Mind the Gap! Implications of a Person-Environment Fit Model of Intellectual Disability for Students, Educators, and Schools
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Online publication date: 23 October 2010

To cite this Article Thompson, James R., Wehmeyer, Michael L. and Hughes, Carolyn (2010) 'Mind the Gap! Implications of a Person-Environment Fit Model of Intellectual Disability for Students, Educators, and Schools', Exceptionality, 18: 4, 168 — 181

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/09362835.2010.513919
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2010.513919
A person-environment fit conceptualization of intellectual disability (ID) requires educators to focus on the gap between a student’s competencies and the demands of activities and settings in schools. In this article the implications of the person-environment fit conceptual model are considered in regard to instructional benefits, special education service delivery, assessment and planning processes (including developing Individualized Education Programs), and the roles and responsibilities of special and general education teachers.

Providing supports that enable students to fully participate in activities and settings valued by the student, the student’s family, and other members of the educational team is a primary goal of education. New conceptual models for understanding disability, variously referred to as person-environment fit, functional, or social-ecological models, have the potential to promote professional practices that enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of students with intellectual disability (ID). These models contrast with deficit-based understandings of disability that focus educational efforts on fixing the student. The purpose of this article is to discuss the implications of a person-environment fit conceptual model of ID in today’s schools. We begin by providing an overview of the person-environment fit model for understanding disability. Next, we address the implications of this model in regard to potential benefits for students and ways in which...
which special education services are delivered. Then, we discuss how the model could influence the activities of educational planning teams and the development of Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). We conclude by discussing implications for the roles and responsibilities of special and general education teachers.

CONCEPTUAL MODELS OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) first proposed a person-environment fit model of ID in the 9th Edition of its terminology, definition, and classification manual (i.e., AAIDD Manual) nearly two decades ago (Luckasson et al., 1992). Subsequent editions (i.e., Luckasson et al., 2002; Schalock et al., 2010) have continued to embrace this conceptualization. The AAIDD definition of ID is predicated on the definition of disability promulgated by the World Health Organization’s (WHO, 2001) “functional” definitions of disability, where disability is viewed not as a defect within the individual but as a poor fit between the person’s capacities and the context in which a person functions. The current AAIDD Manual (Schalock et al., 2010) stipulates that ID is first a disability as defined by the WHO’s definition system, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF). Within the ICF, the term “disability” is an umbrella term for limitations in human functioning, where human functioning refers, simply, to all the life activities in which one would typically engage. Disability can result from any problem in one or more of three dimensions of human functioning: body structures and functions, personal activities, participation.

Briefly, as per ICF, body structures are anatomical parts of the body; body functions are the physiological and psychological functions of body systems. Problems in body functions and structures are called impairments. Personal Activities are the execution of tasks or actions by an individual. Activities refer to skills and abilities of the individual that allow that person to adapt to the demands and expectations of the environment. Problems in this dimension are referred to as activity limitations. Participation, defined as “involvement in a life situation,” is related to the functioning of the individual in society. It refers to roles and interactions in the areas of home living, work, education, leisure, spiritual, and cultural activities. Problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations are called participation restrictions (WHO, 2001).

Therefore, ID is a disability in which impairments to the Central Nervous System (CNS) (e.g., body functions and structures) result in activity limitations and participation restrictions. CNS impairments associated with ID result in limitations in intellectual functioning, a type of human functioning that is greatly affected by level or degree of intelligence. Intelligence is “a general mental capability. It includes reasoning, planning, solving problems, thinking abstractly, comprehending complex ideas, learning quickly, and learning from experience” (Schalock et al., 2010, p. 221).

As mentioned earlier, the three editions of the AAIDD Manual published since 1992 have maintained that ID is evidenced by a poor fit between a person’s capacities and the context in which the person must function. Capacity is the ability to perform a task; in this case a mental, cognitive, or intellectual task. ID is not seen as residing within the person, but instead is conceptualized as a function of the fit between the person’s capacities and the activity and participation expectations of the context. This does not imply that an underlying body function
impairment (e.g., CNS impairment) is in any way fixed by ensuring, through environmental supports or through instruction, a better fit between the person’s capacity and the context. It simply recognizes that ID is not defined by the CNS impairment in and of itself, but instead by the person’s functioning (e.g., the mismatch between the person’s capacity and the context) (Schalock et al., 2010).

