LOW-INCIDENT DISABILITIES: INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

By Michael B. Brown, PhD, NCSP, & Tara L. Brinkman
East Carolina University

Low-incidence disabilities are impairments affecting relatively small numbers of individuals. At school, this generally means that personnel with highly specialized skills and knowledge are needed in order for children with such disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education.

Many children develop low-incidence disabilities as a result of genetic or other medical problems, such as Hurler’s Syndrome or cerebral palsy, and they have traditionally experienced only minimal contact with general education students and curriculum. As a result of special education laws starting with Public Law 94-142 (enacted by Congress in 1975) and the subsequent Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), however, students with low-incidence disabilities are now included in general education classes on a more regular basis. Although children with low-incidence disabilities comprise less than one half of 1% of the school-age population, the number of children with low-incidence disabilities receiving special education services has increased by 24% during the past decade.

Characteristics

Often students with low-incidence disabilities have a variety of coexisting problems such as cognitive deficits, orthopedic impairments, and sensory impairments. Students with multiple disabilities present a challenge to classroom teachers as each child has a unique set of characteristics depending upon age, combination of disabilities, and severity of impairments.

Students with low-incidence disabilities may have one or more of the following traits: limited speech or communication, mobility problems, failure to relate or attend to others (e.g., social challenges), social skills deficits, tendency to forget previously learned skills, difficulty generalizing across situations and settings, and difficulty with major life activities such as self-care. While the likelihood of having a child with multiple disabilities in the classroom is small, teachers need to be prepared to integrate these students into the general education classroom.

Planning and Adapting the Educational Program

Although it may seem overwhelming to be faced with the prospect of integrating a child with multiple disabilities into your classroom, you are not alone in this process. You will be working with a team of other educational personnel to develop and implement an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your student. It is important to start out by looking at the overall picture of the student’s strengths and needs when developing a classroom plan.

Developing an IEP

Educational programming, communication, social interactions, and physical needs and activities are the basic areas to address. Since each student will have a different constellation of strengths and needs, the programs must be individually tailored.

Students with low-incidence disabilities can benefit from education within developmentally appropriate environments when provided with appropriate instructional and technical supports and services. While there are some exceptions, students with low-incidence disabilities typically learn and perform at rates well below those of their non-disabled peers. Therefore, teachers must modify curriculum expectations in order to reduce the disparity between curriculum demands and a student’s performance level. The following strategies provide examples of how to adapt the regular education curriculum to accommodate a student’s needs.
Adjust the Difficulty Level of the Curriculum Objectives

- Allow the students to complete fewer problems as long as they demonstrate mastery of the specific skill.
- Provide more time to complete tasks and assignments.
- Break the desired outcome into component sub-goals and have each subcomponent sequentially become the instructional objective.

Adapt Instructional Strategies

- Identify appropriate assistive technology supports and devices during the IEP process. Encourage students to use these devices to facilitate their educational experience.
- Break complex tasks or concepts into smaller units and teach the smaller units.
- Use peers, parent volunteers, or teaching assistants to provide extra one-on-one instruction and demonstration for new tasks.
- Use demonstrations, hands-on learning experiences, and concrete learning examples.
- Provide additional guided practice opportunities. Utilize direct physical assistance and verbal prompts.
- Use peer tutoring and cooperative learning strategies to reinforce learning and practice.
- Provide ongoing positive reinforcement for learning.
- Allow for more frequent breaks if necessary to maintain energy or attention.

Improve Communication Skills

Communication is key to ensuring that students are fully included in the classroom. Students with relatively severe communication difficulties can be helped to improve their level of communication with others in the classroom.

- Actively promote attention to and interaction with others in the environment.
- Allow students with communication difficulties to point to an object, communication board, or correct answer rather than answering verbally.
- Have the students type or dictate assignments into a tape recorder instead of writing in longhand.
- Give extra time for responding to questions and completing tasks.
- Use pictures, charts, and other visual aids to help the students communicate needs. This also helps to encourage independence.

- Look at the communicative intent of the students' behavior and provide them with the words to communicate the message that is intended.
- Utilize appropriate assistive technology devices to assist in communication. Each school should have access to an assistive technology consultant who can help you with implementing communication props and devices.
- A personal assistant or instructional aide (if one is assigned to the students) may also be helpful in facilitating communication.

Adaptations for Mobility and Physical Needs

There are many environmental adaptations that may be considered when including students with multiple disabilities in the regular classroom. In general, these adaptations should be aimed at assisting student involvement with the ongoing activities of the classroom.

