability. Due to recent changes in legislation, standards-based accountability is now emphasized, whereas previous regulations have required compliance through applying individualized goals and instruction (Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003). All students, including those with disabilities, are expected to make academic progress in the general education curriculum. IDEIA states that students with disabilities must have an IEP that includes a statement regarding how the student will "be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum" (Section 614(d)(II)(aa)). This is particularly

challenging for students with severe disabilities and even more challenging for such students in secondary settings.

Students with severe cognitive disabilities function at academic levels significantly below their assigned grade level in the general education curriculum. In order for these students to access the general education curriculum, special educators may need to make significant adaptations and accommodations to meet the needs of the students. How can teachers provide access to the general education curriculum for students with severe cognitive disabilities in a manner that is productive and meaningful?

Access to the General Education Curriculum

There are multiple ways of providing access to the general education curriculum. Spooner et al. (2006) suggest that "defining Access to the General Education Curriculum for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities encompasses multiple dimensions involving access, participation, student progress, and location of service" (p. 277).

Spooner and Browder (2006) note that access to the general education curriculum occurs when instruction and assessment align with the state standards. However, they clarify that "access does not mean that all educational goals link to academic content standards" (p. 2). Students could have IEP goals that address their needs, but may not necessarily be linked to a content standard. Students with severe disabilities often need to develop skills in areas in addition to academic content. For example, a student may need a goal in toileting. However, such a skill is not included in the general education curriculum.

The IEP goals of students with disabilities outline how they will access and make progress in the general education curriculum. "The law does not specify how or where students access the general curriculum" (Dymond & Orelove, 2001, p. 115). Students could access the general education curriculum in a general education classroom or a special education classroom.

"Equally important, it remains questionable whether student opportunities to pursue the general curriculum will differ based on placement" (Dymond & Orelove, p. 115). Will students receive the same access in a self-contained special education classroom as they would in a general education classroom? Does the special educator have sufficient training in the content to truly give access to the general education curriculum? If we look at the arguments in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), we are reminded that separate is not necessarily equal.

Selecting and accessing appropriate curriculum. Special educators must write IEP goals that align to the general education curriculum of the assigned grade level of the student. "The 'assigned' grade level is usually based on chronological age which for students with significant cognitive disabilities typically differs from the instructional grade level" (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005, p. 15). Aligning to the assigned grade level ensures that the students are learning the same concepts as their peers and that students are receiving age-appropriate instruction. Teaching the curriculum according to chronological age allows the student to learn new tasks and skills that he or she has not learned previously (Spooner & Browder, 2006). The IEP is not intended to define all instruction nor does it function as the student's curriculum. Rather it sets priorities for what the student will master and how he or she will access the broader content (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

Issues and challenges in implementing the general education curriculum. There are many challenges to implementing the general education curriculum with students with severe disabilities. The challenges include aligning to and adapting the general education curriculum through IEP goals, professional development of teachers, communication between general educators and special educators, and finding a balance between individual needs and state standards.

Aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities in high school or junior high school can be especially challenging if the gap between the student's academic achievement and the curriculum is large (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). This occurs most often and is most critical for students with severe disabilities. A student with a severe disability may be in junior high or high school, but their academic skills may be at an elementary level. When this occurs it presents a particular challenge for teachers who must meet the individual needs of the student and align their IEP goals with the general education curriculum. Teachers will often have to adapt the standards to the instructional level of the student. This can be done by finding the educational essence of the standards. When teachers adapt the standards for the student, they need to ensure that the student is performing the skill required even though the skill is adapted to the student's level.

Throughout the adaptation of standards, teachers need to ensure that the student is actively participating in the curriculum. "Active participation occurs in the general curriculum when the student acquires independent responses that demonstrate understanding of the academic content standard" (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005, p. 27). An independent response is one that a student can produce without assistance. This is essential in order to ensure that the student understands and can demonstrate what he or she is being taught. If they are not responding independently or actively, it is not a true determination of their comprehension.

McLaughlin (2000) discusses the concerns special education and general education teachers have of meeting the requirements of NCLB. Her conclusions are based upon her research of five school districts throughout the United States that was conducted over a four-year period. Information was gathered through interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews. She notes that "perhaps the most overriding concern expressed by the teachers was how to deliver these standards and meet these high expectations for *all* students" (p. 22). Teachers

are concerned about all students meeting the high expectations when several of the students are significantly behind. Teachers felt that there was an ever-increasing amount of information, skills, concepts, and processes that are expected to be taught. Due to the increased amount of information, the pace of instruction must increase, resulting in insufficient time to re-teach skills or catch students up.

Special educators have historically focused on essential, functional skills that will help students prepare for the future. Students with severe disabilities often require individualized instruction and large amounts of time to master a skill. With this is mind, "at what point does instruction on a particular academic skill become nonfunctional and unnecessary in helping a student prepare for future environments?" (Dymond & Orelove, 2001, p. 116). Special educators must determine when to focus on essential skills and when to focus on meeting the state standards. Although this could result in students not meeting the requirements of NCLB, it may be done in the best interest of the student and focus on what the student needs most to be successful in functional living.

Professional development of teachers also plays a role in students gaining access to the general education curriculum. Teachers must be adequately trained to provide the necessary services for students with severe disabilities. Spooner et al. (2006) claim that school personnel graduating from institutions of higher education are not adequately prepared to enter the teaching field. "Many special education teachers in the field do not have sufficient content background to be active partners in the curriculum due to the categorical emphasis of their teacher training program" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 277). Differentiated instruction is a teaching method that involves "identifying and modifying the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 278). This method would be extremely beneficial for students

with severe disabilities. However, Spooner et al. suggest that differentiated instruction is often not found because teachers do not know how to implement it.

Communication between general educators and special educators is vital to create access to the general education curriculum. At the beginning of McLaughlin's (2000) study, there had been some confusion when placing a student with disabilities in a general education classroom. Educators believed that students with disabilities were included in the general education classroom to participate in the general curriculum and make *some* progress. However, the expectations of academic progress were unclear. With the implementation of NCLB, the progress required by all students is clearer. Educators are more aware of the specific requirements for all students. Students with disabilities, except for one percent of those with the most severe disabilities, must learn what is being taught in the general education classroom because they will be tested on the curriculum at the end of the year (McLaughlin, 2000).

Determining the proper placement in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for students with severe disabilities can be very challenging for IEP teams. Students should be physically present in general education settings to gain access to the general curriculum. "When students are in separate sites there are major barriers in providing Access to the General Education Curriculum" (Spooner et al. 2006, p. 278). Some of the barriers of a separate placement include not receiving the same instruction and not participating in the same assessments. The placement must be the most appropriate for the student and his or her individual needs. However, access to the general education curriculum must still occur in every setting. It just may look different in different settings.

Perhaps one of the most overarching challenges of implementing the general education curriculum is "that of determining how to balance the development of individualized goals and objectives for students with the need to simultaneously address state standards" (Dymond &

Orelove, 2001, p. 118). The individual needs of students with disabilities are great and vast. It is difficult and demanding to find the proper alignment to the state standards for each individual while also ensuring that the curriculum is meaningful and functional (Dymond & Orelove, 2001).

Standards are designed to be the basis from which curriculum is designed. "The current literature on severe disabilities supports the development of a curriculum that is based on each student's individual needs and preferences, ensures access to the general curriculum, addresses functional skills, and develops social competence" (Dymond & Orelove, 2001, p. 117). Students with disabilities should receive this curriculum instruction along with their peers without disabilities as often as possible.

Some states have chosen to provide access to the general education curriculum by creating access skills, which are the critical functions needed to reach the standard. This "broadens the state standards and allows students to pursue both functional and academic skills as they relate to the general curriculum" (Dymond & Orelove, 2001, p. 118). Students with disabilities can greatly benefit from utilizing access skills because they are intended to provide a way for the students to access the general education curriculum.

Accountability for the results of alternate assessments could also influence how IEP goals are written. If the rewards and sanctions for schools are determined by the results of alternate assessments, "it is possible that IEP teams may find it necessary to write IEPs based on the state standards rather than the student's individualized needs and preferences" (Dymond & Orelove, 2001, p. 118). It is suggested that the integrity of the IEP process may be difficult to maintain with this shift towards standards-based accountability.

Possible approaches to accessing the general education curriculum. Teachers may use several approaches to provide students with disabilities access to the general curriculum.

Examples include peer support, self-determination, universal design for learning, and teaching

and assessing content standards. Each will be discussed.

　　　Peer support. Students with disabilities can gain access to the general education

curriculum through the support of their peers. Peer support "use[es] one or more chronological

age-appropriate peers without disabilities to provide social and academic support to a student

with disabilities" (Spooner et al., 2006, p. 278). Peers can provide guidance and assistance to

students with disabilities when they are in general education or special education settings. Peers

are trained to provide support by giving instruction on IEP goals, adapting class activities to the

needs of the student, helping students with disabilities communicate with others, and other

possible strategies. They can help provide the link students with disabilities may need to gain

access to the general education curriculum. Peer support appears to also provide opportunities for

more frequent interactions and higher levels of active participation of students with and without

disabilities (Spooner et al., 2006).

　　　Self-determination. Self determination is the ability to set goals and measure progress for

oneself. The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) is one model that has

been empirically studied. SDLMI is a "model of teaching that enables educators to teach students

to self-direct learning by enabling them to set educational goals, develop action plans to achieve

those goals, and self-evaluate progress toward those goals" (Palmer et al., 2004, p. 430). This

model empowers the students to self-direct their educational goals and objectives. It can be used

to grant access to the general education curriculum for students with severe disabilities.