The authors of the 9th edition of the AAIDD Manual emphasized this point by stating that ID “is not a trait, although it is influenced by certain characteristics or capabilities of the individual . . . rather, . . . [intellectual disability] is a state in which functioning is impaired . . . . This distinction between trait and state . . . shifts the emphasis from measurement of traits to understanding the individual’s actual functioning in daily living” (Luckasson et al., 1992, p. 10). Thus, from a person-environment fit perspective, ID is characterized by limitations in intellectual functioning that result in individuals needing extraordinary supports (i.e., supports that people from the general population do not need) in order to participate in activities associated with everyday life.

**IMPLICATIONS OF A PERSON ENVIRONMENT FIT MODEL OF ID FOR EDUCATION**

**Potential Benefits for Students**

There are many reasons for educators to embrace the person-environment fit conceptualization of ID. First and foremost, compared to a traditional deficit-based conceptualization, the person-environment fit model places a greater emphasis on understanding student strengths and environmental contexts. Deficit-based models of ID are focused on weaknesses, and the major implication for educators is the need to provide instructional interventions that “fix” student deficiencies. A person-environment fit model focuses on the gap between a student’s capacities and the environment, and the implication for educators is to concentrate efforts on closing the gap between capacity and environmental context so students can meaningfully participate in school settings and activities (i.e., function successfully).

A person-environment fit model calls for investing time and effort in assessing a student’s present levels of performance (i.e., strengths and limitations) as well as ways in which the environmental context might be modified. Thus, the process begins with an evaluation of student strengths, thereby continually raising expectations for what a student can do versus cannot do. Waiting until a student reaches a particular skill level before participating in a learning activity or educational setting (i.e., denying students opportunity to participate settings and activities because of what they cannot do) is difficult to justify when ID is understood from a person-environment fit perspective. For example, a student who does not speak initially may require a teacher to intensively support her when communicating meal choices to lunchroom staff in the school cafeteria. Later, however, this student may learn to use a communication board to convey choices with only limited support from others. Later, the student may use an electronic augmentative communication device as well as some residual speech and will not require any extraordinary support from others. Therefore, there is no reason to “do it for” the student at any point just because he or she needs varying types and intensity of support over time. The person-environment fit model calls for an iterative process where patterns of support change as
student capabilities and environmental demands change, and partial participation in an activity (Snell & Brown, 2006) is almost always an option.

A second reason for educators to embrace a person-environment fit model of ID is because it is conceptually consistent with a range of best practices that benefit all students with or without disabilities. Providing positive behavior supports (PBS) to students with ID is an excellent example of the operationalization of the person-environment fit model to education. Carr and colleagues (2000) defined PBS as “an approach for dealing with problem behavior that focuses on the remediation of deficient contexts (i.e., environmental conditions and/or behavioral repertoires) that by functional assessment are documented to be the source of the problem” (p. 1). In other words, PBS focuses as much on changing the environment or context as changing the child, and in so doing reduces the gap between a student’s capacities and the demands of the context so that a student can function successfully. Moreover, all students benefit from the positive climate for learning that is established through application of the School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) framework whereby increasingly intensive supports and interventions are applied as needed to individual students (Sugai & Horner, 2008).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is another example of the application of a person-environment fit model to education that benefits all students. UDL refers to “the design of instructional materials and activities that allows the learning goals to be achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember” (Orkwis & McLane, 1998, p. 9). Note that the focus is on the design of instructional materials and activities to ensure achievement. The implementation of curriculum modifications and the use of technology inherent in UDL reduce the mismatch between a student’s capacities and the demands of the context (e.g., learning), thus promoting successful functioning.

