It's Okay to Teach People with an Intellectual Disability About Their Disability (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

This paper introduces a newly accredited university programme for students with an intellectual disability (ID). The curriculum is largely based on disability studies pedagogy that creates awareness of the social, political, and economic factors that influence how individuals with a disability navigate society. The aim of the innovative curriculum is to provide students with an ID with a high quality postsecondary education that may better equip them when transitioning from the education sector to employment and independent living. The university programme demonstrates a potential framework for inclusive education and the promotion of a more equitable education system for students with an ID.

Keywords: Postsecondary education, intellectual disability, inclusion, civic engagement

Individuals with an intellectual disability (ID) have been marginalized and ostracized by mainstream society. They have been represented as flawed, in need of pity, and are forced to adapt to/conform to an ableist society (Spassiani & Friedman, 2014). Individuals with an ID have been largely excluded from accessing all levels of civic engagement, including accessing postsecondary education and participating in college life. The disability movement and advocates have played a pivotal role in academic institutions around the world in beginning to examine how they can support equal citizenship of individuals with an ID within their academic community. For these reasons, this paper will present the foundations of a newly accredited university curriculum for students with an ID, and how the curriculum hopes to address the oppression and discrimination individuals with ID encounter. The curriculum will create an awareness about disability so that students with ID may be better prepared to participate in their community post university.

Students with an ID and Higher Education

Until recently, the idea of an individual with an ID attending postsecondary education was an unthinkable thought let alone an attainable dream. Fortunately, legislative acts such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act of 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004) have begun to provide individuals with ID the ability to exercise their right to participate in postsecondary education. It is well documented that the completion of any postsecondary education significantly improves an individual's chance of attaining competitive employment, regardless of disability (Gilson, 1996; National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration, 2000). However, individuals with an ID continue to be more likely to be unemployed or underemployed compared to their peers without disability (Johnson, Mellard & Lancaster, 2007). Grigal and Hart (2010) found that students with an ID have the same goals as their peers without a disability, to attend college and participate in competitive employment. In order to support students with an ID to achieve their goals of not only attending, but successfully completing a postsecondary programme, several inclusive postsecondary education models have been used, such as the mixed/hybrid model, the substantially separate model, and the inclusive individual support model. It is important to note that even with the various models of postsecondary educational programmes, employment and inde-

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pendent living remain low among individuals with an ID (Migliore, Butterworth & Hart, 2009).

Curriculum

The debate about whether functional curricula or academic-based curricula are best suited for students with an ID is an ongoing discussion being had by educators at the national and international level (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas & Sievers, 2011; Bouck 2012; Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson & Slagor, 2007; Ee & Soh, 2005; Kontu & Pirttimaa, 2010; Wang 2011). Although there is limited research in this area specific to postsecondary education curricula there has been some work examining secondary curricula for students with an ID (Bigge 1988; Bouck, 2012; Edgar & Polloway, 1994; Giangreco, Cloninger & Iverson, 1998; Patton et al., 1996; Ryndak, Moore, Orlando & Delano, 2008-2009; Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering & Kohler, 2009; Wehmeyer, Lattin & Agran, 2001). The two most common types of curricula that students are exposed to are functional and academic-based curricula. More specifically, a functional curriculum is also referred to as a life skills curriculum and is focused on teaching the core skills needed for students to participate in adult life (Browder et al., 2004; Patton, Cronin & Jairrels, 1997; Polloway, Patton, Smith & Roderique, 1991; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, Kozleski, 2002). The main learning outcome of a functional curriculum is to prepare the student with an ID with the required skills to be successful in independent living and employment (Bigge 1988; Patton et al., 1996). There are concerns that students with an ID who receive a functional curriculum are less prepared for postsecondary opportunities (Ryndak et al., 2008-2009) as they have learned a limited set of skills (Edgar & Polloway, 1994). Conversely, an academic-based curriculum focuses on academic content. The academic-based curriculum can be delivered with or without accommodations (Wehmeyer et al., 2001). For example, students with an ID may receive the same curriculum as their peers, but their assessments or learning outcomes differ (Giangreco et al., 1998).

