Five Features of Student Experience and Continuum of Supports for Inclusive Education

Universal **Aligned** **Alternate** **Restrictive**



Michael McSheehan
Mary Schuh
Evolve & Effect, LLC

Jessica Apgar
Kate MacLeod
University of Maine at Farmington

Deborah Taub
OTL Education Solutions, LLC

Our Collective Experience

The five of us, for our entire careers, have been working in disability and education, with a focus on inclusive education. Collectively, we have worked with thousands of students, families, educators, and administrators, in over a thousand schools and districts across the United States. When facilitating students' membership, participation, and learning in general education, we have seen what works and what doesn't.

While collaborating on another project, we stumbled into a conversation about how the design and delivery of student supports is central to inclusive education. Supports can enhance or inhibit a student's (a) presence and belonging in general education settings, (b) access to typical classroom activities, (c) participation alongside nondisabled classmates, and (d) active engagement in the general curriculum. We have seen how using supports for disabled students without considering the experience of their nondisabled peers creates barriers for students with disabilities. We think having a framework to guide thinking and communicating about student supports is useful; it provides a way to critically reflect and improve practice.

The Features of experience and Continuum of supports are not derived from a literature review or a theory, per se. It grew from our experiences in classrooms: a product of direct service collaborating with students, families, educators, service providers, and administrators. We hope it provides you with a way to get closer to your vision of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

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Five Features of Experience and Continuum of Supports

What if a simple change in classroom supports could improve the educational experiences of disabled students, their classmates, and their educators? The first step is to recognize that support isn't just extra help or an additional person; it's a bridge to belonging, participating, and learning. The five Features and Continuum help school staff consider how small differences in supports might promote or restrict a student's success in general education.

Purpose

The five Features and Continuum provide educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and administrators a way to design and adjust supports to enhance the learning experiences of students with disabilities in general education. We use the experiences of nondisabled classmates and peers as benchmarks. By doing this, we explore how supports—rather than a disabled student's characteristics—promote or inhibit the same opportunities and experiences.

To achieve that purpose, we will describe the nature of supports, key Features of student experience, and how combinations of those Features enhance or restrict learning experiences. We will explain how to identify points along the Continuum and help you think about ways to adjust supports for greater access, participation, belonging, and learning in general education.

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II. **Key Features of Experience** describes five experience Features that can enhance or inhibit the education of students with disabilities in general education. Features are benchmarked against the educational experiences of students without disabilities.

III. **Continuum of Supports** presents four points along a Continuum and describes how different combinations of the key Features impact the educational experience of disabled students.

IV. **Identifying Shifts in the Nature and Impact of Supports** describes how five key Features distinguish the four points along the Continuum (Universal, Aligned, Alternate, and Restrictive).

V. **Examples of Support** demonstrates how each Feature of supports impacts students' educational experiences.

Nature of Supports

Student support needs are dynamic and context dependent, shifting in relation to the activity, the environment, and the individual's capabilities at that moment. A student with limited or no reliable speech who also has fine motor involvement may need their augmentative communication device to function as spoken output to participate in a class discussion and need it to function as a writing tool when composing an assignment. A student might need a graphic organizer and task list to remember all the steps of a large class project but not need them for a small-group, in-class discussion on a focused topic. A student may benefit from a scribe during assessments so their cognitive and physical energy can focus on the content and concepts. That same student might write for themselves when brainstorming ideas for a poem or completing a low-stakes, low-demand task. A student using a wheelchair may not need any assistance when the environment is accessible, with ample space to navigate and no obstacles in the way. However, if that student enters a class with prearranged seating with only one spot open for the wheelchair while all other students are choosing seats next to their friends, that student might need support to move seats so they, too, can be alongside their friends.