　　　Universal design for learning. Universal design for learning (UDL) begins with the

development of the curriculum. The curriculum designers consider the wide range of diverse

learners when developing the curriculum and create a flexible curriculum with built-in supports

for all learners. Thus, "the curriculum as inherently designed can work for all learners"

(Hitchcock et al., 2002, p. 9). When the curriculum is more flexible there is less demand for accommodations or modifications, since the needs of all learners have been considered from the beginning. UDL also transfers the burden of adaptation away from special educators and students and leads to the development of a universal curriculum for all learners. "Building a curriculum with inherent flexibility… helps teachers maintain educational integrity and maximize consistency of instructional goals and methods, *while still individualizing learning*" (Hitchcock et al., p. 9).

   Teaching and assessing content standards. Individuals working for state departments of instruction have been analyzing the general education curriculum and developing an alternative or extended curriculum. States have many different names for their alternate curriculum. However, each curriculum identifies the key skills and concepts students need to learn. The states then align the alternate assessment to the alternate curriculum, which is aligned to the general education curriculum. If the alternate assessments are aligned with the general education curriculum, students with disabilities are more likely to access the general education curriculum through academic instruction (Spooner et al., 2006).

Aligning IEP Goals to the General Education Curriculum

   Courtade-Little and Browder (2005) suggest six guidelines to help teachers align IEP goals to state standards. These guidelines are: (1) "become familiar with state standards" (p. 14), (2) "become familiar with the state's approach to alternate achievement standards" (p. 18), (3) "keep the planning student-focused" (p. 19), (4) "consider both specific academic goals and broad access goals" (p. 20), (5) "ask the question, 'Is it really reading and really math?'" (p. 22), and (6) "do not 'force fit' all IEP objectives into alignment with academic standards" (p. 24). Each of these standards will be discussed briefly.

Guideline one. Being familiar with state standards is essential when aligning IEP goals. Special educators need to be familiar with the state standards for all the grade levels and subjects that they teach. This can be a very overwhelming and demanding requirement because special educators teach multiple grade levels and subjects. Special educators are generally trained in specific teaching methods and strategies rather than the general education curriculum. Special educators need to be familiar with the general education curriculum for the grades that they teach so that they can focus on aligning to the assigned grade level of the student. However, special educators must also consider the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance when writing the IEP goals (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

Guideline two. Alternate achievement standards could help guide special educators in aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum. "[Alternate achievement] standards don't replace the academic content standards that apply to all students, but instead define a different level of achievement needed to be considered proficient" (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005, p. 18). The general educator on the IEP team could be very beneficial in understanding the requirements of the state standards. In high school it may be beneficial to have a general educator from each subject area to help align IEP goals to the general education curriculum.

Guideline three. The IEP team should focus on the individual abilities and needs of the student. The team members could begin by discussing what the student has recently accomplished. When the team is familiar with the abilities and recent accomplishments of the student, they can then "identify skills that can be used to promote access to the grade level content and accommodations and supports that will be needed" (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005, p. 19).

Guideline four. The purpose of the IEP is not to recreate the entire general education curriculum. Instead, the IEP should have goals that focus on the individual priorities and skills needed to access the broader curriculum (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

Guideline five. Special educators need to ensure that when they are adapting the standard to the individual need of the student the true essence of the standard is not lost. Asking the question "Is it really reading?" helps the special educator recognize if the student is still meeting the essence of the standard (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

Guideline six. It is better to begin with the academic standard and develop academic goals from the standard than to force fit a functional goal into an academic standard. It is easier to adjust the standard to the student than the student to the standard. Not all IEP goals will align with the general education curriculum because some students may have individual and functional needs that are not addressed in the general education curriculum standards (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

Focus Groups as a Research Method

Focus groups are a form of research that first surfaced in social and consumer sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. In consumer sciences, they have generally been used to conduct research on consumers' opinions of products. Other fields have used focus groups to uncover the opinions and viewpoints of marginal groups (Morgan, 1996).

A focus group is a "discussion in which a small number (usually six to 12) of respondents, under the guidance of a moderator, talk about topics that are believed to be of special importance to the investigation" (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981, p. 444). Participants are selected from a target group whose opinions and ideas are pertinent to the research being conducted. The focus group session is "conducted as an open conversation in which each participant may comment, ask questions of other participants, or respond to comments by others,

including the moderator" (Folch-Lyon & Trost, p. 444). Information pertaining to the research questions is obtained from this discussion. The moderator guides the discussion through the use of a questioning route and introduces the topics in a non-biased manner. It is essential that the moderator guide the discussion and encourage participation from the respondents without influencing the opinion of the group.

The questioning route is the list of questions developed to lead the discussion. It is essential in conducting the focus group sessions because it guides the discussion and allows participants to express their opinions. The questions developed should be conversational and use the language that the participants would use when discussing the topic. The questions must be clear and ask what is intended. They should usually be short, one-dimensional, and open-ended. The questions need to be easy to say so that the moderator does not stumble over the wording of the questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The questioning route must be fluid, allowing the questions to flow easily from one to the next. The first few questions need to get the conversation started. The first question should be answered by everyone, encouraging participation and creating a comfortable environment. The questions should also flow from general to specific. As the discussion continues, more specific questions should be asked. The time available needs to be used wisely, ensuring that there is sufficient time for the more important questions generally asked in the latter part of the session (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus groups are a research method that gives a voice to outlying groups. The participants are empowered by being able to express their feelings and opinions during the focus group session. Focus groups are generally used in the business world to determine the viewpoints of consumers. However, they are a great method to use to discover the viewpoints of small groups (Morgan, 1996).

Strengths of focus groups. Focus groups can be a very beneficial method of research depending on the type of information a researcher is seeking. Focus groups can provide insight to participants' complex behavior and motivators because participants can explain their behavior and motivators during the focus group session. This can be especially helpful in comparison to other research methods where participants do not have the opportunity to explain the causes behind their actions (Morgan, 1996).

Researchers can also observe how participants agree and disagree since such information manifests during the session. Participants can question each other and explain themselves to one another. One particular benefit is that, as the participants discuss the topic and respond to the questions, they work together to create a response or resolution. The resolution is usually greater than any one person alone could have created (Morgan, 1996).

Weaknesses of focus groups. One weakness of conducting focus groups is the influence of the moderator on the group discussion. The moderator could influence and bias the data depending on his or her interaction with the participants. Agar and MacDonald (1995) conducted a discourse analysis comparing a set of individual interviews and a single focus group. They discovered that sometimes the "moderator's efforts to guide the group discussion had the ironic consequence of disrupting the interaction that was the point of the group" (Morgan, 1996, p. 140). The moderator's behavior definitely has an effect on the outcome of the focus group session. However, this is not solely found in focus groups. Interview and survey research can also be influenced by the interviewer.

Another weakness of focus groups is that occasionally participants' attitudes may become more extreme after the focus group session. However, in research conducted by Morgan (1996), this only accounted for "4% of the variance in attitude change" (p. 140). This type of variance is not likely to alter the results of most focus groups.

When to use focus group interviews. Krueger and Casey (2000) list situations in which it is appropriate to use focus group interviews as a research method. If the researchers want to find a "range of ideas or feelings people have about something" (p. 24), or "the purpose is to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation" (p. 24), focus groups are a good choice. Focus groups can be especially insightful when researchers are looking into complicated problems and are looking for explanations of behavior that may be influenced by multiple forces. Focus groups can also be helpful when the researchers want new "ideas to emerge from the group" (p. 24), since the group as a whole can produce more than individuals alone.

Alternately, Krueger and Casey (2000) outline when focus groups would not be the most beneficial or effective research method. The situations not appropriate for the implementation of focus group research include those in which the researchers want the participants to come to a consensus or want to educate the participants. If the researchers are looking for statistical projections or do not "intend to use the results but instead want to give the appearance of listening" (p. 24), focus groups would be detrimental to the research. Focus groups would not be beneficial "if the situation is already emotionally charged, and a group discussion is likely to intensify the conflict" (p. 24). Finally, when other methodologies can produce better quality of information or can more economically produce the same quality, focus groups are not the best option.

Methods

In this study, we are seeking the perceptions of special educators of secondary students with severe disabilities regarding the alignment of Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals to the general core curriculum. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of special educators of secondary students with severe disabilities regarding the alignment of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals to the general education curriculum?

2. How are special educators meeting the requirement of giving students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum?

Research Design

After obtaining approval from the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board, we used focus groups as our research method. We found participants by contacting at least four of the local school districts. We contacted the Special Education Directors in each district. We requested the email addresses of the special educators who teach students with severe disabilities in grades 7-12. We sent introductory letters through email to these teachers. The letters outlined the purpose of the study, invited them to participate, and described the incentives provided if they participate. The email also included a copy of the question route and consent form. We held the focus group sessions in a central location within the school districts of the participants.

When the participants arrived at the focus group session, they were greeted by the moderator and given a copy of the consent form to sign. Participants received name tags so that they can address each other by name. Copies of the questions were distributed to the participants to give them a visual reference to the questions. The moderator began the focus group session. The moderator guided the discussion of the participants through the questioning route. The

session was audio-and video-recorded by the assistant moderator to facilitate analysis of the discussion.