The implications associated with a person-environment fit model for developing student self-determination provides educators with a third reason to adopt this conceptualization of ID. By actively involving students in addressing their own support needs, students will have opportunities to learn how to assess the gap between their own functioning and environmental demands. Students can learn to ask “What are my goals in engaging in this activity? What accommodations do I need to succeed at this task in this setting? Have I achieved my aims by participating in this activity?” In doing so, students learn how to directly address the learning challenges that confront them by developing self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills.

The Purpose of Special Education

When ID is understood from a deficit-based perspective, the primary purpose of special education is to eradicate deficits to the greatest extent possible so that students with ID function less atypically. Therefore, interventions that target behavior change are entirely consistent within the traditional deficit-based model of ID. In contrast, special education services based on the person-environment fit model are focused on providing supplementary aids and supports that result in enhanced opportunities to learn across multiple activities and settings in addition to designing and implementing interventions that enhance student capacity.

It is important to reiterate that a shift to a person-environment fit model in no way alters the desirability of increasing student behavioral repertoires through teaching and learning activities.
As mentioned in the Introduction to this issue of *Exceptionality*, a person-environment fit model does not deny that children with ID have meaningful limitations in personal capacity that are quite different from limitations experienced by people from the general population. Instead, it is recognized that the extent that CNS (i.e., cognitive) impairment impacts a student’s life is a function not only of limitations in skills but also, and perhaps more so, in the ways in which environments are configured and the degree to which supports are provided that enable students to function more successfully. Altman (2001) pointed out that evidence of pathology (i.e., disease and disorders) is the core component of leading person-environment fit models of disability put forth by the Institute of Medicine and the WHO. However, in a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID, *the pathology is not the disability*. Rather, the disability is “the expression of a physical or mental limitation in social context—the gap [emphasis added] between a person’s capabilities and the demands of the environment” (Altman, 2001, p. 103).

Therefore, there is a subtle, yet very critical, shift in focus when justifying special education services from a person-environment fit perspective. Instead of providing services to eradicate deficits (i.e., fix the child), the purpose of special education is to close the gap between personal capacity and environmental demands. Put another way, the rationale for special education is not to make a child less atypical (although, this may happen) but rather to enable a child to more fully participate in and benefit from settings and activities that are valued by the student, the student’s family, and other members of the educational team.

Although a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID can be thought of as a “new paradigm” that it is different from traditional, deficit-based models, the importance of understanding children by their support needs has been acknowledged within the field of special education for several decades. Nirje’s (1969) and Wolfensberger’s (1972) classic work on principle of normalization, calling for “patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream society” (Nirje, 1969, p. 181) to be available to people with ID, is implicitly aligned with a person-environment fit perspective. Additionally, identifying children’s needs for support has been an underlying subtext of the professional literature on instructional planning and delivery that Lou Brown and others have championed for more than 40 years. This literature calls for educators to focus on their students’ current environments as well as future environments of “ultimate functioning” (e.g., see Brown et al., 1991; Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Niuetupski, 1976), which is entirely consistent with a support needs orientation. It was more than 15 years ago when Snell and Drake (1994) concluded that “disability labels still may be necessary for eligibility, but a profile of each student’s needed supports is essential” (p. 406) for delivering quality special education services. Therefore, attempting to understand children with ID by their needs for extraordinary support is not a new idea; rather, it is an idea that has become more explicit over time.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND TEAMING**

In this section, we discuss actions that educators need to adopt in order for their practices to be consistent with a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID. First, we propose a five-component model for assessing support needs and developing support plans. Then, we provide recommendations for aligning support needs planning with IEP development.
Support Needs Assessment and Planning

A five-component support needs assessment and planning process based on a person-environment conceptualization of ID is shown in Figure 1. This process “starts with assessing personal interests and needs for support, proceeds to team planning and implementation, is followed by careful monitoring of implementation, and ends with an evaluation of outcomes” (Thompson et al., 2009, p. 143). The process is iterative because it calls for planning teams to return to earlier components based on monitoring and evaluation activities. Educational planning teams adopting this process should realize that it requires an investment of time and effort beyond that which is required when planning is focused solely on a child’s learning/achievement goals. However, because the result is a better fit between the student’s capacities and the environment, students should have more meaningful educational experiences and more satisfying educational outcomes.