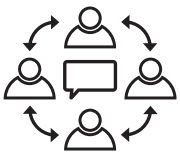
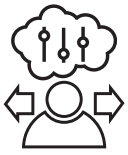
If we think of supports as static (e.g., the list of accommodations and modifications "as written" in the IEP), we will either (a) miss the need to adjust supports, potentially restricting students' access, participation, and agency or (b) have really long IEPs that attempt to describe every possible scenario in every possible context. If we don't consider the context and the dynamic nature of supports, we will (and often do) miss the mark, making students lose out.

Furthermore, if we plan for supports in an overly specialized manner, supports may be disconnected from what's actually happening in general education for nondisabled students, and therefore present barriers to access, participation, and progress. This creates a chasm between students with and without disabilities that restricts learning opportunities for both and often stigmatizes and devalues disabled students. To be most effective and inclusive, we need to benchmark the design of supports with what's happening for all students and consider the setting, teaching methods, instructional arrangements, materials, interactions among students and adults, and more.

Key Features of Experience

Attempting to imagine and plan for an infinite array of supports is impossible. By having a "go to" set of features to consider when designing, delivering, and evaluating supports, our efforts will be more effective and efficient. In our experience, and as described in Table 1, the most salient and impactful Features to address when supporting students with disabilities in general education are *Location*, *Accessibility*, *Participation*, *Affirmation*, and *Agency*.

Table 1. Select Features of student experiences benchmarked by the opportunities and experiences in general education.

FEATURE	DESCRIPTION
 **LOCATION**	Location remains the same as it would if the student did not have a disability.
 **ACCESSIBILITY**	Environment, interactions, and all materials are designed to be usable and engaged with similar ease, quality, timing, and opportunity, regardless of physical, sensory, cognitive, or other disability.
 **PARTICIPATION**	Student with a disability is involved in the same experience, arrangement, and academic and social routines as their peers without disabilities.
 **AFFIRMATION**	Interactions and materials promote accurate understanding of disability as a natural part of human diversity, showing respect and value, honoring disability identity and culture, and celebrating unique strengths and needs.
 **AGENCY**	Students demonstrate ownership and control over their own learning and lives.

Continuum of Supports

How the five Features from Table 1 come together during educational experiences will enable or inhibit student success in general education. Figure 1 shows four points along the Continuum of Supports: Universal, Aligned, Alternate, and Restrictive. These points signal a shift in the nature and impact of supports on students' educational experiences. It's the supports, not students' characteristics, that enhance or restrict the opportunity for educational experiences consistent with those of classmates without disabilities.

Universal. When the experience is designed so that all five Features are preserved, the resulting experience is Universal. Supports are built into the curriculum, interactions, environment, etc., and made available to all students. The design anticipates and seamlessly supports the use of individualized tools (e.g., wheelchair, AAC device, screen reader).

Aligned. Aligned experiences also preserve all five Features, but they do so through individualized supports added-on to the design. These supports may be planned in advance or adjusted in the moment. The experience is Aligned when those supports preserve Location and provide for Accessibility, Participation, Affirmation, and Agency, so that the shared experience stays intact.

Alternate. When supports preserve Location but one or more of the other Features, particularly Participation, are inhibited, the experience becomes Alternate. The student may be physically present but is no longer engaged in the same instructional or social routines as peers.

Restrictive. When supports involve a change in Location, the experience becomes Restrictive. Once Location changes, Participation in shared routines is no longer possible. Other Features may or may not be present, but the foundational condition for equitable educational experience has been removed.

Figure 1. The Continuum of Supports: Universal, Aligned, Alternate, and Restrictive.



Identifying Shifts in the Nature and Impact of Supports

Distinctions along the continuum (universal, aligned, alternate, restrictive) are identified by changes in the five essential features. As shown in Table 2, *universal* and *aligned* provide for all features. While they accomplish this in different ways, both intentionally and purposefully attend to what is happening in general education for nondisabled students.

Educators might intend to foster inclusion, but unless the specific purposes outlined in the key features (i.e., location, accessibility, participation, affirmation, and agency) are addressed, supports might not promote inclusion and can sometimes create additional challenges.