I received training through a course on focus groups. I conducted at least two practice focus groups with peers before beginning our research to practice the skills required to properly conduct a focus group.

Rationale

Focus groups can access multiple people in a shorter period of time in comparison to individual interviews. The interaction of participants was an appealing aspect of focus groups because it allows new ideas to form as the participants discuss the topic and interact with each other. This was especially appealing in relation to this current research topic as special educators may approach the challenge of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum using different methods. Multiple methods of aligning goals to the general curriculum were discovered as teachers discussed the methods they were using.

Focus groups are especially helpful in determining how and why individuals do what they do (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). As we sought to know how special educators are aligning IEP goals to the core curriculum and their perceptions of this legal requirement, focus groups provided an efficient means to discover this information.

Participants

Participants were special educators of secondary-aged students with severe disabilities. Secondary is defined as grades 7th -12th. Letters were sent to possible participants inviting them to attend the focus group session. Teachers were selected from school districts across the Wasatch Front, in order to include teachers from at least six different school districts. This avoided possible bias from individual districts. Different districts may handle the requirement of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum in different manners. Some districts may

have had more training on aligning IEP goals than others. Some districts may hold teachers more responsible in aligning goals. It was intriguing to learn how each district approached the situation.

Settings

The focus groups were held in a central location for the teachers participating. We conducted at least three focus group sessions with about two to three participants. It needed to be a neutral location that is easily accessible. Possible locations included schools or other public buildings within the participating districts. Meeting times were set to avoid conflict with the teachers' schedules as much as possible. The focus groups were not held during school hours. The focus group discussions were audio-and video-recorded in order to facilitate data collection. Thus audio and video recording equipment at the location were essential. Incentives were provided for the participants. Incentives varied from books, gift cards, and treats provided at the sessions. Treats were provided for the whole group. All participants received a restaurant gift card. A prize drawing was conducted for the other incentives.

Treatment

Participants participated in a focus group discussion guided by a trained moderator. The focus group session lasted approximately one hour. The moderator had a question guide to lead the discussion. The participants had a copy of the questions so they could refer to the questions as the discussion progressed. The participants were able to interact and respond to one another as well as the moderator. This allowed for more interaction and information than a one-on-one interview. No harm came to those participating; they were all equal participants in the discussion of the issues.

Measures

      The questioning route was developed to reflect the purposes of this study. We sought the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the alignment of IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The first question required everyone to respond and hopefully created an open atmosphere. The questions continued on to discuss how the requirements of IDEIA and NCLB have influenced the teachers. Copies of the questions were given to the participants in advance to help facilitate their ease in responding.

Procedures for Collecting Data

      All focus group discussions were audio and video recorded. The moderator led the discussion and took notes. The assistant moderator monitored the recording equipment. Audio recording has been the traditional method of recording focus group discussions. Video recording has begun to be utilized. Video recording was beneficial because it was easier to determine who was speaking. It also recorded non-verbal language that was not observable in an audio recording. The video files were destroyed upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

      The audio and video recordings of the focus group discussions were analyzed to find common themes and ideas. The purpose of the study was to find what special educators think about aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum and to discover what they are doing to try to be in compliance with IDEIA and NCLB. Data was analyzed using NVivo software.

      NVivo software allowed for the importation and analysis of qualitative data. Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and imported to NVivo. The software sorted the data according to our pre-specified needs. The data was coded to determine common themes such as methods for aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum, adapting standards

to the individual needs of students with severe disabilities, and so forth. The specific coding was determined according to the responses of the participants. The major themes were determined by the team members according to the findings.

Potential Limitations

The special educators were selected from the population of secondary teachers of students with severe disabilities along the Wasatch Front. The results may have potential implications for other teachers of secondary students with severe disabilities.

The methodology of focus groups could present some limitations. The information learned from this method of research was limited to the knowledge and experience of the participants. The reliability of the information may also be affected. The information was based upon the opinions and recall of the participants. Participants may not necessarily have recalled all of the training they may have received on aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum. The moderator could influence or interrupt the group discussion. It is also possible that one participant could dominate the discussion thus skewing the data and including only one person's opinion.

Results

The results of the study indicated that special educators use various methods to meet the requirements of IDEIA. The teachers expressed their efforts to implement a range of strategies to provide students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum while aligning IEP goals to that curriculum.

Participants in this study provided answers to seven primary questions that were explored during the focus groups. Each question and a summary of the participants' responses will be discussed.

Question 1: What is Your Understanding of Providing Access to the General Education Curriculum?

The participants were asked to explain their understanding of providing students with significant disabilities access to the general education curriculum. The responses fell into three basic areas: requirement, barriers, and benefits.

Requirement. Participants identified two primary requirements which guided their practice: adhering to the legal mandates of Least Restrictive Environment and providing students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum.

Least Restrictive Environment. The participants discussed the requirement of providing students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. One aspect that was discussed was how access to the general education curriculum must be provided in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Participants suggested that for most students the LRE is the high school with their peers. The students should be with their nondisabled peers as much as appropriate. A participant from District 1 said the following:

"All students are to participate in the general education curriculum, and when students

with disabilities are not able to fully access the general education curriculum

independently they are offered specially designed instruction in special education classes. This could be anything from co-taught classes to small group life skills instruction."

The participants also discussed how parents have the power to request that their child is placed in a general education class. Participants suggested that, even if the child is not able to meet the educational standards and expectations of the course, the parent can insist their child attend the class. Parents may make the request due to the social benefits of attending a general education class.

Access to the general education curriculum. The participants discussed the requirement of providing access to the general education curriculum. They acknowledged that the IDEIA requires students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum. A participant from District 2 said that the, "IDEIA law states…that we have to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education, which is…providing an appropriate education that aligns with what the other students, their peers in their grade level and their age, are learning." A participant from District 1 said students should have "access to curriculum that's on their age level." The participants acknowledged that they need to provide access to the general education curriculum and align their students' goals to similar tasks of their typical peers.

Many of the participants from all of the Districts stated that their students received access to the general education curriculum in a general education class. However, these classes were often limited to elective classes and were not core curriculum classes. The students with disabilities would participate primarily in general education classes in which the teachers were willing to have them in their classes and would provide accommodations for the students.

Barriers. Participants discussed a few barriers that prevent or impede students from receiving access to the general education curriculum. The barriers fell into two categories: the individual needs of the students, and the general education classes and teachers.

Individual needs. The ability level of each student is so varied that adapting the general education curriculum to their needs can be extremely challenging. Special educators with students in secondary settings have an even greater challenge since the disparity between the ability of the students and the general education requirements is greater. It is, as a participant from District 1 noted,

> very tricky when you get to secondary schools because often times…the regular ed
> students have these requirements in foreign language, science, history, and CTE [Career
> Technology Education] classes. So it's sometimes really hard as a special ed teacher to
> try to balance that and see how we're supposed to create goals and opportunities that
> align with all those requirements that they're required to have for a diploma.

General education classes and teachers. Many of the participants have students who attend general education classes to obtain access to the general education curriculum. However, often the general education teachers had different expectations for the students with disabilities that were enrolled in their classes. A participant from District 3 said, "The expectations are very low for the students, or they'll let them do whatever they want while they're teaching the rest of the students." Participants noted that this presents a challenge because the students may not be receiving access to the general education curriculum if the expectations for their performance in the class are different than the expectations of general education students.

Benefits. The participants discussed the benefits of providing access to the general education curriculum. The benefits included the social aspect and the extended core curriculum.

Social. Participants mentioned that students with severe disabilities benefit socially from receiving access to the general education curriculum. The students are able to participate with their typically developing peers in general education classes. Although the students with

disabilities tend to be in general education classes for social aspects rather than academic aspects, the students still benefit from this opportunity.

Extended core curriculum. The Utah State Office of Education has created an extended core curriculum for students with severe disabilities. The extended core curriculum is a tool that supports special educators in determining the essence of the standards of the general education curriculum. The participants in District 3 mentioned that this resource could help them provide access to the general education curriculum, and could be helpful in preparing lessons and units.

Question 2: What is Your Understanding of Aligning IEP Goals to the General Education Curriculum?

The participants were asked to explain their understanding of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Their responses fell into three basic areas. The areas discussed were the requirement of aligning to the general education core curriculum, the barriers that prevent them from aligning to the core curriculum, and the benefits of aligning to the core curriculum.

Requirement. Participants discussed how they met the requirement of aligning to the general education curriculum through providing a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), access to the general education curriculum, and aligning the IEP to the general education curriculum.

Least Restrictive Environment. Participants discussed how LRE can be a factor in aligning to the general education curriculum. Students can be placed in general education classes if the parent requests it. One participant from District 3 discussed the request of a parent to have their child with severe disabilities placed in an algebra class. Referring to what the parents said, he stated "I know he doesn't understand algebra, but that's not the point. [The parent said,] 'I want him there socially. It's where his friends are and I'm the parent.' And she went to court over it. And she won… because of IDEA and other things."

Accessing the general education curriculum. One group from District 3 discussed the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) in providing access to the general education curriculum. Because RTI puts more responsibility on general education teachers to provide access to the general education curriculum for students who struggle with learning, they may be required to have students with severe disabilities in their classes. The participants felt that even the students with the most severe disabilities could be placed in general education classes in order to have access to the general education curriculum.

Aligning IEP with the general education curriculum. Participants discussed aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum. They proposed a few different approaches to aligning goals. They discussed the individuality of students, aligning to similar tasks as their peers, and striving for the students to become contributing members of society.