*Person-centered planning.* Figure 1 shows that the first component of the support needs assessment and planning process is to *identify desired life experiences and goals*. This can be accomplished by using person-centered planning (PCP) processes such as MAPS, PATH, or PICTURE (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 1994; Holburn, Gordon, & Vietze, 2007).

![Five-component support needs assessment and planning process](image)

**FIGURE 1** Five-component support needs assessment and planning process. (*Source:* Adapted from Thompson et al. [2009].)
Regardless of which PCP process is used, the desired outcome is for people who support a child (e.g., family members, teachers) to arrive at a collective vision of the child’s life going forward. PCP processes require participants to project desirable life conditions and experiences several years into the future, and to not restrict discussion by only considering services that are currently available or by interjecting perceived barriers (e.g., fiscal restrictions, limitations in a person’s skills) (O’Brien & O’Brien, 2002).

There is limited professional literature on how educational teams use PCP processes as a means to provide a context for annual IEP planning. However, at the very least, the student, family, teachers, and other team members should understand how annual IEP goals are related to the broader “dreams and aspirations” that emerge from PCP processes. Martin et al. (2006) and Test et al. (2004) provide suggestions for teaching and supporting students in advocating for themselves at IEP meetings. These models could be expanded to assist students in assessing and articulating their own support needs in regard to annual goals and long-term plans.

Assessing support needs. The second component involves assessing a child’s support needs. Although conscientious educators have been considering aspects of children’s support needs for years, systematic and comprehensive approaches to identifying the nature and types of support a child with ID needs in order to participate in a variety of settings and activities have yet to be developed. A new scale, the Supports Intensity Scale for Children (Child SIS; Thompson et al., 2010) is being developed to fill this void. It is currently being field tested on a standardization sample of students (ages 5–16) from the United States and Canada.

The Child SIS was modeled after the Supports Intensity Scale (SIS) (Thompson et al., 2004). It is composed of two sections, the Support Needs Scale and Exceptional Medical and Behavioral Needs. The section from which norm-referenced indices will be generated, the Support Needs Scale, includes 61 life activities grouped into seven subscales or domains: (a) Home Life Activities, (b) Community & Neighborhood Activities, (c) School Participation Activities, (d) School Learning Activities, (e) Health and Safety Activities, (f) Social Activities, and (g) Advocacy Activities. Each of the 61 items is rated across 3 support dimensions: Type (the nature of support that is needed); Frequency (how often is support needed); and Time (how much total daily time is needed to provide support). For example, one student may need full physical assistance every time she moves around school and transitions between activities for a total of four or more hours per day. Another student may need only occasional monitoring during the day to participate in these same activities.

The Exceptional Medical and Behavioral Support Needs section lists 18 medical conditions (e.g., support needed to avoid triggers for allergic reactions and managing allergic reactions such as use of an epi-pen) and 14 problem behaviors (e.g., prevention of wandering). An underlying assumption is that certain medical conditions and challenging behaviors predict that a child will require increased levels of support, regardless of his or her relative intensity of support needs in the life activities included in the scale. For example, children with high support needs in terms of respiratory care or a child who is physically aggressive will need maximum support in their daily lives regardless of the intensity of support they need to participate in specific activities associated with Home Life, Community & Neighborhood, and so forth.

Developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating support plans. The third component of the support needs assessment and planning process shown in Figure 1, developing and
implementing the individualized support plan, involves taking information from component one (i.e., the collective vision of a child’s life going forward that resulted from PCP) and component two (assessment of a child’s support needs) and creating an individualized support plan that specifies the settings and activities in which a child will participate during a typical week, and what supports will be provided to enable meaningful participation. For school-aged children, the plans for support that emerge from component three plan would need to be integrated into the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The fourth and fifth components of the process, monitoring and evaluating, require planning teams to evaluate the extent to which (a) the support plan was implemented with fidelity (Did people do the things they said they were going to do?); (b) the outcomes projected when the plan was initiated matched actual outcomes (Did what was planned work out?); and (c) the desired life experiences and goals have remained relevant (Did the child’s interests and/or priorities change?).

It is critical that students actively participate in assessing the extent to which they believe their support needs are being addressed vis-à-vis desired activities, outcomes, and environmental demands. In addition, care must be given throughout the entire five-component support needs assessment and planning process to be sensitive to the cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity of students and their families. Families’ needs, assets, backgrounds, values, and views differ tremendously. Educators on the planning team must not dominate decision-making; rather, professionals must make special efforts to listen to students and family members to assure that their voices are reflected in the plans for support that are developed.

IEPs and Support Planning

Legal considerations. The cornerstone for delivering special education services in the United States is the IEP. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to create an IEP for each child receiving special education services that specifies the services a child will receive and stipulates the learning goals for the school year (which are made explicit by short-term learning objectives that include measurable progress benchmarks). Although specific requirements for developing the IEP have changed over time with revised federal laws and regulations, the IEP has been the official record of a child’s legal entitlement to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) since the initial passage of IDEA in 1975 (Wright & Wright, 2007).

Federal rules and regulations associated with the IEP are consistent with a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID where the focus is on providing individualized supports to meet environmental demands. In addition to specifying learner goals, IDEA requires IEP teams to identify and for schools to provide, “the accommodations, modifications, supports, and supplementary aids and services, needed by each child with a disability to successfully be involved in and progress in the general curriculum, achieve the goals of the IEP, and successfully demonstrate his or her competencies in state and district-wide assessments.” (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 209). Moreover, IEP teams must document that they have considered a child’s need for assistive technologies (AT) (Wright & Wright, 2007). All leading AT assessment frameworks involve assessing demands associated with settings and activities in which a student wants to participate (Watts, O’Brian, & Wojcik, 2004).

As mentioned previously, developing traditional achievement-based, behaviorally written goals and objectives is entirely consistent with a person-environment fit conceptualization
of ID as long as the goals address key features of the “gap” between a child’s functioning and the contextual demands of the school, home, and community environments in which the child desires to participate. Developing new skills can eliminate the need for certain types of supports. For instance, a child who develops mental arithmetic and money handling skills would not need support from a personal assistant or access to a calculator when making small purchases. Eliminating the need for individualized supports by learning new skills is highly desirable because a student can more efficiently access and participate in settings and activities if not reliant on extraordinary supports.

**Incorporating support planning into the IEP.** The IEP must not be limited to learning goals, but also must identify the types of supports needed by the child. Supports are “resources and strategies that aim to promote the development, education, interests, and personal well-being of a person and that enhance individual functioning” (Luckasson et al., 2002, p. 151) and therefore include people (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, peers), instructional accommodations and adaptations (e.g., peer note taker, adapted assignments), technology (e.g., using word/picture processing software program for written work), and instructional strategies (e.g., self-monitoring and self-management techniques). Planning individualized supports requires team members to consider an array of contextual features associated with settings and activities (e.g., the people who will be present, the physical conditions of the setting such as noise level). Moreover, environments are dynamic; they change regularly and sometimes change in critical ways. Individualized support planning, therefore, requires planning teams to tolerate more ambiguity and change than they would if focused solely on a child’s achievement of instructional objectives.

An important consideration in supports planning is to acknowledge that a support may be needed at one point in time, but may not be needed in the future based on changes in a child’s repertoire of skills and/or changes in the environment. For example, the array of supports provided by a paraprofessional to a child with intellectual disability in the general education classroom need to be closely monitored. Although it may be important for a paraprofessional to maintain close proximity to a child with ID throughout the school day if the child has never before attended a general education classroom, if excessive proximity to a paraprofessional dominates the child’s school experience for an extended period of time the child may be at risk of becoming overly dependent on adults and segregated from classmates. Additionally, general education teachers may not assume ownership or responsibility for the child’s educational progress (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Therefore, the nature of supports provided by a paraprofessional must be carefully monitored and revised over time to assure that supports which a child receives are maximizing the child’s opportunities for learning and meaningful participation within the general education classroom.

