

Running head: APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM FOR STUDENT WITH SEVER  
DISABILITIES

What is the Appropriate Curriculum for Students with Disabilities?

Standards-Based Curriculum versus Functional Curriculum for Students with Disabilities

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May/2018

### Abstract

The term severe disabilities refers to any student who is eligible for special education services in the United States under the category of moderate to severe cognitive impairment. The term takes into consideration a combination of shortages in both cognitive performance and appropriate behavior. Recently, in the field of severe disabilities, the benefits of the standards-based academic curriculum versus those of the functional curriculum have become one of the most critical debates—with both types of curriculum being supported by various researchers in the field. However, the debate between the advocates for each of the curricula is impacted by multiple issues, for example, the accountability related to progress in the academic curriculum that is required by such legislative mandates as the No Child Left Behind Act. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide an overview for both of these curricula, and it will examine the expectations for academic achievement versus the acquisition of life skills from the perspective of parents, teachers, and professionals.

*Keywords:* students with disabilities, standards-based curriculum, and functional curriculum

### What is the Appropriate Curriculum for Students with Disabilities?

#### Standards-Based Curriculum versus Functional Curriculum for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities face difficulties in their day-to-day activities that make them dependent on others in order to live successful lives. In the educational arena, such disabilities require teachers to adopt teaching practices that would help the students to grasp the concepts and apply them after completing their studies (Taub, D. A., McCord, & Ryndak, 2017). Since teachers, parents, researchers, and the U.S. Federal Government have different opinions on what is believed to be appropriate and useful to students with severe disabilities, there has been an ongoing debate and a number of legislative measures pertaining to this issue. According to Rupparr, Gaffney, and Dymond (2015), the educational policy on addressing the academic needs of students with special needs has been shifting from developmentally appropriate curricula to functional curricula/curriculum (FC), and now to the standards-based curricula/curriculum (SBC). These challenges are greatly influenced by the shifting beliefs of various stakeholders, curricular practices, research, and, most importantly, state and federal legislation. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) came into force, giving such children the right to a full educational opportunity (Ayres, Douglas, Lowrey, & Sieves, 2011). However, the Act does not define what is considered the most appropriate way to render this right. Therefore, the debate on the right way to educate students with disabilities continues as teachers, parents, and researchers put forth their arguments.

#### **Standards-Based Curriculum versus Functional Curriculum**

Since the inception of special education programs dating back to 1975 through the adoption of the EAHCA, there have been two major diverging views on the right approach to teaching children with severe disabilities. On one side of the divide, there is a school of

thought that affirms the primary importance of an FC that puts the emphasis on the general life skills needed for a fruitful and independent post-school life (Ayres et al., 2011). On the other side, there are proponents of an SBC that emphasizes instruction, assessment, and grading in various subjects including language, the sciences, and social subjects, among others (Courtade et al., 2012). In identifying a definitive approach to this debate, it is important to understand the basic factors behind each side of the argument.

Typically, the SBC renders academic skills that prepare students to meet the requirements of their future career. Contrarily, functional skills enable students to be independent, to fit into the community, and to make important life decisions. While the mode of delivery of the FC is uniform and the content is standardized, the delivery of functional skills may be more personal due to the differences in student needs. Students with severe disabilities (SWSD) have specific needs and preferences, which vary between individuals. Since general education focuses on grade-level skills, it is absolutely vital to integrate functional skills into the learning process in order to honor the rights of SWSD to full educational opportunities (McDonnell & Copeland, 2011).

An FC is set, and rightly so, on the premise that the immediate needs of SWSD are to be functional members of the society by being self-reliant and capable of performing daily activities. Consequently, an FC is ideally supposed to impart skills that are important for not only community participation but also for effective functioning as adults (Ayres et al., 2011). It is important to note that SWSD present unique challenges to educators regardless of whether the system is based on SBC or FC. Ayres et al. (2011) note that for students with severe disabilities, progress can be registered in all areas of both learning and daily functioning. Therefore it becomes a matter of prioritizing which between the two results in a better quality of life for SWSD after the school phase is over. Based on research conducted in this context, over 50% of SWSD considered being independent or self-reliant as a key

indicator of their success in the future (Cameto et al., 2004). Therefore, it is imperative that education is focused on fulfilling those goals articulated by most SWSD. A functional curriculum would, therefore, be the best approach to ensuring these goals are achieved. As mentioned above, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was a step in the right direction as it not only provided inclusive access to education for all children with disabilities but also required that such education include individualized transition plans (ITP) for transitioning from school education to adult life. This, by interpretation, requires more attention to functional skills at some point in the learning process to enable smooth transitioning and integration into the community after school.