Individuality of students. Participants discussed how the individuality of the students contributes to the development of the IEP goals. The teachers would give an interest survey to determine the interests of the students, and then would align goals with the curriculum that most interested the students. If a student is interested in various subjects the teachers can then align goals to their subjects of interest. They can determine the performance levels of the student; and decide what the students need to do next. A participant in District 1 stated, "My understanding is just trying to do the best of looking at their personal interests, looking at the curriculum, and trying to mix it."

Aligning curriculum to similar peers' tasks. Participants in one district discussed the importance of creating goals that are similar to the tasks of their peers. For example, if a student with disabilities is in high school, that student would need to be working on tasks similar to other high school students. A participant from District 2 stated that if the "regular education curriculum is working on adding and subtracting integers and whole numbers, the goal that we

write for a student in special education would be very similar. We break down the steps and start where the student needs to be." This approach ensures that students receive instruction that is similar to their typically developing peers. Participants in District 2 discussed the importance of aligning goals to similar tasks is to help the students be "ready as they transition from high school to the adult world." The teachers in District 2 strive to "create goals for [the students] that would meet all of those needs."

Striving for students to be contributing members of society. One participant from District 2 proposed that one of the main goals of general education is for students to become contributing members of society. She also claimed that special education teachers have the same objective for their students. This requires the students to "have goals that will help them to be at that stage where they are able to contribute to society as members of it, and just have as much independence in life as possible."

Barriers. The participants discussed two barriers that prevent them from aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum: the individual need of the student and general education teachers.

Individual need. The individual needs of each student are so great and so varied that it can be difficult to align goals to the general education curriculum. When a student is functioning far below the general education curriculum level, it is difficult to find tasks the student can accomplish that align with the curriculum. One example given was indicating a choice between two objects. The participant from District 3 felt that this skill did not align with the curriculum, especially not at the high school level. Participants indicated that when students are not functioning at high-school levels, it makes it difficult to align goals to the high-school level.

The participants also discussed the use of the extended core curriculum that the state of Utah recently developed. Even with the extended core curriculum it is still difficult to align goals

with the general education curriculum because students are not functioning at grade level. Some students are functioning so far below their typically developing peers that they need to work on skills that do not align with the general education curriculum. Students may need to work on skills such as hygiene, toileting, or indicating a choice. There are no core curriculum standards for these skills; however they are essential skills for students with severe disabilities to learn. There are some academic skills that students may work on such as reading or writing. However, when a student is reading at a first-grade level, it is difficult to align to the 10th grade core curriculum. One teacher from District 3 stated "I think it's really hard to say we're working on this because it's something they need to work on, and it aligns with the core this way, because sometimes they just don't align."

General education curriculum teachers. Another barrier that participants from District 3 discussed was general education teachers. They stated that some teachers do not want students with disabilities in their classes. When general education teachers do not want or allow students with disabilities into their class, it can be very difficult to give students access to core curriculum.

Benefits. The participants discussed the benefits of using the extended core curriculum to align IEP goals. The extended core curriculum can be used to write IEP goals for students with severe disabilities, providing a way to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum. It is still a challenge, but may be slightly more attainable than aligning to the standards of the general education curriculum.

One participant from District 2 discussed a resource she had in California. The state provided a binder with goals that aligned to the general education curriculum, and the teachers could then select goals for their students. However, she said that "it was really difficult and usually a huge stretch."

Question 3: What is Your Understanding of the Differences Between Access and Alignment to the General Education Curriculum?

The participants were asked to explain their understanding of the differences between access and alignment to the general education curriculum. Both will be discussed.

Access. Participants discussed how access to the general education curriculum was provided by participating in general education classes, special education classes, and accessing the community.

General education. Access was defined as participation in general education classes with support. Providing support can be done in various ways. It could either be sending a peer tutor or paraeducator with the student to the class, or it could include talking to the teachers in advance and giving them ideas of how to help the student be successful in their class. One teacher in District 2 suggested that "accessing the curriculum could look a variety of ways and could mean just exposure and some alignment but still basing IEP goals on student need."

An important aspect of providing access was ensuring that general education teachers are informed of the accommodations or modifications the students require when attending a general education class. Some teachers in District 2 use Snapshot IEPs in order to inform teachers of the levels and accommodations required for each student. A Snapshot IEP briefly describes the student's present levels of academic abilities, lists the accommodations that the students needs, and outlines their goals that may apply to the general education classes.

Special education classrooms. District 2 discussed the importance of providing access to the general education curriculum within the special education setting. They discussed meeting the needs of the students while coming as close to the general education curriculum as possible.

Community. Participants mentioned that access to the community is another avenue of providing access to the general education curriculum. The teachers strive to align their

community-training experiences with the general education curriculum in order to provide students with more opportunities to perform certain skills. They also strive to help teach students to generalize their skills and perform them in multiple settings.

Alignment. Participants discussed their understanding of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Participants strived for alignment using a few approaches. They discussed aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum and aligning to the core curriculum in a special education class. One participant acknowledged that she was not aware that the terms *access* and *alignment* were in the law.

IEP and core curriculum. Participants discussed aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. It can be difficult, but it is possible to find standards that can be beneficial for students with severe disabilities to align to. The participants discussed striving for the alignment between the student's IEP goals and the general education curriculum. One participant from District 2 defined alignment as "teaching my students exactly the same thing as their typical peers but with accommodations."

Special education classrooms. One of the participants from District 2 discussed aligning to the general education curriculum in a special education setting. She said, "Alignment is when a student is receiving specially designed instruction pertaining to the curriculum but in a special education setting."

Unknown. One participant did not know the difference between access and alignment. The teacher from District 3 stated "Are those terms that are in the law? I don't know the difference. Do you?"

Question 4: How are You Aligning IEP Goals to the General Education Curriculum?

Participants were asked to discuss how they are aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The participants strive to meet this requirement using multiple approaches.

Three approaches are through accessing the community, general education classes, and special education curriculum and materials.

Accessing the Community. A few of the participants discussed how they are aligning IEP goals to the work-based learning section of the state core curriculum. Their students are given real-life situations to practice skills they are learning in the classroom. The skills they discussed included using the "dollar more" strategy, reading functional grocery words, and learning self-advocacy skills.

Participants discussed how some of their students were placed in work settings where they had the opportunity to practice skills they need to successfully complete their job. The students were placed at an animal shelter, a library, and a nursing home. At these placements the students had opportunities to work on important skills such as punctuality and interacting with co-workers and supervisors.

General education classes and curriculum. Participants discussed different approaches to aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum through general education classes as well as instruction in their classes. For some higher functioning students it is easier to align goals since they are closer to the level of their peers. One high functioning student was enrolled in a German class. The special education teacher aligned the student's goals with the general education German curriculum. The goals consisted of tasks relating to building German vocabulary. A teacher from District 1 indicated that he strived to align goals to other general education classes that his students were attending.

One participant from District 1 collaborated with the general education science teachers to provide opportunities for the students in her class to access the science curriculum. The students with disabilities would participate in the labs with the general education students. This provided great opportunities for the students to explore science concepts as they participated.

Another approach for aligning with science is teaching science concepts in the special education setting. One teacher from District 2 discussed how she taught mapping skills in the special education classroom. When they were teaching mapping they also taught about the globe and its revolutionary pattern. They aligned their instruction to the science general education curriculum.

Teachers in District 2 use portfolios to assist them in aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. They use a portfolio program that has requirements for different subjects and areas. For example, in science the areas include "astronomy, conservation, energy, [and] ecology" according to a participant in District 2. Each subject has suggestions of activities to complete the portfolio. The teacher selects tasks that align with the general education curriculum as much as possible. Some students use the work they complete for their portfolios to meet some of the graduation requirements.

The Utah Alternative Assessment (UAA) has helped a few teachers align goals to the general education curriculum. Teachers select tasks for each student to complete. The students then have IEP goals aligned with the task. A participant from District 1 discussed a student who was required to identify five astronomical objects by name, such as sun, moon, stars, or Earth. This student's IEP goal aligned with this task and the general education astronomy curriculum.

One teacher discussed the importance of being familiar with the general education curriculum. If the teachers are familiar with the curriculum, they can then adapt it to the needs of the student with whom they work. The teacher from District 2 stated, "be knowledgeable about what the state curriculum says and find ways to make it individual for each student and be aware of what their needs are."

Special education curriculum and materials. Participants discussed three approaches to aligning goals to the general education curriculum using special education curriculum and

materials. They discussed new materials and curriculum specifically designed for students with disabilities, using the extended core curriculum, and the reading continuum.

Materials designed for students with disabilities. Materials and curriculum specifically designed for students with disabilities is becoming more readily available. A few of the teachers from District 3 discussed a new program they had recently received. It was a reading program designed specifically for students with severe disabilities that focused on environmental print. It could be used with students within a large range of disabilities, including students who are non-verbal. The program is researched-based, includes direct instruction scripted lesson plans, leveled readers, and other features. Prepared curriculum such as this is becoming more available for students with disabilities, allowing teachers to have a greater variety of resources. These programs will hopefully make it easier to align instruction and students' IEP goals with the general education curriculum.

Extended core curriculum. Participants in a few of the districts discussed the extended core curriculum that the state of Utah recently created. Participants from District 2 use the extended core curriculum to assist them in writing IEP goals for their students. The extended core curriculum takes the general education core curriculum and outlines the essence of each standard. It provides up to three extended skills that align with the standard. It is a great resource that helps make the general education curriculum more accessible for students with disabilities.