Table 2. The relationship of key Features and the Continuum.

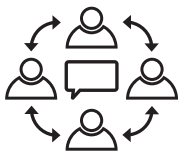
	Universal	Aligned	Alternate	Restrictive
Location	■	■	■	
Accessibility	■	▨	▨ ☒	
Participation	■	▨		
Affirmation	■	▨	▨ ☒	▨ ☒
Agency	■	▨	▨ ☒	▨ ☒

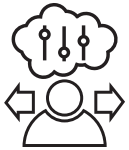
■ The feature is present. ▨ The feature is present because individualized supports are added-on.
☐ The feature is not present. ☒ The feature might or might not be present.

Being in the same location, breathing the same air, isn't the same as being included. In the case of *Alternate*, a disabled student may be in the general education classroom (Location), but the learning experience is altered such that the student is not involved in the same instructional routines and arrangements as their nondisabled classmates (Participation). Missing that one Feature (Participation) will shift the support from *Aligned* to *Alternate*, even if the materials can be used with similar ease (Accessibility), the norms of the classroom and the temperament of the educators reduce the likely stigma associated with not participating (Affirmation), and the student is provided opportunities for choice and reflection on their learning (Agency). Participation with nondisabled peers in the classroom community is essential because it creates a sense of belonging and leads to learning. Active involvement in the learning processes with peers who are learning the same content is fundamental to education. Thus, when supports do not provide for Participation, it signals a shift in the nature and impact of supports from *Aligned* to *Alternate*.

A similar shift occurs for *Restrictive* supports. If students are pulled out of the general education classroom or scheduled for separate instruction or therapy in a special setting (Location), it signals that the supports are *Restrictive*. That change in Location eliminates the possibility of Accessibility in the same environment and Participation with classmates without disabilities. A student cannot be involved in the same learning experiences if the student is not there.

Table 3. Guiding questions for planning student supports that are Universal or Aligned and ensure the presence of key Features.

FEATURE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	REFLECTIONS/ACTION STEPS
 **LOCATION**	Is the location where the student would be if they were not disabled? Is the location considered a general education setting, alongside nondisabled peers?	
 **ACCESSIBILITY**	Can the environment (the learning space) be used and engaged with similar ease and quality as for peers without disabilities? Are the materials designed to be used and engaged with similar ease and quality as for nondisabled peers? Do the environment and materials provide the same opportunities and experiences regardless of physical, sensory, cognitive, or other disability?	
 **PARTICIPATION**	Do supports promote participation in the same learning processes (i.e., the same instructional arrangements and academic routines) as nondisabled peers? Do supports promote participation in the same social routines and arrangements as peers without disabilities?	

FEATURE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	REFLECTIONS/ACTION STEPS
 **AFFIRMATION**	Are interactions and materials free from stereotypes, negative beliefs about people with disabilities, or other stigmatizing features? Do the interactions and materials promote any or all of the following: • accurate understandings of disability, • disability as a natural part of human diversity, • respect and value, • honoring disability identity and culture, or • celebrating unique strengths and needs?	
 **AGENCY**	Does the disabled student have equitable opportunities to develop agency? Does support enable the student to demonstrate ownership and control over their own learning process?	

Examples Using the Key Features and Continuum of Supports

This section includes five diverse student examples of how to use the Continuum and analyze the key Features to continuously improve supports for students with disabilities. Each example highlights the presence or absence of the five Features (Location, Accessibility, Participation, Affirmation, and Agency) and helps us determine where the supports fall on the continuum (Universal, Aligned, Alternate, Restrictive). The examples are organized from Restrictive to Universal and include a brief analysis addressing the key Features.