However, a focus on an FC raises the issue of limiting the potential, professional or otherwise, of SWSD. This is in the sense that there are many students who have potential in the academic field and would be shortchanged if their time in school, limited as it is, is spent exclusively on learning functional skills at the expense of honing their academic capabilities. Courtade et al. (2012) present seven reasons why they believe that SBC is best suited for SWSD. In their first point, they assert that the ability, or lack thereof, to be independent should not hamper or impede access to an academic education for SWSD as it is a right guaranteed by the Constitution through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA). They continue to argue that functional skills are not prerequisites to academic learning, as put forward in their reason number four. This is evidenced by the distinguished scholars in various fields who, despite having trouble performing routine activities and requiring assistance, have made an immeasurable contribution to their fields of study. Courtade et al. (2012) recognize that there are few such individuals and even less supporting evidence through longitudinal research. However, for their third reason, they reiterate that the academic potential of SWSD is still largely unexplored due to the current ambiguous systems in place, and SBC should therefore

not be dismissed on the basis of a lack of evidence. Proponents of SBC put forward the notion that SBC, despite being the best approach, should not replace FC but instead should take primary priority in the education of SWSD. They compare FC to teaching kindergarten children how to vacuum or use credit cards when it would be more appropriate and important to teach them age-appropriate skills and incrementally teach them advanced concepts, functional or otherwise. There has also been evidence that SBC has a positive impact on the general functioning of SWSD. In general, Courtade et al. (2012) put forward compelling reasons for the advancement of the SBC agenda.

Both schools of thought have sound rationales behind their arguments. However, just like students without disabilities are allowed to pursue their passion and even specialize in some subjects while still in high school, SWSD should also be afforded this privilege. The immediate arising issue is the fact that SWSD are often unable or unaware of their passions and would require significant help. Additionally, the severity of cognitive impairment among SWSD varies considerably, which makes it difficult to develop a standardized curriculum of any form (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). There are numerous specialized skills that would require to be taught to SWSD for application in various environments, which also makes an FC unacceptably broad as far as scope is concerned. Despite these impediments, an FC is the most appropriate when used as a basis to build on other educative elements including math, language, and the sciences. Furthermore, individualization is the key to ensuring that each SWSD acquires the most relevant education and functional skills in accordance with their potential and cognitive impairment (Ayres et al., 2012). However, the personal beliefs of educational researchers, the preparedness of teachers, and the position of parents greatly influence the success of such integration.

### **Researchers' Perspective**

Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) formulated seven principles that would ensure all students have access to full educational opportunity regardless of any physical or mental challenges they may be facing. These principles presented an alternative viewpoint to the developmentally appropriate and functional skills teaching and focused on the learners' independence, which is crucial for students with disabilities. In their arguments, these researchers focused more on the possibilities of the students rather than their limitations and shortcomings, giving seven reasons for their stand. These reasons reiterated the right to a full educational opportunity by SWSD, the relevance of SBC to SWSD, and the unknown potential of SWSD. They also reasoned that functional skills are not a prerequisite to academic learning and that the standard and functional curricula are not interchangeable, citing the limits of an individualized curriculum when used on its own. They summed up their reasons by claiming that students with disabilities contribute to the changing expectations by their own achievements.

Although the arguments of Courtade et al. (2012) made some sense, Ayres et al. (2012) critiqued their work and revealed certain fallacies. According to Ayres et al. (2012), it is undeniable that students with severe disabilities can learn objectives related to grade-level standards. However, their contention lies in the cost at which the students learn these standards and whether these skills will make them employable. They also question whether these skills will influence where such students will live and whether they will be in a position to participate actively in their communities. They emphasized that students with severe disabilities have to learn how to function independently in addition to acquiring academic skills. In their counterargument, these researchers redefined full educational opportunity as one that honors the provisions of the NCLB and IDEA by supporting flexibility and individualization in favor of SWSD. In their opinion, the common core should include skills

and knowledge that ensure independent living, social integration into the community, and employment. They advocated for the correct balance between the two curricula that would support SWSD.

Ayres et al. (2012) challenged Courtade et al.'s (2012) idea of the relevance of SBC to SWSD. According to the former, SBC would be more effective in improving the breadth and depth of the curriculum if applied in alignment with the long-term goals and priorities of the students and their families. They defined a relevant curriculum as one that is meaningful, individualized, and linked to independence in future environments. Inasmuch as the general education standards may be well designed to meet student needs, it is necessary to perform individualized assessments to ensure the curriculum is meaningful to SWSD.