Reading continuum. The reading continuum was used by District 1. It is a tool that outlines reading levels and the skills within them. The teachers can use the reading continuum to determine the reading levels of their students and then make goals for expected progress. It can help the teachers identify specific skills a student may be lacking in order to progress. The continuum then outlines the basic skills required to progress to the next level.

Question 5: What Are the Barriers, if any, to Aligning IEP Goals to the General Education Curriculum?

Participants were asked to describe the barriers that prevented them from aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The barriers included (a) the discrepancy between the ability level of the students and the requirements of the general education curriculum (b) and time.

Discrepancy between individual needs and requirements. Several participants discussed the discrepancy between individual student characteristics and the requirements of the general curriculum as a barrier. Each student has unique needs and abilities. Some students need to work on skills that may not be part of the general education curriculum. Participants felt that if they only focused on the general education curriculum their students could miss out on other important skills. One participant from District 2 stated, "quite often when we try to align all of their goals to the general education curriculum we're limiting a lot of things." Participants in District 2 felt that the students' needs are so great and "if [they] just stuck strictly to the academic core curriculum [they] would be missing a whole lot."

Some participants felt that, by the time students with severe disabilities get to high school, working on the core curriculum would be useless. A participant from District 2 felt that they were "wasting time… dwelling on reading and writing and science at that time." Although those subjects can be important and can be put into everyday living skills, the participant felt it would be more pertinent to work on skills such as "how to use transportation, how to cook a meal, and how to do the things they have to do every single day."

Participants in District 2 felt that aligning to the core curriculum could take away from the individuality of the IEP. They fear that aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum could "take away from the individualized part and be more like a school-wide or

classroom-wide IEP than an individual program for each student to work on what's important for them." If all goals were aligned to the general education curriculum students may have very similar goals, and the individuality may not be as prevalent.

Participants expressed the difficulty of trying to find the balance between the general education curriculum requirements and what the students really need. Determining what skills the students really need to learn in order to increase their independence is a challenge. The focus has shifted from a functional curriculum to an academic curriculum. Participants in District 3 struggle to find the proper balance between the need to align with the curriculum and the need to increase their independence through working on specific skills. Both aspects will help the student progress; however, it is difficult to determine which area is more important for the student to focus on. An important aspect of this determination stems from the transition piece of the IEP. Transition plays a major part in determining the IEP goals of a student, especially as a student gets older. A participant from District 3 said that special education teachers are "trying to prepare [the students] for whatever is coming next, and that doesn't always go together with the regular curriculum."

An additional barrier pertains to breaking down the curricular standard into attainable steps for the students. Participants in District 1 felt that, "when you are breaking down the core standards to things that are attainable by the students, they are seemingly very low. This can make the goals seem like they are not on grade level." One participant from District 1 felt that although he was a high school teacher, he was teaching elementary skills. He said, "Alignment for my IEP goals has been more along the curriculum of an elementary teacher instead of a secondary high school teacher." The challenge remains to align to the general education curriculum while meeting the needs of the individual student.

Changing the frame of mind of educators is another barrier. On participant from District 3 said, "I think [that] thinking in new terms is difficult for us, as teachers, as educators." Changing the way educators think about aligning IEP goals is a challenge. Many educators may think a student must read in order to align to the language arts curriculum. However, there may be ways to align a task to the general education curriculum that do not require reading.

A participant in District 1 felt that content knowledge can also be a barrier for educators. Special educators are trained in individualizing and adapting the core skills. They are not trained in specific curriculums such as science, foreign language, history, or other specific subjects. This lack of familiarity can make it difficult for special educators to align to the general education.

Time. Limited time is a barrier in aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Participants felt that, with all of the components of the IEP, it can be difficult to work on each aspect as well as the general education curriculum. They strive to focus on the tasks that are most vital for the student. Participants in District 1 felt that "there's just not enough time in the day to hit everything." They focus on the priorities, such as reading, writing, math, and transition for each student. They do the best they can; however they feel they cannot do everything because time is limited.

Question 6: How are You Meeting the Requirement to Provide Access to the General Education Curriculum?

Participants were asked to describe how they are meeting the requirement to provide access to the general education curriculum. They describe a few different approaches to providing access. They included general education classes, general education activities, peer tutors, and an adapted curriculum.

General education classes. Many of the participants' students attended general education classes to access the general education curriculum. The students often attended

elective classes, not core curriculum classes. General education teachers provide accommodations for the students attending their classes. Some students would go with the support of a peer tutor or paraeducator; others could go independently. Participants in Districts 1 and 2 felt that their students were accessing the curriculum by their participation in the general education classes.

One participant from District 2 discussed how she is not providing access to the general education curriculum. She said "I am not really meeting the needs of giving my students access to the general education curriculum. They are integrated in PE and have had access to the food class in the past." As a disclaimer, she noted that she taught students whose behavior often prevented them from participating in general education classes.

General education activities. Participants in Districts 2 and 3 discussed general education activities as an avenue for access. Students with severe disabilities had access to the same activities as general education students. The students attend assemblies, concerts, and other activities. Although these activities are not part of the core curriculum, they are still able to participate with their nondisabled peers.

Peer tutors. Peer tutors provide a means for students to participate in general education classes. Students with severe disabilities could have a general education student accompany them to class as a peer tutor. The peer tutor can then assist the student in the class and help them participate. A participant from District 2 related that peer tutors can also "be there to help them on their level. They can accommodate and modify the things so that it's better… for the student." Peer tutors make it possible for some students to participate in general education classes with support. They can be an advocate for the student and assist them to meet the requirements of the general education class.

Adapted curriculum. Participants discussed how they strive to meet the needs of their students as well as the requirements of the general education curriculum. Adapting the curriculum is an avenue that can hopefully accomplish both.

The participants discussed various approaches to adapting the curriculum according to student need. They discussed three methods that they are using to adapt the curriculum: portfolios, lower level classes, and specialized instruction.

Portfolios. Some participants use portfolios to provide access to the general education curriculum. Through portfolios students are able to access concepts of the general education curriculum. Participants in District 2 use portfolios to meet the requirements of some of the general education curriculum. A participant in District 2 said, "we're trying to align some of these portfolio [tasks] to the core curriculum for the [students] who really can't handle being in the other classes." Teachers can align the tasks in the portfolio with the general education curriculum to provide access to the core curriculum standards.

Lower level general education classes. Participants discussed the creation of lower level general education classes as part of adapting the curriculum. A few general education teachers in District 1 created a lower level class for students with disabilities. They adapted the curriculum to the needs of the students and taught at their level. This provided an opportunity for the students to participate in a class taught by a general education teacher.

Specialized instruction. Participants mentioned that specialized instruction is another way to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the students. Participants would adapt the curriculum in their own classroom to provide access to the general education curriculum for their students. Instruction in the Life Skills classes could be adapted to the specific needs of the students yet still allow access to the general education curriculum.

Question 7: What Are the Barriers, if any, to Helping Your Students Gain Access to the General Education Curriculum?

Participants were asked to describe any barriers they may be facing in providing access to the general education curriculum. They discussed several barriers including student behavior, general education teachers, peer tutors, time, and special education teachers.

Student behavior. Student behavior is a significant barrier preventing some students from receiving access to the general education curriculum. If students are unable to control their behavior and act appropriately they are unable to obtain access to the general education curriculum through attending general education classes.

One participant from District 1 discussed how his perspective has changed on student participation in general education classes. When the participant first entered the field, he was determined to have students with disabilities participate in general education classes regardless of their behavior. However, the participant has since come to realize how one student who is very noisy or disruptive can throw off an entire class. He continued to describe the necessity of finding a balance between the rights of students with disabilities to participate in general education classes and the rights of general education students to have a calm environment in which to learn. He acknowledged that it is important to not allow one student's right to participate in a general education class supersede the rights of the other students. A participant from District 2 related a similar perspective: "It isn't fair to the typical population to distract their learning by students who can't typically sit still or have very little independence."

Students need to have their behavior under control in order to participate in general education classes. A participant from District 3 stated, "If they are aggressive they can't be in a regular class. If they have the potential to hurt someone they can't" participate in a general

education class. The liability of the student causing harm to another student is too great. Thus the student with a disability is limited to a more restrictive setting due to their behavior.

One particular skill that participants discussed is following directions. Participants in District 1 said students need to be able to follow directions in order to participate in general education classes. They work on teaching their students to be compliant, and as their students learn to follow directions they can have greater access to the general education curriculum.

General education teachers. A participant from District 1 stated, "One of the biggest barriers is making sure the [general education] teachers understand that this is the law, and our students are to participate just as any other student would." General education teachers are required by law to provide accommodations for students with an IEP who are in their classes. Some teachers are great at providing accommodations and modifying the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. However, other teachers are not. These teachers may need training or direction on how to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. It is difficult for special educators to place their students in general education classes if the teachers are unwilling to have them in their classes. Some teachers are more willing to have students with disabilities in their classes than others. This tends to lead to a few teachers being overburdened with students with disabilities in their classes.

Peer tutors. Peer tutors can be a great resource to providing access to the general education curriculum. However, not having enough peer tutors is a barrier. Participants in District 2 said that they have been struggling to find enough peer tutors to meet the needs of their students. They are uncertain why finding peer tutors has recently been such a struggle. They speculated it could be due to increased graduation requirements for nondisabled students.

