

Differentiated Output: Increasing Engagement and LRE Opportunities for Students with ASD

A primary guiding principle for educating students with disabilities is to ensure that individualized education program (IEP) and intervention decisions are aligned and informed by the law, research, and data. Unfortunately, IEP team decisions to remove students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from the general education classroom are often solely made on erroneous conjecture and opinions.

The Law

Special education services are provided under the requirements of federal and state laws and policies.

- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, P.L. 94-142): This is the federal law that outlines special education requirements. It includes two fundamental requirements for educating students with disabilities:
 - Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). FAPE is defined as “an educational program that is individualized to a specific child, designed to meet that child’s unique needs, provides access to the general curriculum, meets the grade-level standards established by the state, and from which the child receives educational benefit” (extrapolated from case law and 20 U.S.C. §1401(14) and 34 CFR 300.320 through 300.324 re IEP, and 300.17 re FAPE definition as special education and related services per IEP)
 - Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE is defined as the environment in which “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities... are educated in the general education classroom with children who are not disabled... and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from regular education environments occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (34 C.F.R. §300.114).

Supplementary aids and services are defined as “aids, services, and other supports that are provided in general education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate in accordance with §300.114 through §300.116” (34 CFR 300.42). The purpose of providing supplementary aids and services, then, is to support students with disabilities to be active participants in general education. According to the law, this includes modifications to the general curriculum. In fact, as outlined in IDEA, a child with a disability should not be removed from general education solely because of needed modifications in the curriculum (34 CFR 300.116 (e)).

In short, then, providing a FAPE within the LRE means providing an education to a student with a disability within the general education environment with supplementary aids and services. These supplementary aids and services include modifications to the curriculum. Unless the student cannot make progress with these supplementary aids and services implemented consistently and with fidelity, the student must be placed in general education. Progress is not limited to academic areas, but includes social and behavioral growth, engagement, independence, and other relevant areas.

Research & Data

The most recent revision of IDEA, 20 U.S. Code §1400 (2004), states: “Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of students with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their *access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom*, to the maximum extent possible.”

Research shows:

- Post-school employment outcomes are higher for students with the highest degree of integration with age-appropriate peers despite lower IQs, behavior problems, physical disabilities, or other challenging needs (White, J. and Weiner, J.S. (2004)).

- For students with extensive support needs (e.g., ASD or cognitive impairment), the amount, type, and quality of interactions with typical peers were better in general education contexts. When done well, services in general education contexts are also likely superior to those in self-contained settings with respect to the quality of educational programs, the amount of time that teachers provide instruction, the amount of time students are engaged in instruction and social interactions, and outcomes of social competence, language development and use, literacy, and general education content areas (Jackson, Ryndak, and Wehmeyer (2010)).
- Rationales often used to restrict access to general education—including sense of community, fewer distractions, more individualized and specialized instruction, and more appropriate behavioral supports—did not stand up to rigorous review and research. In fact, research showed that segregated classrooms had increased and more intense distractions than did general education classrooms. Segregated classrooms also had less individualized and specialized instruction and an increased use of seclusion and restraint procedures (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, and Cosier (2011)).
- “[T]here is strong evidence that students with extensive support needs acquire skills and content knowledge in general education with rigorous instruction and [universal design for learning]-based adaptations” and are best served through a focus on finding solutions to challenges of education in general classrooms rather than looking for alternative placements (Ryndak, Lewis, and White (2013)).

Given these findings, it is crucial that the education of students with ASD be focused first and foremost on placement in general education with the use of supplementary aids and services, including modifications to the curriculum. Restricting access to general education should be approached with caution and occur only when the nature and severity of needs are so great that, even with implementation fidelity of effective supplementary aids and services (e.g., modifications to the curriculum but including other universal supports and evidence-based practices), progress on IEP goals and progress in social, communicative, behavioral, academic, independent, and engagement domains are hindered.

Definitions and Use: Accommodations, Modification, and Differentiation

There is often confusion in the field about what constitutes a “modification.” Interestingly, IDEA and its regulations do not define modifications, although there has been some agreement in the field about what they mean. Different than accommodations, which are considered supports and services that level the playing field for an individual with a disability (e.g., extended time), modifications are generally understood as adjustments that change the expected outcome or standard or what the assessment is supposed to measure. When applied to individual assignments over time, modifications would likely impact the overall outcome or standard (e.g., Grade-Level or Core Content Standards), which, in turn, would impact grades or credits. However, when applied periodically to individually-determined assignments or assessments, may not affect overall grades or credits and in that way are more like accommodations.

Given these differences and to avoid miscommunication of the intention of their use, START has chosen to use the term “differentiation” to define individually-determined changes to assignments or assessments. The current focus is on differentiation of student output that is organized in a hierarchy. The purpose of the differentiated output is to improve student engagement and validly measure student learning. Based on the number and type of differentiated output used, general education teachers, who specialize in the general education curriculum, can then determine over time if the differentiation should be considered an accommodation or modification of the overall curricular outcomes.