Several researchers agree that the relevance of a curriculum is embedded in its ability to meet the future needs of students. Since students are in school for a finite amount of time, focusing on a standard curriculum alone may deprive them of the chance to learn functional skills.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Teachers and administrators are often at a loss of what to do to meet the needs of those students who differ from typical learners. As a result, they tend to retain an attitude of incompetence towards such students, particularly when teaching the general curriculum (Browder, 2015). The general educational standards are merely taught as standards and do not necessarily prioritize the focus on meaningful, individualized outcomes that persist into adult life and predict the future functioning of students with disabilities. In some cases, teachers do not understand why they are required to focus on grade-level content for students with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, educators of grade-level competencies are likely to ignore the student's right to appropriate education at the functioning level.

### **Parents' Perspective**

In the midst of a shifting curriculum, parents appear frustrated because they are excluded from the development process. Such frustration is seen in Courtade et al.'s (2012) offense at a parent's concern about the decisions that were made concerning their child. The confusion experienced by parents comes as a side effect of the SBC that overtakes some of the fundamental needs of SWSD and their families. Parents are caught between the stigma associated with their children's conditions and the need to accept personalized support. While Courtade et al. (2012) attempt to promote the dignity of SWSD by having them stick to the standard curriculum, Ayres et al. (2011) focus on the students' post-school independence that would eventually be dignified if they had the necessary functional skills. The latter ridicules a solely grade-based system in the title of one of their works: "I Can Identify Saturn but I Can't Brush My Teeth." The title reveals a wide gap between academic skills and functional skills, which in this context appear to be essential for the SWSD to live normal lives. It also highlights the role of parents in the education of such students, particularly in regard to functional skills. The development and implementation of a functional skills curriculum may require the involvement of parents because most of these skills are practiced more at home than in school. Parents and other caregivers may be more competent in imparting such skills, especially when teachers have introduced the students to them. According to Ayres et al. (2011), if general standard education is wholly adopted as the gold standard for program planning for all students, then SWSD and their parents will be explicitly denied free and appropriate public education. Such parents will have to rely on their own skills and other resources to educate their children with disabilities as required.

Based on the arguments of various researchers and the experience of students with disabilities and their parents, it is evident that such students need both academic and functional skills in order to be well equipped for their future careers and societal life. It

makes little sense to have all the academic skills but lack the ability to live independently, especially when one is required to work to earn a living.

In conclusion, the SBC versus FC debate is likely to rage on into the near future. However, when the end goal of ensuring that SWSD have a better quality of life after school is considered, my opinion is that an FC with specialized academic learning is the best approach. SWSD face numerous challenges living life after school, especially if they do not have the skills to be independent. Consequently, in ensuring that functional skills are taught mandatorily to a certain level, SWSD can have easier times integrating into the society. It is, however, important to note that teaching functional skills should be up to a certain level where advanced skills are taught or an SBC is adopted depending on a student's abilities and needs. Nevertheless, for students with severe disabilities, an FC should take precedence over an academic curriculum.

#### **The Effectiveness of Each Curricular Approach for Students with severe disabilities**

Over the years, the curriculum has been one of the most contentious fields in the sector of education. It determines what the student will acquire in school in both societal and personal values and in areas of educational philosophy. Additionally, it is dynamic as it changes with the societal perspectives. Changes in the curriculum have been influenced by various factors with the primary consideration being the school accountability movement. Curriculum standards are found in almost all nations. More so, there are assessments aimed at discussing the degree to which those set standards are being considered. The assessment is inclusive as it includes the students with disabilities, which is in accordance with the IDEA of 1999 (Browder et al., 2004). However, there is a need for alternate assessment of individuals with cognitive disabilities, various disabilities, severe autism, and deaf-blindness. Over the last three decades, there has been a dramatic change in regards to the societal viewpoint toward an individual with severe disabilities (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-

Nietupski, 1976). Concurrent shifts in curricular focus have also been evident. The first shift involved the shift from developmental principles to functional models. Another change included the addition of the general curriculum aimed at the operational models. Also, there has recently been an evident interest in aligning alternate assessments and the general curriculum.

The SBC has been at the forefront in the provision of the educational opportunity and independent life skills. These skills focus on helping those students living with severe disabilities. However, after the student reaches the age of 21, the services become limited. The educational plans for students with severe disabilities concentrate on grade-aligned state academic component standards. It does provide chances for community-based instruction and job interviews (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012). The societal values claim that students living with severe disabilities should have complete access to schools, future job opportunities, and communities. Unfortunately, in most cases, this involves teaching the state standards. State standards aim at preparing students for functioning as adults in the community, and the first step in achieving this aim is helping them pursue college education alongside individuals without disabilities. From the conducted study, in the area of skills that connect to grade-level content, students living with severe disabilities have proven to possess multiple abilities (Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006). First, they can receive an education in public schools, and they can learn skills associated with their community contexts. Also, they can gain from opportunities to be with individuals without disabilities. Finally, they can study state standards that are adjusted for other achievements (Courtade et al., 2012). With enhanced academic competence, students with severe disabilities will have various choices of adult jobs, as well as leisure activities such as the access to books, and jobs that require mathematical knowledge. They will also gain overall independence. Being independent involves being able to read one's letters or being able to

engage in civic exercises (Courtade et al., 2012). Hence, if students with disabilities are included in public schools alongside their peers without disabilities, the chances for their success in a community are rather high.