Training peer tutors can also be a barrier since it requires time to train. Once the peer tutor is trained they are a great resource. However, occasionally it can be difficult to ensure that

all of the peer tutors receive appropriate training.

Time and priorities. Participants discussed time as a barrier. The amount of time a teacher has with a student is limited. Their ultimate goal is for the student to be as independent as possible. Therefore, participants from District 1 felt it would be more vital to work on skills related to daily living rather than other academic skills. They felt it would be "more important for [students] to learn how to create a budget and follow it… than to learn about plants." In the limited time they have, participants prefer to focus their instruction on pertinent life skills their students need rather than academics in the general education curriculum. A participant from District 1 said, "The student needs to learn their address, where they live, and their phone number. Instead of, you know, how many square feet of agricultural whatever we have in Utah."

Special education teachers. Special educators can also be a barrier to providing access to the general education curriculum. There may be a lack of understanding on the part of the special educator and the general educator. Special educators may not know what they can do to provide access to the general education curriculum for their students. A participant from District 3 stated that special educators "have to be… advocates for our students." General educators may not understand how to best teach students with disabilities. A participant from District 3 discussed the importance of "understanding what is really available and what really would be some options for [students]. Then [we could] give general education [teachers] the understanding of what that might look like, or how it could be possible." If a special educator is unable to provide support to the general education teachers, it can be a barrier for their students.

The participants discussed many methods that can be effective in meeting the requirements of IDEIA. They are striving to align IEP goals and provide access to the general education curriculum. Through their valiant efforts students with disabilities are receiving greater access to the general education curriculum.

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of special educators regarding the alignment of IEP goals of students with severe disabilities with the general education curriculum. Focus groups were conducted with special educators from three districts in Utah Valley who worked with students with severe disabilities in a secondary setting. Participants in the focus group were asked to discuss their understanding of the requirement to align IEP goals with and provide access to the general education curriculum. Participants were also asked to share their current practices regarding this requirement.

The results of the focus groups reflected the participating special educators' general understanding of the requirement to provide access to and align IEP goals with the general education curriculum. The participants are striving to meet these requirements through various methods such as using the extended core, general education classes, and aligning tasks to similar tasks of the students' peers. While discussing their employed methods, participants also discussed barriers and benefits to providing access and aligning IEP goals with general education curriculum.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of special educators of secondary students with severe disabilities regarding the alignment of IEP goals to the general education curriculum?

Special education teachers' understanding. The participants related their understanding of aligning IEP goals with the general education curriculum. The discussion emphasized the requirement of the IDEIA to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Participants demonstrated their understanding of alignment through their discussion of several possible approaches to aligning IEP goals to the core curriculum. The most common approaches

discussed were incorporating the individuality of the student, aligning to similar tasks of their peers, and providing specialized instruction in a special education setting.

*Student individuality***.** Participants related the importance of incorporating the student's individual interests and abilities into their IEP goals. This strategy aligns with Courtade-Little and Browder's suggestion to "keep the planning student-focused" (2005, p. 19). Courtade-Little and Browder state, "The student's preferences and individual goals can …provide a starting point for planning" (p. 19). A few participants followed this recommendation and used interest surveys with their students as a starting point to develop IEP goals that align with the general education curriculum.

Task alignment. Participants discussed aligning IEP goals with the concepts that the students' same-age peers are learning. For example, if a student with disabilities were in high school, that student would be working on tasks similar to other high school students such as adding and subtracting integers. Teaching concepts that align to the general education curriculum would require being familiar with the state standards as Courtade-Little and Browder (2005) suggested. Courtade-Little and Browder recommended aligning goals to the student's assigned grade level "while also using information on present level of performance … to pinpoint objectives for academic learning" (p. 15). The participants suggested adapting instruction to the ability level of the student while aligning to the core curriculum which coincides with the recommendation from Courtade-Little and Browder.

*Providing specialized instruction***.** Providing specialized instruction in a special education setting was another approach to alignment that the participants discussed. Specially designed instruction requires not only familiarity with general education curriculum but also adapting the standards to the ability level of the students. Spooner et al., (2006) suggest employing differentiated instruction, which is a teaching method that involves "identifying and

modifying the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners" (p. 278). These two terms describe similar teaching practices that promote alignment with the general education curriculum. A participant from District 2 stated, "Alignment is when a student is receiving specially designed instruction pertaining to the curriculum but in a special education setting." For many students with severe disabilities, most of the instruction they receive will probably be in a special education setting. According to Courtade- Little and Browder (2005), curriculum should be aligned with the assigned grade level, which is based on the chronological age of the student. Spooner and Browder (2006) suggest that students can learn new tasks and skills if they are taught the curriculum according to the students' chronological age.

Special education teachers' practices. The participants discussed the methods they were using to align IEP goals with general education curriculum. The discussion included the barriers to and benefits of aligning to the general education curriculum. The most common methods the participants employed include having students attend general education classes, using portfolios, and using the extended core curriculum.

A few of the participants discussed utilizing general education classes to help align IEP goals with the general education curriculum. These special educators wrote goals for the students that aligned with the general education classes the students were attending. According to the participants, this approach tended to work better for students who were higher functioning and able to benefit from general education core classes. In order for the participants to write goals aligning with the general education classes, they would need to be familiar with the state standards, as Courtade-Little and Browder (2005) suggest. The lower functioning students tended to participate in general education classes that were not core curriculum classes they were often elective classes. In elective classes they are able to access some aspects of the general education curriculum. However, the participants did not necessarily write IEP goals to align to

the elective classes because they focused the goals on reading, writing, math, and transition.

Participants in District 2 used portfolios to assist with aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The portfolios have different requirements for each subject, which allows for adaptation to the ability level of each student. This practice provides multiple opportunities for alignment to the general education curriculum while also accommodating for the students' abilities. Portfolios can also allow the students to direct their education. The students could determine which tasks they want to complete as part of their portfolio. The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction allows students to direct their learning (Palmer et al., 2004) and could include portfolio assessments to allow students the power to direct their education according to their individual interests.

The extended core curriculum is a tool that several of the participants discussed. The extended core curriculum was recently developed in Utah. Other states such as New Jersey, Wisconsin, and West Virginia have an extended core for students with significant cognitive disabilities (New Jersey Department of Education, 2011; West Virginia Department of Education, 2011; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010). Some of the participants were just beginning to use the extended core curriculum, while others were still unfamiliar with what it contained. The extended curriculum breaks down the standards of the general education curriculum into simplified steps. It is a resource that could assist special educators in aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum.

Barriers to alignment. Participants discussed the barriers that make it difficult to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The barrier that was identified by multiple participants is the discrepancy between the ability level of the students and the general education curriculum standards. The other main barrier is time.

Participants felt that the individual needs of the students did not always align with the general education curriculum. Often the students were not functioning at grade level, making it difficult to align with the general education curriculum. Even with the assistance of the extended core, the students were not able to perform the skills required on grade level. Some participants felt that due to this discrepancy, the general education curriculum should not be the main focus of the IEP. Some participants felt that they were limiting themselves by only focusing on the general education curriculum. The participants' concerns are supported by Courtade-Little and Browder's (2005) suggestion that educators should "not 'force fit' all IEP objectives into alignment with academic standards" (p. 24). Courtade-Little and Browder recognized that not all skills that a student needs to work on will align with the general education curriculum. Spooner and Browder (2006) also supported this concern. They were referring to accessing the general education curriculum when they said that "access does not mean that all educational goals link to academic content standards" (p. 2). Therefore, students could have IEP goals that address their needs but may not necessarily be linked to a content standard.

Another barrier discussed was time. Participants stated that they did not have enough time to meet all the needs of the student and include the general education curriculum. They focused on the most important aspects of the IEP but felt as though there was not enough time to work on everything. The participants' concern is similar to the concern expressed by the teachers in a study of five school districts conducted by McLaughlin (2000). McLaughlin found that teachers felt the pace of instruction must increase due to the ever-increasing amount of information, skills, concepts, and processes that are expected to be taught. Students with significant cognitive disabilities may require more time to learn a concept. Teachers felt that there would be insufficient time to re-teach skills to facilitate mastery of the curriculum standards.

Benefits of alignment. Participants discussed the benefits of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum using the extended core curriculum. Participants believed the extended core could help make the general core curriculum more attainable. The extended core breaks down the general education core standards and outlines the essence of the standard. It then outlines different tasks that coincide with the standard at a simplified level. Participants felt that having the extended core helped them align IEP goals to the general education curriculum, but it was still a stretch to do so. However, as the extended core was recently released by the state of Utah, not all special education teachers were familiar with it nor were they using it yet.

Research Question 2

How are special educators meeting the requirement of giving students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum?

Special education teachers' understanding. The participants related their understanding of providing access to the general education curriculum. Participants discussed students accessing the general education curriculum through general education classes as well as in special education classes. The practice of accessing the curriculum in general education and special education classes allows students to gain access to the general education curriculum through multiple methods and placements. Dymond and Orelove (2001) stated that "the law does not specify how or where students access the general curriculum" (p. 115). The flexibility of the law allows students to gain access in the most appropriate setting for the student, which is determined by the IEP team. Hitchcock et al. (2002) related that access to the general curriculum is sometimes defined as access to information and activities. However, Hitchcock et al. further defined curriculum as a plan of learning which needs to be accessible. Special educators interviewed by Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, and Slagor (2007) defined access to the general

curriculum as "access to an adapted curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to the student and addresses individual student needs and interests" (p. 11).