**IEP meetings.** Although the legal protections provided by the IEP are essential to assuring a child’s access to a FAPE, the legal standing of the IEP may be a barrier to effective supports-based planning. Many special educators find paperwork associated with IEP preparation to be very cumbersome, and it is easy for the goal of planning a child’s education to be displaced by a goal of assuring compliance with rules and procedures (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). Also, too often time constraints for IEP meetings create an atmosphere where there is limited opportunity for discussion. Sufficient time for discussion is essential to planning supports.
Identifying and arranging individualized supports is a labor and time intensive endeavor that requires thoughtful analyses of learner and environmental contexts, creative problem solving, and collaboration (including negotiation) with others.

Because the legal status of the IEP and time constraints associated with IEP meetings may create a context that is not conducive to planning individualized supports, educators may wish to keep the process for support needs assessment and planning (such as shown in Figure 1) separate from formal IEP meetings. As stated previously, IEPs should definitely be fully congruent with plans for providing individualized supports. However, planning supports may be most effective if communication is ongoing and discussions are formative, compared to IEP meetings where summative information is shared and a legally binding document is created.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Special Education Teachers**

Adopting a person-environment fit understanding of ID has implications for the roles and responsibilities of special educators as well as the teacher preparation programs that prepare them. A cursory examination of existing professional standards reveals that many elements consistent with a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID are already incorporated. For example, the Council for Exceptional Children’s (2009) knowledge and skill standards for beginning special educators (2007) include the following indicators: “Relate levels of support to the needs of the individual” (p. 131), “Identify supports needed for integration into various program placements” (p. 132), and “Identify and prioritize areas of the general curriculum and accommodations for individuals with exceptional learning needs” (p. 134).

Special educators that are best suited to meet the challenges involved with planning and delivering supports are those who excel in creative problem solving. There are specific practices that assist a special educator in becoming a good problem solver. Most notably, teachers who systematically collect data to monitor student progress are in a much stronger position to recognize when instructional interventions and/or supports are effective, and when they are not.

Not only do special educators need to monitor children’s progress on instructional goals and adjust teaching interventions accordingly, but special educators must also be cognizant of accommodations and adaptations children need to access desired settings and activities. This requires knowledge about general education classrooms, especially knowledge about curricular content and expectations as well as knowledge about general education teacher roles and responsibilities. Additionally, special educators need skills in collecting data on environmental factors (e.g., ecological inventories), collaboratively working with others (e.g., administrators, general education teachers, related service professionals, and paraprofessionals), and advocating for children.

Planning individualized supports requires thoughtful and regular analyses of student characteristics and environmental contexts. Although educators from a variety of disciplines can make contributions, it would be logical for the special education teacher to take the lead in serving as the primary facilitator of this process. To do it correctly, this role will require that special educators spend sufficient time observing children in general education settings to collect data,
as well as collaborate with others for purposes of problem solving. A cost of support needs assessment and planning is teacher time, and if sufficient time for essential activities is not provided it is unlikely that truly individualized supports will be arranged.

Therefore, special educators who spend additional time planning and monitoring supports may have less time to work directly with students on instructional activities. Although providing teachers with a planning period is not a new concept in schools, in many cases release time from students has been perceived to be “free time” because it is not structured and educators have not been held accountable for how this time is used. Such attitudes and practices will need to change. Administrators need to understand the amount of time and effort that is associated with planning, implementing, and monitoring individualized supports, and must arrange staffing patterns that reflect this reality. Additionally, special educators must develop proficient organizational and time management skills to efficiently complete tasks associated with support needs assessment and planning.

**General Education Teachers**

Traditionally, general education classroom teachers completed the majority of their work in isolation of special educators and students with IEPs. Although teachers needed to conform their instructional and classroom management methods to guidelines (both implicit and explicit) established by their school, school district, and state education agency, they had considerable autonomy in their classrooms. Collaboration with special educators was more likely to be episodic as opposed to ongoing. For example, traditionally general education teachers have referred low-achieving students for comprehensive case study evaluations to determine eligibility for special education services. In cases where a student was found to be eligible for special education services, it was common for the child to be assigned to a new teacher in a separate classroom and for the general education teacher to no longer retain any instructional responsibility.