Bouck (2012) conducted a longitudinal national study in the United States and found no statistically significant difference in postsecondary outcomes (i.e., independent living, attending postsecondary education, and employment) for students who received functional vs. academic-based curriculum. The study found that in general students with an ID reported low rates of employment, independent living, and postsecondary attendance regardless of curriculum type they were exposed too. Examining the differences between functional and academic-based curricula provides a possible explanation for the low success rates for students with an ID due to this group not being educated about how their disability effects not only their learning, but how they interact with and negotiate society with an ID, such as how to manage stigma, discrimination, and prejudice. Students with an ID must be educated about their disability so that they may understand how it impacts their life in regard to learning, employment, life skills, independent living, and social interactions. Understanding one's disability will allow the individual to better negotiate their environment and advocate for the needed supports to be successful in postsecondary education (Stodden & Whelley, 2004), and to be contributing members of society. It is common that individuals with an ID have not been told by their guardians that they have an ID in an attempt to shield them from the discrimination and oppression that is associated with having a disability, particularly an ID. However, this begs the question: how do we expect individuals with an ID to become independent and become fully integrated in society if they are unaware of their impairment and how it directly influences not only their day to day life, but also how they interact with their community?

Depiction of the Problem

Of all students with disabilities, those with ID have been reported to have the poorest post-school outcomes. This is primarily due to lack of opportunity for students with ID to participate in a formalized structured curriculum in higher education institutions. The typical educational opportunities available for students with ID who are 18 years or over are segregated life skills programmes or community-based transition programmes. Inclusive postsecondary education options have begun to slowly replace these vocational programmes and are challenging significant barriers, such as attitudes and low expectations that society has about students with ID being able to be successful in postsecondary education programmes (Hart 2006).

A topic of concern in both the academic and applied community is how we can make society more inclusive for individuals with an ID. How can we make education more inclusive for students with an ID? How can we make employment more inclusive for individuals with an ID? However, these discussions commonly work around the elephant in the room – that is ensuring that individuals with an ID understand the social construction of their disability and how they can be given the tools and skills needed to participate in the wider community with their disability.

There has been an educational movement and increased awareness given in academic settings about marginalized groups. Offering courses/programmes that critically examine the history of how individuals of minority groups navigate society are typically seen in the form of such courses/programmes on LGBT studies, women's studies, Black studies, and disability studies. These courses/programmes play a pivotal role in not only creating awareness of the importance of civil rights but also allows students to think critically about how individuals of minority groups are viewed by a capitalist society, and how they must navigate the oppression, discrimination, and stigma that exist so that they can experience meaningful inclusion. Although ID would be addressed in disability studies programmes in the university, these programmes are limited and are not typically made accessible for students with an ID. For example, a woman with a physical disability has the opportunity to learn about how gender and disability play a role in how she interacts with society within a higher education setting. Likewise, a nondisabled man has the opportunity to also take part in such academic programmes to learn about the historical and current social, political, and economic factors that influence community participation and integration of minority groups. However, no such opportunities exist for students with an ID as these curricula are not accessible. The rational presented above was the driving factor to develop an inclusive disability studies curriculum for university students with ID.

Description of Innovative Practice

The newly accredited interdisciplinary programme aligns directly with evidence-based research suggesting the much-needed shift to providing high standards of postsecondary education programmes for students with ID. The programme has been recently accredited as a Level five major award following the National Framework of Qualification guidelines in Ireland, to address the gap in educational curricula for university students with an ID. The interdisciplinary programme is embedded in disability studies pedagogy where each module is informed by how disability is understood from cultural, social, political, and economic perspectives. Disability studies programmes, which critically examine disability as a social construction, are becoming more commonly offered at the university level. However, a major criticism of these programmes is that they are not inclusive for individuals with ID. By providing a programme for individuals with ID that is embedded in a critical disability studies framework, individuals with ID may

have a better understanding of the social construction of disability and be more able to navigate their way within the community. By having such a tailored programme, these individuals may be able to develop and refine the skills needed to advocate for social justice, not only for themselves, but for other individuals with disabilities.