Special education teachers' practices. Participants are striving to meet the requirement of providing access to the general education curriculum through a few approaches. The main approaches discussed were general education classes, peer tutors, and adapted curriculum.

General education classes. Many of the participants stated that their students gained access to the general education curriculum through participation in general education classes. Their students often were enrolled in elective classes to gain access to the general education curriculum. Dymond and Orelove (2001) discussed educating students with disabilities in general education classes, relating that in some instances "inclusion appears to have become the curriculum. That is, students participate in the same activities as their peers without disabilities, regardless of whether the curriculum enables them to achieve competence across a variety of academic and functional skill areas" (p. 110).

Browder et al. (2007) relate that IDEIA does not require students to receive access to the general education curriculum through placement in general education classes. "Instead, the law requires that students who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards receive instruction from teachers who are highly qualified with subject matter knowledge" (p. 3). Thus, special education teachers can be highly qualified to teach academic content in any setting. Students could receive access to the general education curriculum in a special education class from a highly qualified teacher.

Peer tutors. Several participants utilize peer tutors to help provide access to the general education curriculum for their students with disabilities. The peer tutors either accompany a student to a general education class or they work with a student in a special education class. Spooner et al., (2006) discuss the use of peer support, which coincides with peer tutors. They

define peer support as "one or more chronological age-appropriate peers without disabilities to provide social and academic support to a student with disabilities" (p. 278). Peer tutors provide this type of support for the students with whom they work. Participants were grateful for the support they had with peer tutors. Peer tutors make it possible for some students to attend general education classes with the additional support they need.

Adapted curriculum. Adapted curriculum is a method the participants used to provide access to the general education curriculum. Participants adapted the general education curriculum to accommodate the ability levels and needs of their students. The main methods they used to adapt the curriculum were portfolios, lower level classes, and specialized instruction.

Each method provides opportunities for students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum. According to the participants, portfolios allow the special education teacher to select tasks that align with the general education curriculum but are also appropriate for the ability level of the student. Lower level classes are general education classes taught by general education teachers. This is an opportunity for the students to access the general education curriculum at their level. Specialized instruction often occurs in special education classes. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 50% of students with intellectual disabilities, 45.1 % students with multiple disabilities, and 39.8% of students with Autism were educated in special education settings for more than 60% of the school day (2010). Special educators adjust their instruction for the individual needs and interests of their students. All of these methods allow for adaptation of the general education curriculum.

Barriers of providing access. The participants discussed many barriers to providing access to the general education curriculum. Barriers included general education teachers, peer tutors, time, special education teachers, and student behavior. The barrier that was discussed the most frequently and seemed to be the most problematic was student behavior.

Participants agreed that if the student with disabilities has problem behavior it can be difficult for that student to access the general education curriculum. Some students with disabilities engage in disruptive behavior that may distract from a quiet and safe environment. Disruptive behavior "interferes with the educational process and places a burden on teachers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. III-17). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study, one-third of students with disabilities display problem behavior and have experienced various forms of disciplinary action at school. Students with disabilities are "more likely than their peers in the general population to have faced … disciplinary actions" (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 7). Students with disabilities may not be able to attend general education classes or receive specialized instruction if their behavior is not under control. Special educators agreed that general education students have the right to a peaceful environment in which to learn. Students with disabilities also have the right to participate in general education classes. Participants felt that the rights of students with disabilities should not supersede the rights of general education students.

Benefits of providing access. Participants discussed the benefits of students with disabilities receiving access to the general education curriculum. The main benefit discussed was the social benefit of students attending general education classes. Students with disabilities are able to participate in classes with their typically developing peers. Dymond et al. (2007) listed several benefits for students with disabilities to participate in general education classes. The benefits they listed were "socialization, peer interaction, learning appropriate behaviors, access to the same materials, access to the general education teacher, [and] access to the 'truest curriculum'" (p. 8). Browder et al., (2007) suggested additional benefits of providing access to the general education curriculum including increased adult competence and "increased means and opportunities for self-determination" (Browder et al., p. 4).

The participants also discussed the use of the extended core as a benefit of providing access to the general education curriculum. The participants discussed the possibility of using the extended core to develop lesson plans and units for students who are in self-contained units. Developing lesson plans in accordance with the extended core could align with Browder et al.'s (2007) suggestion to increase expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Providing access through the extended core could also benefit the students by providing an equal opportunity education, as Browder et al. recommended (2007).

Limitations of this Research

The implications of the research could be limited because the data collected is limited to the opinions of the participants, who were from three school districts in Utah Valley. The data collected is based upon their recall of their experiences and knowledge. Some participants did not know how to respond to some of the questions. They were either unfamiliar with the terms we were discussing or were unsure of how to perform the tasks discussed. The results are also limited due to the number of participants and focus groups held. Due to time constraints, saturation was not reached. We were only able to hold three focus groups before the end of the school year. The focus groups that were held had only a few participants due to scheduling conflicts. It was also difficult to contact possible participants and arrange a time they could all meet.

It is also difficult to determine the reliability of the data collected since some of what the participants said could have been influenced by the moderator. However, based on the transcripts, it did not appear as though the moderator influenced or interrupted the participants to the point of invalidating the data.

Another limitation is that the participants did not always directly answer the questions. Occasionally participants would discuss items related to the question, without answering the

question. The conversation drifted away from the question despite the efforts of the moderator to keep it on track. Other times the participants did not know the answer to the questions.

A further limitation is the limited population to which this study could be generalized. Because the participants are drawn from such a small group of people, namely special educators who work with students with severe disabilities in a secondary setting, the results may only be generalizable to this population.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should include more focus group sessions with a greater number of participants. This would allow for a greater opportunity to reach saturation. More participants in each focus group would also allow for more discussion during the focus groups. The participants may develop ideas for additional approaches to align IEP goals and provide access to the general education curriculum

It would also be interesting to research the effects of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Does it benefit or hurt students with severe disabilities? Some of the participants felt it limited the students' education if they had to focus only on the general education curriculum standards.

Finally, it would be intriguing to see how special educators implement the extended core curriculum once they become more familiar with it. Special educators seemed excited about the extended core; however, they were unsure how to best implement it.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the special educators who participated are striving to meet the requirements of IDEIA to align IEP goals and provide access to the general education curriculum by implementing various methods. The common approaches to aligning IEP goals discussed were attending general education classes, portfolios, and the extended core. The main

approaches to providing access to the core curriculum were general education classes, peer tutors, and adapted curriculum.

The use of general education classes was the most common approach to aligning IEP goals and providing access. Special educators should be cautious when utilizing general education classes, so as to not make inclusion the curriculum (Dymond & Orelove, 2001). However, Dymond et al. (2007) noted that equity and fairness are also factors in students with disabilities participating in general education classes. As one general educator in their study related:

> It's more in line with what our society is like. We don't really walk down the sidewalk for people with cognitive learning disabilities and then on another sidewalk for the people without. I just feel like it starts here [in general education classrooms] (Dymond, et al., 2007, p. 8).

IDEIA requires that students receive instruction from highly qualified teachers with subject matter knowledge (Browder et al., 2007). This is a major undertaking and requires an adept familiarity with the general education curriculum in multiple subjects, which can be especially challenging for special educators in secondary settings. The extended core curriculum may be able to assist special educators in this task. A few participants were using the extended core; however, many were unfamiliar with its contents and had not yet read it. As special educators become more familiar with the extended core curriculum, they may be better able to implement it in their instruction and write IEP goals that align with it.

Participants adapted instruction to meet the needs of the students' individual abilities and interests. They were striving to align these tasks with the general education curriculum but found it difficult. Several barriers, student behavior being the greatest, seemed to be a significant

problem for many of the participants. Student behavior can be a significant problem that can greatly affect the instruction a student receives.

I would suggest utilizing the extended core curriculum and portfolios to align IEP goals. Special educators must first become familiar with the extended core curriculum so they know what skills are required. The extended core curriculum breaks down the standards into the essence of the standard. Special educators can begin by writing one IEP goal per subject, which are math, language arts, and science, that aligns with the extended core curriculum. Every goal in the IEP does not need to align to the general education curriculum, which allows the teacher to focus on the individual need of the student. I would suggest selecting a task that is most pertinent for the student to learn based upon their ability level. If three subjects feels to daunting, begin with one subject and progress to including all three subjects in the student's IEP.

Portfolios are another approach to providing access to the general education curriculum. Portfolios have different requirements for each subject with a list of tasks per subject. The students or teachers can select tasks within a specific topic. The tasks vary in difficulty, which allows flexibility in accommodating for the students' individual needs and desires. Portfolios allow students to utilize self-determination as suggested by Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, and Agran (2004). Self- determination is the ability to set goals and measure progress for oneself. Students can set goals and measure their progress as they complete their portfolio in each subject. Teachers can guide them through this process as necessary.

As special educators continue to work towards aligning IEP goals and providing access to the general education curriculum, hopefully the education of students with disabilities will continue to improve. Hopefully, through the efforts of special educators, students with severe disabilities will gain greater access to the general education curriculum and have greater opportunities to learn.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Special Educators' Perspectives of Aligning Individual Education Program Goals of

Students with Severe Disabilities with the General Education Curriculum

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Kristi Tonga, a graduate student at Brigham

Young University, to determine the perspective of special educators regarding the alignment of

Individual Education Program (IEP) goals with the general education curriculum. You were

selected to participate because you are currently a special education teacher of students with

severe disabilities in grades 7-12.