- Allow the student to explore and adapt to the physical classroom environment while other students are not present before integrating the student into the classroom. This time also allows for last minute classroom modifications that may have been overlooked (i.e., making sure the classroom computer is accessible or ensuring that the height level of the pencil sharpener is appropriate for a student in a wheelchair).
- Consider efficient mobility, access to materials, and independence when adapting the environment. Provide ample space to maneuver assistive devices such as a wheelchair or walker. Allow for adequate space to store and utilize assistive technology devices such as a communication boards.
- Arrange seating that is convenient to the front of the classroom, facing the teacher, and near a student/adult assistant. Whenever possible, seating should enable students to easily enter and exit the classroom with minimum disruption.
- Reduce the level of extraneous materials, noise, and distracting stimuli (e.g., windows, vents, high traffic areas). Individual study areas may provide a quiet, separate area for students who are distractible or who need additional space to complete assignments and tasks.
- Schedule times for movement in order to increase physical comfort. The day should be divided into both group and individual activities in which physical movement is both necessary and natural.
- Seek out services of an adaptive physical educator. Every school district should have a consultant who can provide you with assistance in adapting games...
and physical activities to provide involvement in these important areas for these students.

- Make sure that the playground or activities areas are adapted to meet the needs of the students.

Facilitate Socialization
Enhancing interactions among students with and without disabilities provides benefits for all students. Social interaction is key to enhancing the student's relationships with others, and makes being a part of the class a rewarding experience. Strategies to enhance socialization include:

- Teach social skills and social interactions that are appropriate to your classroom.
- Encourage group activities in which a variety of roles are available to students, including the students with low-incidence disabilities. For example, try group art projects, where some students can cut out shapes, others can put paste or glue on them, and others can place the shapes into a design. In this case, students with low-incidence disabilities may be able to apply the glue or paste or apply the parts to the design.
- Peer tutoring or cooperative education strategies can foster improved social integration in the classroom by allowing the students to be involved with others in academic tasks.
- Involve the students as much as possible in the routine of the classroom (doing the weather board, collecting lunch money, collecting or passing out papers). Pair the students with another student if assistance is needed to complete a task.

Involving Students Without Disabilities
Preparation. Preparing students in the classroom who do not have disabilities is a final key to successful integration of students with low-incidence disabilities. While they do not need extensive information on the background of a classmates' disability, you should be prepared to answer questions in an age-appropriate manner. Students need to be aware of what students with low-incidence disabilities can and cannot do independently and when assistance may be necessary or valued. Students should also understand the physical limitations disabilities present in order to help accommodate a student's limited range of motion or motor skills.

Augmentative devices. Students with severe disabilities may have adaptive devices or equipment in order to accommodate certain limitations. Students without disabilities do not need to know how to operate the devices, but they should understand the basic purpose the devices serve in assisting students in the classroom. If a student will be using an augmentative and/or alternative communication device, all members of the classroom should understand how to use the device to enhance communication with the student.

Roles for students without disabilities. Students without disabilities can play many roles in facilitating the inclusion of all students in the classroom. These students can be peer tutors, cross-age tutors, data collectors, peer buddies, helpers, and role models. It is important that students without disabilities are given appropriate instruction on how to fulfill these roles so they are able to be effective without hindering their own education. It is also important to be sensitive to the feelings of students without disabilities to be sure that they are comfortable filling these roles before assigning them to assist students with multiple disabilities.

Summary
Research has demonstrated the positive academic and social gains that are made by students with low-incidence disabilities who receive most of their education in the mainstream. Teaching children with low-incidence disabilities in the regular classroom can be a challenge, but will also provide you with many rewarding experiences.

Resources


**Websites**
The Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH)—
www.tash.org/index.htm
Circle of Inclusion—http://circleofinclusion.org
Integrating Minnesota Graduation Standards (Low-Incidence Student-Based Programs)—
www.integratingstandards.org/se/html/low-incidence.html
National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities—
www.nclid.unco.edu
National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)—www.nichcy.org

Michael B. Brown, PhD, NCSP, is an Associate Professor and Director of the School Psychology Program at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. Tara L. Brinkman is a graduate student in the School Psychology program at East Carolina University.


The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org) and the NASP Center for Children & Families website [www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org). Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

**About School Psychology**—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
[www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html)

**Crisis Resources**—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
[www.nasponline.org/crisisresources](http://www.nasponline.org/crisisresources)

**Culturally Competent Practice**—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**En Español**—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. [www.naspcenter.org/espanol/](http://www.naspcenter.org/espanol/)

**IDEA Information**—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
[www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html)

**Information for Educators**—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
[www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html)

**Information for Parents**—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
[www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html)

**Links to State Associations**—Easy access to state association websites.
[www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html)

**NASP Books & Publications Store**—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
[www.nasponline.org/bestsellers](http://www.nasponline.org/bestsellers)
Order online. [www.nasponline.org/store](http://www.nasponline.org/store)

**Position Papers**—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
[www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html)

**Success in School/Skills for Life**—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school’s website.
[www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit](http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit)