

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

THE IMPORTANCE OF ELEMENTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The Joint Position Statement on Education adopted by AAIDD and The Arc in 2018 is a comprehensive listing of elements of quality inclusion needed to support students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) to access the general curriculum with their same-age peers. This article outlines the process by which position statements are written and adopted. Each article in this special issue proposed by the AAIDD's Education Interest Network is introduced.

*Key Words:* inclusion, education, supports, intellectual and developmental disability

### The Importance of Elements of Inclusive Education

AAIDD Position Statements provide important information and guidance for the membership of the Association, professionals in diverse fields that work on or write about disability-related issues, and the general public regarding critical issues, practices, and policies. Many position statements are joint statements created within a consensus-building approach, such as the position on Education, a statement approved by AAIDD and The Arc in 2018 (AAIDD, 2018). Each year, The Arc and AAIDD review existing position statements to determine if any documents need adjustments. The Education Position Statement was selected to be reviewed and updated during the 2017-18 review cycle by the full Policy and Position Committee of The Arc and AAIDD. Position statement formats include a summary statement of the Position, an issue or problem statement that outlines reasons a position statement is needed, and a more detailed, expanded explanation of the position statement listing multiple elements and issues that constitute the agreement of the organization(s). The language and purposes of the position statements are to clarify, inform, and promote the well-being and understanding of the issues that impact people with disabilities and their families. Furthermore, teachers, service providers, policy makers, legislators, writers or news reporters, and other interested entities can access the position statements online to accurately promote and support the rights and responsibilities of people with a disability on a diverse listing of issues such as self-determination, advocacy, supported decision making, and other topics.

The Education Position Statement was drafted by a work group that included members of AAIDD and the Arc who are people with a variety of perspectives, including self-advocates, educators, educational policy professionals, and family members. Then, the statement was

submitted to the full Policy and Positions Committee for review and initial revision. Chapters of The Arc are invited to review drafts of all position statements under review. At this point, each of the position statements being reviewed or updated in a particular year are returned to the work groups for further suggestions or editing before once again moving on to the full committee to finalize. The chair of this work group ably led the members through a series of updates and revisions that strengthened and illuminated issues of inclusive education for students with Intellectual Disability. The boards of the AAIDD and The Arc each approved the following Education Position Statement as written to be a *Joint Statement* of both organizations:

All children and youth with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD) must receive a free appropriate public education that include fair evaluation, ambitious goals, challenging objective, the right to progress, individualized supports and services, high quality instruction, and access to the general education curriculum in age-appropriate inclusive settings. These are essential for achieving the nation's four policy goals of quality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (the four policy goals). Parents and families must be supported as essential partner in the education and transition to adult life of their sons and daughters (AAIDD, 2018).

This special issue was proposed by the AAIDD Education Interest Network, members of AAIDD who focus primarily on inclusive education through supporting teacher preparation and continuing education, working with families to develop and maintain family-professional partnerships, and working on research and practice to expand the current practices within some schools that tend to discourage inclusive education. Members of the Education Interest Network believe that students with IDD should be able to access the general education curriculum and make progress while being taught in the least restrictive settings with their same-age peers with or without other disabilities.

The first paper of this special issue takes an in-depth look at ten key actions outlined in the Joint Position Statement on Education. Authors summarize recent literature and research

findings on positive outcomes while recommending additional changes for our system of education to ensure free and appropriate access to education for students with IDD. This article shares positive perspectives on the main points of the position statement on inclusive education in such a way that makes one consider, “Why aren’t more students with IDD accessing and benefitting from inclusive placement, assessment that is accessible, technology supports, and more?”. The subsequent articles highlight key ideas for inclusive education.

Thompson et al. (2020) emphasize that educators must identify and arrange individualized supports for students with IDD for inclusive educational practices. Using focus group methodology, the authors investigated how teachers plan for instruction, how teachers view a systematic problem-solving process for support planning, and what resources/technical assistance would help with individualized supports. McDonnell and Hunt (2014) reminded us that systems-level factors such as school staffing and organization can impact inclusive programming as well as how funding can be used to promote inclusion. Although a number of investigations have polled teachers on elements of inclusive instruction, Thompson et al. investigate how educators plan, arrange, and implement supports for students with IDD and follow up by identifying barriers and challenges to using a structured process for planning, arranging, and implementing supports. Using qualitative methodology, a series of themes were generated that both confirm and expand knowledge of how educators perceive and implement both informal and formal supports for students in the context of inclusive classrooms. In general, there was little evidence that teachers preferred a structured process to plan, arrange, and implement supports. In many cases educators used old resources in unsystematic ways, rather than new ones. Teachers wanted information on students and in-depth contextual details about each general educator and general education setting in which their student might be enrolled.

Overall, the authors highlight the critical need to adjust educational environments for accessible learning and the need to systematically individualize supports within a structured process for planning, arranging, and implementing both informal and formal supports.