The common core standards were developed to prepare students for post-secondary education as well as the workforce. They aim to define the skills that are helpful to students during the transition. In such a way, common core standards prepare students living with disabilities for their post-school lives. The skills will help them in careers and college. Additionally, they assist the students to think about the world in which they live. Students living with severe disabilities learn vocabularies and experiences of communication that aid them during social interaction with other members of the society. In this regard, they will be able to travel nationally and internationally, interact with people from diverse cultures, and participate in the events of the world.

As a result of the curriculum completion, self-determination becomes possible. It can be promoted through the provision of access to technology (Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). Additionally, it can be improved through teaching the prerequisite skills for daily living, future job success, and enhancement of positive behavior (Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, & Agran, 2004). During teaching, it is advisable for the instructor to include some skills required for daily living or generalizable to everyday activities (Courtade et al., 2012). The standards set by the state have enhanced sequential learning, for instance, when the mathematics abilities in the fourth grade build on those of the third level (Browder et al., 2007). The pairing of the academic competence with supplemental instruction leads to the life skills that students require. Eventually, students will have access to the programs of education that develop their enhanced power. Academic proficiency is necessary for the job market (Donaghy, 2015). The most significant goal for standards-based instruction is to

enable students to drive the expectations themselves based on their achievements. Over the years, academic assessments have increased.

In regards to academic content, educators hold the entire responsibilities for what the students learn. The academic content includes mathematics, which involves algebraic expressions that aid in solving problems later in life. Other elements of the educational content include sight words, science, and the use of money. Students living with disabilities can understand, being able to read aloud. In such a way, the aim of the SBC should equip the students to become independent in their lives.

### **Functional Curriculum**

The FC should focus on the developmental model and employ the most recent principles of functioning in the community. This principle implies the selection of skills from both the prevailing and future environments (Brown et al., 1976). The term functional infers a current curriculum model that advances community access by aiming at the capabilities required for operating in daily life (Browder et al., 2004). The domains of functional skills are used as the new content areas of curriculum. As described by Brown et al. (1979), these include the following: community, domestic, vocational, and recreation. Embraced together, they compose a sound FC.

The emergence of a curriculum offers guidance to resources used for planning functional skills instruction. It is a requirement that when the technical skills are taught, they are supposed to be performed (Brown et al., 1976). The application should occur in various settings, such as multiple natural settings in the presence of multiple individuals with various language cues as well as numerous sets of instructional materials.

Currently, the FC has the results of developing a student's independent functioning in their future and current conditions. A practical curriculum in regards to the educational importance of the student prepares a student to live an independent life (Ayres, Lowrey,

Douglas, & Sievers, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education funded both of The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) I and the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) II to classify the school and educational elements that affect the outcomes of post-school for students with disabilities. The findings from these studies indicated that adding vocational education courses to the general education curriculum has a multiplying effect on the post-school outcomes for students. Additionally, it enables an individual to have a productive adult life to the best level possible. Further, it helps students with severe disabilities grow more independent and prosperous in their lives. It assists them irrespective of whether or not the learning of grade-level standards enhances independence in the life after school (Bouck, 2012). Eventually, the quality of life of an individual is improved.

The FC focuses on various areas, including community skills, consumer skills, and domestic and self-help skills. Possessing consumer skills, such as the ability to shop, implies being able to make payment with cash, pay through debit cards, and locate a commodity and pay for it (Ayres et al., 2011). Other money-associated skills being taught include making orders and making payments in restaurants by the use of a vending machine (Ayres et al., 2011). Community skills include such basic skills as street crossing, while office skills and vocational skills are also areas to be taught. Additionally, in the domestic and self-help category, students are trained to take care of themselves in their home, hence being able to live independently. Such capabilities include laundry skills, preparing food, hygiene, putting away groceries, and dressing.

### **Conclusion**

From the discussion, it is clear that both a standards-based academic curriculum approach and FC have important roles to play in regards to the ability of students living with severe disabilities to acquire skills and academic achievement. Eventually, the skills learned enable them to live an independent life. Self-determination is also the result of the

curriculum. Like their peers without disabilities, students with severe disabilities have the right to acquire an education. To achieve this end, the curriculum should be well incorporated to address the needs of students with severe disabilities in all the spheres of life.

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