This course has been designed to challenge the traditional viewpoint that people with ID are "non-educable." It seeks to educate its students, not only in regard to developing life skills, but also in relation to understanding disability from social, political, and economic perspectives. Understanding the social construction of disability and how it impacts on their lives may enable students to participate fully in society and advocate for change. It aims to help students to develop a conscious awareness of how having a disability directly impacts on their ability to meaningfully participate in their community and attain/sustain competitive employment. From a practical point of view, it will also provide successful students with a formal qualification which may enable them to apply and compete for jobs alongside applicants without disabilities, or to pursue further studies. The programme closely aligns with research that has shown that students with ID who have postsecondary experience are more likely to obtain competitive employment, require fewer supports in the community, and earn higher wages compared to individuals with ID without any postsecondary exposure (Hart, 2006).

Course Content

The accredited programme is a two-year full-time course offered at a top ranked university in Ireland for the first time in October 2016. The interdisciplinary curriculum was based on the interests of university students with an ID who were currently enrolled at the university. The students provided feedback about their university module and what they would like to see be offered at the university level for future incoming students. The two-year full time programme divides modules into six interdisciplinary themes: (1) advanced learning theories and self-development; (2) applied research theories and practice; (3) applied science, technology, and maths; (4) business and marketing; (5) advocacy, rights, and culture; and (6) fine arts and languages.

The proposed curriculum will provide students with knowledge of multiple academic disciplines, and takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine how disability is influenced and reinforced through the various academic perspectives. Table 1 provides a description of each theme and theme objectives.

Programme Aims and Learning Outcomes

The programme has established standardized programme and module learning outcomes that directly align with the programme aims. More specifically, the programme aims and programme learning outcomes for the programme are described in Table 2.

Course Structure

There are 22 modules, most being 12 weeks in length (one academic term) and others lasting 24 weeks (two academic terms). The programme is offered as a level five major award. The overall aggregated mark of both years will be the credit-weighted average of the module marks. Each year contributes 50% in the calculation of the award result. The Certificate will be awarded as a pass, merit, or distinction. A pass will be awarded at 40%, a merit at 55%, and a distinction at an overall average of 70%, which aligns directly with university undergraduate regulations. Students must be 18 years or older when starting the programme, have an ID, have successfully completed secondary school, and demonstrate reading, writing, and basic math skills to be eligible to apply for the programme.

Each module is designed to provide students with multiple and varied assessments types to ensure the learning styles of students are being taken into consideration. For example, each module encourages collaborative learning and whole class input and discussion; each student receives a learning needs assessment to identify accommodations needed to best suit their learning needs; regular formative and summative assessments will be given in each module to reinforce concepts learned during lectures/labs/tutorials. Assessments are provided in various formats and students are given the choice to decide which format best suits their learning needs; students have designated independent study hours where they have the opportunity to complete assessments with their peers or support from faculty members who teach on the programme.

Institutional Resources

The newly accredited programme was well supported by the university, particularly higher management, academic, and administrative staff. There was an overall agreeance within the university that the previously existing programme being offered to students with ID had become tokenistic and not a true exemplar of meaningful higher education. More specifically, the university recognized that it was unjust that their students with ID were attending a two-year programme, however, upon successful completion

would not receive any formal qualification recognizing their contributions. For this reason, the university set out to redevelop the programme to align directly with university standards that all programmes must adhere too. An interdisciplinary committee was developed to reconceptualise and develop the new programme. The committee comprised of professors from various academic backgrounds and an occupational therapist to provide input on each of the six interdisciplinary themes.

Committee members were expected to deliver modules on the programme in their respective areas of expertise. The programme coordinator, a disability studies professor, oversees all programme content to ensure that content touches upon disability and how it can be applied to real world settings where appropriate. The majority of professors did not have prior experience working with individuals with ID; however, professors were encouraged to adapt content to the appropriate level. A decision was made to not provide professors with special education training, however, to encourage each professor to view students with ID the same as any other university student. The programme coordinator would meet with professors as needed to offer input and feedback about the delivery of content and ensure professors were being well supported. The professors who taught on the programme where from the School of Education, where the new programme is based and part of their teaching workload included teaching on the programme. For quality assurance, the committee meets monthly to discuss the delivery of the modules, and any issues or concerns with module content or students.

Additionally, students have fortnightly meetings with an occupational therapist during their time in the programme to support students in their personal and professional development. Each student guides the direction of the meeting to what they see is important to them. For example, meetings can range from goal setting, to development of academic skills, to professional development. Meetings with the occupational therapist are kept confidential and are meant to be a resource for students to take advantage of where they feel safe to discuss their needs in a proactive manner.