The third article in this special issue, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Technology Training and Usage by Youth with IDD in the National Longitudinal Transition Study of 2012*, is timely and pertinent. Within the general population of today's teenagers there is a high rate of internet and smart phone use (98% vs 95% respectively; Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Yet, students with IDD report a much lower level of technology use. We need more details about how individuals with IDD interact with technology, especially in the use of technology for social capital and social media, since details on social media users were not collected prior to the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) of 2012. This dataset was used to find difference in technology instruction, technology use, and social inclusion between youth with IDD, youth with other disabilities, or youth without disabilities. Students with IDD are using technology less than their peers, receive less training, and thus engage in fewer social media interactions (Fisher, Williamson, & Guerra, 2020). These authors consider the effect of technology on instruction and the necessity to teach students the skills that result in establishing digital citizenship to gain social capital. Also, the authors looked at the relationship between disability status and access to social media instruction, perceived usefulness of instruction, and social inclusion opportunities. Then, the relation between social inclusion opportunities and access to technology instruction, technology use, and disability status was evaluated. One of the most startling findings was that youth with IDD were 248% less likely to text with friends compared to youth without IDD which creates a significant gap in forming social bonds with friends. Results of this study, which focused on data collected in 2012, question if youth with IDD are prepared for adulthood and

suggest that schools explicitly teach technology coupled with social media to promote social capital.

The article *Effective Technology Supported Writing Strategies for Learners with Disabilities* by Smith, Lowrey, Rowland, and Frey (2020) focused on improving middle school writing by combining direct instruction, technology-enhanced student participation, and ongoing assessment delivered within a professional development model including coaching. General education teachers spent additional time to learn the process, evaluate their effectiveness with students in inclusive settings, and impact student success regarding writing skills, an important aspect of literacy. Toews and Kurth (2019) remind us that literacy instruction for students with IDD often occurs in self-contained setting, even though social interaction is a critical piece of literacy. Smith et al. (2020) support Toews and Kurth's call for literacy instruction to be delivered in inclusive general education settings to expand the horizons and raise expectations for students with IDD. In the model to improve writing, Smith et al. (2020) emphasize technology support using word prediction applications that list words to select, give an audio prompt for each word, and use the writer's previous writing samples as guidance for suggestions. In addition, text-to-speech was used to encourage students to listen/hear what they wrote. Overall, teachers combined numerous strategies with technology to strengthen direct instruction in inclusive settings, following up with progress monitoring to evaluate outcomes.

Regarding transition assessments, Deardorff et al. (2020) asked 938 educators to identify the measures they employ for transition concerning students with IDD. The article, *What do Transition Assessments Look Like for Students with a Significant Cognitive Disability? A Multistate Survey of Educational Stakeholders* outlines that schools must select a formal transition assessment with adequate validity and reliability. Informal assessments are also used

with students with IDD. This report of an online survey presents a broad snapshot of transition assessment for students with IDD across several states and seeks to identify what is needed to adequately assess transition for students with IDD. Transition planning is essential for all students but is especially important for students with IDD (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014).

Inclusion in general education settings for students with IDD using accommodations and supports is important. Supports and services should be based on student strengths, rather than focusing primarily on deficits (Snell et al., 2009). Students with IDD can benefit from inclusive environments focusing on strength-based supports in order to have opportunities to interact and learn with peers while experiencing challenging academic curriculum (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Schalock, & Thompson, 2017). Thus, the Education Position Statement calls for the best *quality of opportunity* and *full participation* of students with IDD in educational settings, as indicated by these national goals. The focus on the transition to *independent living* and *economic self-sufficiency* is also critical for schools to acknowledge by creating and sustaining quality opportunities and inclusive supports for all students. The Joint Education Position Statement of AAIDD and The Arc combines all the elements needed to address high-quality inclusive services for all students with disabilities, but the focus on students with IDD is essential to drive the field toward a renewed sense of the need to provide challenging curriculum within environments that include same-age peers without disabilities.

According to Kurth, Morningstar, and Kozleski (2014) students with the most severe disabilities continue to be educated in separate settings. This non-inclusive placement for many students with IDD continues, even though research shows that students with IDD benefit academically and socially in inclusive settings (Feldman, Carter, Asmus & Brock, 2015; Spooner & Browder, 2015). Kurth et al. mention that more research is needed within system-level

capacity building, school and classroom capacity, and student learning and development. Each of these separate research foci is multi-layered and complex. At every level of capacity building, valuing the importance of the context of instruction will encourage inclusive services for students with IDD and encourage alignment with the Joint Position Statement on Education of The Arc and AAIDD. However, we must also consider the results of Thompson et al. (2020) in this issue which highlight the need for every teacher to plan for and individualize supports for students with IDD for best results. Educators must embrace each of the elements of the Joint Education Position Statement to advance the education of students with IDD in our country.

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