Procedures

You will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion. The discussion will last

approximately one hour. During the focus group, you will discuss your perceptions and

experiences regarding the alignment of IEP goals to the general education curriculum. The focus

group discussion will be audio and video-recorded and transcribed.

Risks or Discomforts

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. You may feel emotional

discomfort when answering questions about personal perceptions and experiences. When

participating in the focus group, it is possible that you may feel embarrassed when talking in

front of others. The moderator will be sensitive to those who may become uncomfortable.

Benefits

There are no known direct benefits to participants. However, by participating in this

discussion, you may learn more about aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum and

meeting the needs of students with severe disabilities. The information shared by participants

will assist the researchers in making recommendations for IEP teams.

Confidentiality

All information provided will remain confidential and will only be reported as group data with no identifying information. All data, including audio and video tapes and transcriptions from the focus group, will be kept in a locked storage cabinet, and only those directly involved with the research will have access to them. After the research is completed, the audio and video recordings will be destroyed.

Compensation

Light refreshments will be provided at the focus group session. There will also be a drawing for prizes, such as books about students with disabilities appropriate for secondary students and gift cards. You may also receive a copy of the results of the research if you wish.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Kristi Tonga at (801) 836-0875, kristi.tonga@gmail.com or Tina Dyches at (801) 422-5045, tina_dyches@byu.edu.

Questions about your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board Director, Christopher Dromey, 801-422-6177, christopher.dromey@byu.edu.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Signature:_____Date:_____

Appendix B: Question Route

Opening

1. Tell us your name, where you teach: describe the students you work with and what you enjoy doing when you're not teaching.

Introductory

1. What is your favorite thing about working with students with severe disabilities?

Transition

1. What is your understanding of the IDEIA requirement to provide access to the general education curriculum?

2. What is your understanding of aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum?

3. What is your understanding of the differences between accessing the general education curriculum and alignment with that curriculum?

Key

1. How are you aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum?

   a. What are the barriers, if any, to aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum?

2. How are you meeting the requirement of giving your students access to the general education curriculum?

   a. What are the barriers, if any, to helping your students gain access to the general education curriculum?

Ending

Summarize what the participants have stated then ask

1. Is this (insert what they have discussed) the most difficult barrier in aligning IEP goals?

2. Is this (insert what they have discussed) the most effective way to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum?

3. Is this (insert what they have discussed) the most effective way to provide access to the general education curriculum?

4. Is this (insert what they have discussed) the most difficult barrier in providing access to the general education curriculum?

Appendix C: Invitation Letter

Dear (insert name of teacher),

I am a graduate student at Brigham Young University working on a Master's Degree in Special Education. As part of my research for my thesis, I am conducting focus groups with special educators of students with severe disabilities in grades 7-12. I am researching the alignment of IEP goals to the general education curriculum.

I have been teaching students with severe disabilities in grades 10-12 for five years. Throughout my teaching experience I, along with many other secondary special educators, have wondered how to best approach aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum. Therefore, I chose to study aligning IEP goals and instruction to the general education curriculum.

I would greatly appreciate your attendance at one of the focus group sessions. In the focus group sessions we will discuss your experience and opinions regarding (1) aligning IEP goals to the general education curriculum, (2) providing students with severe disabilities access to the general curriculum, and (3) specific strategies for alignment and access. We will also discuss any barriers you may be facing and successes you have had in meeting this legal requirement.

Refreshments will be provided at the focus group sessions. We will also have prize drawings for books about students with disabilities appropriate for secondary students, gift cards, and other various prizes. The focus group session should last approximately one hour. The focus group times and locations are listed below. Please indicate which focus group you will attend, or if you won't be able to participate.

Focus Group Sessions

Date	Time	Location
Feb. 9, 2010	3:00 pm	Mountain View High School, Room 169
Feb. 11, 2010	3:30 pm	Salem Hills High School, Room D-110
Apr. 29, 2010	3:30pm	Timpview High School, Room C-11

Unable to participate.

Thank you for your willingness to assist me in my research. If you would like a copy of the results of the focus groups, I would be more than happy to send them to you.

Sincerely,

Kristi Tonga

Appendix D: Article

Aligning IEP goals to the General Education Curriculum: A Brief Guideline

Kristi Tonga

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act was reauthorized in 2004. The reauthorization requires students with disabilities to have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum. This presents a challenge to special educators who work with students with severe disabilities. The discrepancy between the student's ability level and the standard can be great, especially for students in secondary settings. As students with severe disabilities get older, their abilities and educational skills may not necessarily progress at the same pace as the state standards. It can be extremely difficult to align Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals for a student who is functioning on a first grade level to the 10th grade Language Arts core. Courtade-Little and Browder (2005) suggest six guidelines to align IEP goals in their book, *Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards for Students with Moderate and Severe Disabilities.* In addition to their guidelines, using the extended core curriculum for students with severe disabilities and portfolios can make this requirement more attainable.

Courtade-Little and Browder's (2005) guidelines to help teachers align IEP goals to state standards are: (1) "Become familiar with state standards" (p. 14). Educators must know what is in the general education core curriculum in order to write IEP goals that align. (2) "Become familiar with the state's approach to alternate achievement standards" (p. 18). Special educators need to know how adequate yearly progress will be measured in their state. (3) "Keep the planning student-focused" (p. 19). The IEP team needs to focus on the individual abilities and needs of the student when writing goals for that student. (4) "Consider both specific academic goals and broad access goals" (p. 20). Special educators can focus a few goals on specific academic goals and then relate the goals to broader skills that the student needs to learn. (5) "Ask

the question, 'Is it really reading and really math?'" (p. 22). Ensure that the essence of the standard is not lost in the adaptation. Students need to still be performing the essential skill of the standard. (6) "Do not 'force fit' all IEP objectives into alignment with academic standards" (p. 24). It is better to begin with the academic standard and develop academic goals from the standard than to force fit a functional goal into an academic standard. It is easier to adjust the standard to the student than the student to the standard. Also, not all of the student's goals may align with the general education curriculum.

The Utah State Office of Education recently released an extended core curriculum for students with severe disabilities. The extended core curriculum is a tool that provides support for special educators in determining the essence of the standards of the general education curriculum. Special educators can use the essence of the standard to write IEP goals for students with severe disabilities. Breaking down the standard provides a way to align IEP goals to the general education curriculum that may be more attainable.

In order to write goals that align to the general education curriculum, special educators must be familiar with it (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). Special educators can begin by writing one IEP goal per subject, which are math, language arts, and science, that aligns with the extended core curriculum. Every goal in the IEP does not necessarily need to align to the general education curriculum (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). The teacher can focus on the individual need of the student when selecting tasks. I would suggest selecting a task that is most pertinent for the student to learn based upon their ability level. If aligning IEP goals to three subjects seems daunting, begin with one subject and progress to including all three subjects in the student's IEP.

Portfolios are another approach to providing access to the general education curriculum. Portfolios have different requirements for each subject with a list of tasks per subject. The

students or teachers can select tasks within a specific topic. The tasks vary in difficulty, which allows flexibility in accommodating for the students' individual needs and desires. Portfolios allow students to utilize self-determination (Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, & Agran, 2004). Self-determination is the ability to set goals and measure progress for oneself. Students can set goals and measure their progress as they complete their portfolio in each subject. Teachers can guide them through this process as necessary.

I began to align goals for my students to the extended core curriculum by selecting one standard per subject. For one of my students I aligned IEP goals to the English Language Arts and Math extended core curriculum standards. My student was in tenth grade. She could read and comprehend at a second-grade level. In math she was functioning at a second-grade level. She needed to improve her reading and computational skills. To write goals that aligned with the extended core I selected a standard to focus on in each subject and composed an IEP goal.

For English Language Arts (ELA), I selected standard one in ELA grades 9 and 10, which states, "reading: students will use vocabulary development and an understanding of text elements and structures" (Harrington, 2009, p. 20). The ELA extended core standard Id 2, states "retell or summarize informational text using three pieces of information" (Harrington, p. 20). To align with this standard, I wrote a goal for the student to retell at least three points of information (i.e. beginning, middle, and end) from a given informational passage or story. I selected this standard because I felt the student would benefit from working on retelling to improve her comprehension.

For Math, I selected standard one in high school math, which states, "students will expand number sense to understand, perform operations, and solve problems with real numbers" (Harrington, 2009, p. 39). The math extended core standard Ib states "compute (+), (-), (x), (÷) with whole numbers and decimals place (e.g., $.25 plus $.25 equals $.50) to the hundredth place

using manipulatives or a calculator" (Harrington, p. 39). To align with this standard, I wrote a goal for the student to add and subtract monetary amounts with manipulatives or a calculator if needed. I focused on two functions rather than all four functions to accommodate the needs of my student. She was not quite ready to do multiplication and division but needed to increase her addition and subtraction skills. I felt that monetary amounts were a simple way to teach place value to the hundredth place.

These suggestions are intended to make the requirement of providing access to the general education curriculum more attainable. Students with severe disabilities may access the general education curriculum through different approaches. Each student's needs are unique and need to be met through various approaches. Special educators should strive to meet the requirement to the best of their ability. This may be done one IEP goal at a time.

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