Separate educational settings are largely antithetical to a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID. Removing a child from a valued educational environment (i.e., general educational classroom) is only justifiable in situations when the separate instructional setting functions as a support to close the gap between the student’s capacities and general education settings and activities. For example, removing a child from the general education classroom for the purpose of preteaching key concepts, vocabulary, etc., prior to a classroom lesson could be justified. Research has shown that preteaching can be an effective intervention for some children who struggle with academic achievement (Burns, Dean, & Foley, 2004). If progress-monitoring data showed that with preteaching a child experienced a higher level of achievement in the general education curriculum, then removal from the larger group for this purpose would be a reasonable course of action. There are other examples (e.g., speech therapy to address articulation disorders) that could be used to illustrate that a person-environment fit conceptualization does not require children with ID to spend every minute of every day in a general education classroom. However, because of the importance that is placed on bridging the gap between personal competence and the demands of everyday environments, a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID calls for children to receive individualized supports to function successfully in general education settings. Therefore, the person-environment fit model is philosophically consistent with the inclusive education move-
ment (Brown et al., 1991) where general educators retain instructional responsibilities for students with IEPs.

SWPBS (Sugai & Horner, 2008) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001) are frameworks for schoolwide reform that are consistent with a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID due to the fact they fundamentally alter the environmental context of general education. RTI and SWPBS proponents contend that all students in the school (i.e., general education and special education) need many levels of support that fall along a continuum of intensity. At one end of the continuum, students are able to respond successfully to classroom expectations with little additional assistance. But, at the other end, students need a great deal of individualized support to successfully participate in school settings and activities.

If implemented correctly, SWPBS and RTI require significant changes in the traditional roles and responsibilities of general education teachers. Although a full discussion of classroom teacher responsibilities in RTI and SWPBS is beyond the scope of this article, it is difficult to overstate the time and effort required of classroom teachers to develop an array of interventions that serve the needs of all students. General educators have pivotal roles and responsibilities in the complex task of aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment that lies at the heart of RTI and SWPBS. For example, general education must be skilled at implementing interventions at the universal level with fidelity and in order to provide a reliable data to guide second- and third-tier interventions. Also, they must invest considerable time collaborating with multiple professionals to assure planned supports are in place and are provided as envisioned by the planning team.

MIND THE GAP!

Conceptualizing ID has always been in a state of evolution, and there is no reason to believe the new terminology and person-environment fit model provided by the AAIDD (Schalock et al., 2010) is going to be the “final word” from this point forward. That said, conceptualizations of ID that become widely accepted provide the basis for setting public policy, directing the efforts of education and human service systems, and establishing parameters for professional work. The premise of this article is that a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID is superior to the traditional deficit-based conceptualization because it focuses intervention efforts on addressing the gap between student competencies and the demands of environments in which they wish to participate.

Anyone who has traveled to London and has ridden the public transportation system referred to as “The Tube” is familiar with the admonition to “Mind the gap.” At every stop, the name of the station is announced and travelers are asked to focus their attention on the gap between the train and the platform. Unsuccessful negotiation of “the gap” will result in undesirable outcomes. And so it is with a person-environment fit conceptualization of ID. Educators are called on to focus their attention on the gap between how children with ID function and the demands of school activities and settings. Individualized supports to address the gap might include teaching new skills, providing assistive technologies that enhance functioning, providing people (e.g., peers, paraprofessionals, teachers) who can offer assistance and facilitate participation, and modifying tasks and settings in ways to better accommodate learners with diverse needs.
NOTE

1. The 1992 and 2002 AAIDD T&C manuals retained the term “mental retardation.” The 11th Edition of the manual, published in 2010, changes the term to intellectual disability. Although the IDEA categorical area remains “mental retardation,” we use the term intellectual disability as it is more accurate and less stigmatizing. However, the operational definition of intellectual disability (e.g., that used for diagnosis and classification) did not alter with the introduction of the new term.

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