1. Student Profile: Aiden, Age 7 (Second Grade, Autism)

Supports in Action:

- **Location:** Aiden is in the general education classroom but often sits at a separate table with his paraprofessional. He is removed from the room during certain instructional times (e.g., read-alouds and whole-group activities) for individualized intervention or related services.
- **Accessibility:** All instructions are accompanied by visual aids. Class materials are provided in digital formats with embedded text-to-speech. Aiden uses noise-canceling headphones.
- **Participation:** Aiden takes part in small groups for math, science experiments, and story writing. Teachers use clear routines and provide alternative ways for Aiden to respond, such as writing, drawing, or using a tablet. During collaborative class projects, instead of facilitating peer interaction, his paraprofessional often works with him. Educators and paraprofessionals have stated that he often "needs parallel instruction."
- **Affirmation:** Class norms promote neurodiversity, and students learn that communication styles vary. Aiden's strengths in pattern recognition and detail-oriented thinking are integrated into projects.
- **Agency:** Aiden uses a visual schedule and self-monitoring checklist to track progress on goals and identify when to take a sensory break. He sets daily learning intentions with his teacher.

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Restrictive

Brief Analysis: Because Aiden's supports do not fully address the key Features of Location and Participation, his experience is ***Restrictive***. When Location is the general education setting, Accessibility is accomplished with add-on tools, and Participation is not addressed.

2. Student Profile: Jackson, Age 10 (Fourth Grade, Emotional Behavioral Disability)

Support Features:

- **Location:** Jackson is assigned to a fourth-grade general education class and receives math, reading, and social emotional services in the behavior support room. If he becomes agitated when he is in the general education class, a paraprofessional or special educator will often remove him from the room to "cool down" in the behavior support room.
- **Accessibility:** Although Jackson's IEP specifies access to a computer, he is presently not allowed to use them after significantly damaging the laptop assigned to him. His papers are given to him in a sealed plastic cover, so he does not rip the paper, and he uses a dry-erase marker to write his answers.
- **Participation:** Jackson's desk is in the back of the general education classroom, near the door. He is rarely involved in class activities. When the class is given computer activities, Jackson is given a worksheet that is often focused on a different skill or a different content area.
- **Affirmation:** The adults talk about Jackson in front of other students. If Jackson is in the room, they comment on his behavior as if he is not there. While there are opportunities for Jackson to participate when students showcase their work, feedback for him is almost exclusively negative. Students rarely speak with Jackson. They say this is because they "don't want to make him mad."
- **Agency:** Jackson often refuses work and has several individualized behavior structures in place that focus on "responding appropriately." Adult conversations with Jackson about school most often address issues of behavior and external motivation (e.g., a sticker, preferred activity).

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Restrictive

Brief Analysis: Though assigned to a general education classroom, Jackson has scheduled pull-out services in the behavior support room. When Jackson is in the general education classroom, his supports do not address any key Features. Jackson's experience is ***Restrictive***.

3. Student Profile: Jamal, Age 12 (Seventh Grade, Intellectual Disability)

Support Features:

- **Location:** Jamal is assigned to a seventh-grade general education class for most of the day. While physically present, he is often seated close to his paraprofessional.
- **Accessibility:** While some materials are simplified for Jamal, adaptations are inconsistently provided. He often works from different worksheets or books than the rest of the class. Visual supports are limited. Instructions are heavily verbal, making it difficult for Jamal to engage independently.
- **Participation:** Jamal does not regularly interact with classmates during instruction. He rarely takes part in class discussions or collaborative projects. When group work is required, he is often given a different task to complete alone or with adult support. His academic contributions are seen as peripheral and his participation in social routines (like classroom games or group presentations) is minimal.
- **Affirmation:** Educators, including his paraprofessional, frequently speak to Jamal in a high-pitched, sing-song voice with exaggerated praise, often using simplified or "baby talk" language, which undermines his dignity. The classroom environment tolerates casual ableist language; peers frequently call one another names like "crazy," "idiot," and "retard" without correction or conversation from adults. Disability is either ignored or stigmatized.
- **Agency:** Jamal has few chances to make decisions about his learning. His day is driven by adult directives focused on compliance, such as "finish your work" and "quiet hands." Choices are limited to trivial options (e.g., red marker or blue marker). There's little encouragement or opportunity for Jamal to express preferences, set goals, or reflect on his own learning.

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Alternate

Brief Analysis: Jamal is "in" the general education setting but his supports do not address any other key Feature. His experience is ***Alternate***.

4. Student Profile: Marcus, Age 16 (High School, Intellectual Disability)

Supports in Action:

- **Location:** Marcus attends 10th-grade classes with his peers, including U.S. history, biology, and a student leadership elective.
- **Accessibility:** Marcus engages with text adapted from the same materials as his classmates with simplified language and audio versions of readings. Organizers and graphic aids support his comprehension and expression.
- **Participation:** Marcus joins class discussions using sentence starters and works on team projects with scaffolded roles (researcher, presenter). Paraprofessionals sometimes support his interactions with peers by reminding all students to use the group roles and, if needed, support each other. Marcus co-leads a campaign in his leadership class to improve school lunch options.
- **Affirmation:** Marcus is recognized for his leadership qualities. Teachers use person-first and identity-affirming language, varying them with Marcus's preference. His IEP team includes him in goal setting with dignity and transparency.
- **Agency:** Marcus sets personal learning goals and reflects on them weekly. He chooses electives, helps design project rubrics, and gives feedback on what strategies work best for him.

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Aligned

Brief Analysis: Marcus's supports address all five Features. Because Marcus has additional individualized supports designed to promote his Accessibility, Participation, and Agency, we consider his experience to be ***Aligned***.

5. Student Profile: Lily, Age 5 (Kindergarten, Down Syndrome)

Supports in Action:

- **Location:** Lily attends a general education kindergarten class with her neighborhood peers.
- **Accessibility:** Classroom centers are arranged to allow easy physical navigation. Visual schedules and picture-symbol instructions, available for all students in all centers, support Lily's comprehension and independence.
- **Participation:** Lily participates in all daily routines and activities alongside her classmates. During all activities (e.g., morning meeting, math games, and story time), Lily participates in the same activities as her peers with individualized supports like partner modeling, simplified language, and visual cues. Lily's additional supports are often planned in advance (e.g., purposeful peer partnering during an activity) and sometimes adjusted in the moment. Lily's peers often provide in-the-moment support (e.g., pointing to the visual schedule before transition).
- **Affirmation:** Books and classroom discussions include positive portrayals of disability and individual differences. Lily's contributions are valued by peers and adults. Everyone talks with Lily in the same tone of voice, cadence, and vocabulary as they do with any other student in the class.
- **Agency:** Lily uses an individualized choice board to select her preferred activities during center time and self-initiates with her visual schedule. She is encouraged to advocate for breaks or help using a "help" card.

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Aligned

Brief Analysis: Lily's supports address all five Features. The design of the centers and the disability-affirming materials and interactions are available for all students, and also address Lily's Accessibility and Affirmation. Because Lily has additional individualized support designed to promote her Accessibility, Participation, and Agency beyond what is available to her classmates, the experience is ***Aligned***.

6. Student Profile: Zahra, Age 10 (Fifth Grade, Hearing Impairment and ADHD)

Supports in Action:

- **Location:** Zahra attends a fifth-grade classroom where she joins peers in all core academic blocks (reading, math, science), specials (PE, music), and nonacademic settings (lunch, recess).
- **Accessibility:** All materials are digitally formatted and available for all students. Visuals/graphic organizers and, whenever possible, real objects are available to illustrate concepts. Videos and audio materials always include captions and transcripts. Written versions of verbal instructions are always provided on the board/screen and as handouts/digital documents. During station and independent work time, students know they can choose from various options: sit at the desk or on the floor, use a computer, wear headphones, work alone or with partners, etc. Zahra often chooses to work on her laptop at a standing desk to help her with focus.
- **Participation:** Zahra participates in all daily classroom routines and activities alongside her classmates. She is skilled at math and science, and her peers often look to her for support and leadership in those subjects.
- **Affirmation:** Zahra's class regularly reads literature with accurate and positive representations of disability. In social studies, disability rights and disability history are part of the curriculum. Zahra is interested in disability rights and self-advocacy and started a chapter of KASA (Kids as Self-Advocates) in her school district.
- **Agency:** Zahra, like all students in the class, has embedded opportunities for self-assessment and reflection throughout the day. She updates her learning goals weekly and tracks her own progress. The teacher has 1:1 goal conferencing time for all students, including Zahra, to help foster self-awareness and self-determination.

PRESENCE OF FEATURES					RESULTING SUPPORT
LOCATION	ACCESSIBILITY	PARTICIPATION	AFFIRMATION	AGENCY	
					Universal

Brief Analysis: Zahra's supports address all five Features. Because the supports which promote Zahra's Accessibility, Participation, Affirmation, and Agency are all built into the design of the class and curriculum and are available to all students, the resulting experience is ***Universal***.

Closing

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act sets the expectations that students with disabilities must be involved with, and make progress in, the general curriculum alongside their nondisabled peers in the "regular" education settings they would attend if they did not have a disability, to the maximum extent possible. A student's IEP team explores, evaluates, and documents the constellation of supports to meet, if not exceed, that expectation. Supports enhance or restrict the opportunities students have to learn and make progress in the general curriculum. They also inhibit or promote social interactions and an overall sense of belonging in a class and school community. Additionally, teams often don't know what education in the regular classroom to the "maximum extent possible" truly is because they haven't experienced it for disabled students. They haven't had a way to rigorously design and revise supports to make it happen. No one wants adult-designed supports to limit what is possible for a student.

What we know from the research and our own decades of practice is that disabled students make progress in the general curriculum when they have access and are engaged in the learning process with their nondisabled peers in general education classrooms. The Features we've identified help to define what must be present in order for this to happen. Educators create the desired outcomes when they make decisions about the environment, materials, instructional routines, structures, methods, and overall climate of the classroom. These decisions make or break students' opportunities to learn and experience life in schools as their peers without disabilities do. Students with disabilities have a right to an equitable education. Upholding this right must be at the center of all student support decisions. This resource was created to help you do just that.

For additional assistance with the Features and Continuum, contact us:

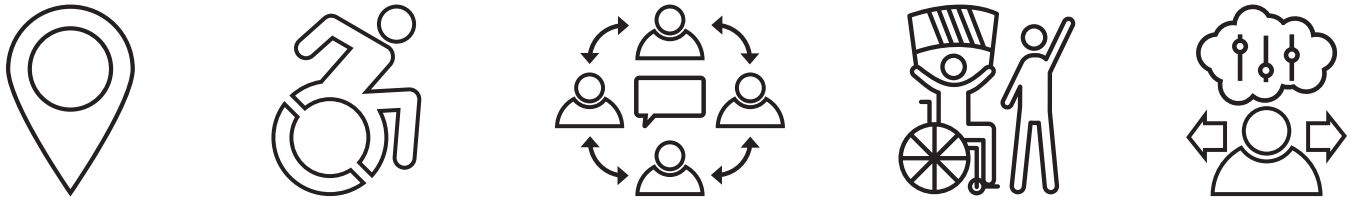
Michael McSheehan michael@evolveandeffect.com

Jessica Apgar jessica.apgar@maine.edu

Deborah Taub drdtaub@gmail.com

Mary Schuh mary@evolveandeffect.com

Kate MacLeod kate.macleod@maine.edu



LOCATION ACCESSIBILITY PARTICIPATION AFFIRMATION AGENCY