Future Outcomes and Implications

The newly accredited programme is currently being delivered for the first time and will be closely monitored to ensure that programme aims and learning outcomes are being achieved. Student outcomes such as successful completion, transition, employment, and independent living outcomes will be measured. The occupational therapist sessions will also

be examined for personal development outcomes such as goal setting, communication skills, and organizational skills; as well as examining how the learning needs assessment delivered by the occupational therapist can be used as a benchmark tool for both individual and programme success. Particular attention will be given to examining the experiences of mainstream professors educating university students with ID, such as their ability to adapt and learn to educating students with ID, and personal and professional challenges to overcome. Furthermore, the suitability of inclusive assessments, and the effectiveness of content being delivered will be examined.

Closing Thoughts

The purpose of this paper was to introduce an innovative accredited postsecondary education curriculum for students with an ID being offered at a leading academic institution. Universities have a responsibility to start providing real choice, true inclusion, and high expectations of students with ID. By providing a postsecondary program for people with ID that is embedded in a disability studies framework students may be able to develop and refine the skills needed to truly be included in their communities and participate in all aspects of civic engagement. This type of academic curriculum which is embedded in evidence-based best practice would not only be ground breaking, but has great potential to be the standardized model that other postsecondary institutions can look to when developing similar programs for students with ID.

Individuals with an ID must become educated, not only in regard to developing life skills, but also in understanding disability from a social, political, and economic level. Individuals with an ID must have a conscious awareness of how having a disability directly impacts their lives. The notion of "ignorance is bliss" to shield individuals with an ID from their impairment must be eradicated. Not educating individuals with an ID about disability and expecting them to be contributing members of society is not only unrealistic, but ultimately, and sets up these individuals for failure.

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Acknowledgement

Table 1

Description of Themes

Interdisciplinary Theme	Objective
Advanced learning theories and self-development	This theme focuses on modules which utilize/employ various styles of learning and strategies to support students in their learning throughout the programme. This theme will also focus on helping students to identify personal and professional goals and monitor their progress and development.
Applied research theories and practice	This theme introduces students to research methods and provides students with the opportunity to participate in, and lead their own, research projects.
Applied science, technology and mathematics	This theme includes modules focusing on a variety of disciplines such as: health sciences, environmental studies, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). These modules focus on core topics while providing a practical approach to how these subject areas relate to individuals with disabilities.
Business and marketing	Students are exposed to the fundamental principles of business and marketing. Students are provided with the tools to design a business plan and to lead a marketing project that critically reflects on how disability is portrayed in the business and marketing realm. The modules in this theme provide students with the skills and knowledge to successfully navigate the employment sector. Furthermore, students are required to take part in an eight-week work placement. This provides students with experiential learning skills needed when they transition to the employment sector.
Advocacy, rights and culture	This theme addresses human rights from a global perspective, with an emphasis on disability rights. The modules in this theme provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate services and advocate for their rights and the rights of others.
Fine arts and languages	This theme introduces students to how disability narratives are represented in language, film, art, and poetry. This theme will also explore how these representations influence societal understandings of disability, which ultimately influence the way individuals with disabilities experience and participate in society.

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Table 2

Description of Programme Aims and Learning Outcomes

Programme Aims	Program Learning Outcomes
• To help students develop the ability to think critically about disability, express viewpoints, engage in logical discussions, and problem-solve effectively within a higher education learning environment.	• Critically identify and reflect on how the construction of disability directly influences the lived experience of individuals with disabilities.
• To equip students with the interdisciplinary knowledge to navigate the community and employment sectors.	• Demonstrate a broad knowledge of interdisciplinary subject areas and how their content relates to disability.
• To develop in students the learning skills required for developing their own person-centred plan when engaged in the wider community.	• Apply an inquiry-based approach to critically identify strategies to facilitate societal change for people with disabilities.
• To provide students with the learning skills and knowledge needed to confidently advocate for change in their own lives and the wider disability community.	• Articulate and apply arguments, concepts and theories, both orally and in writing.
• To encourage collaborative learning through project-based tasks incorporating academic content and applied skills to reinforce overall academic, professional and personal development.	• Learn independently and in groups in order to engage optimally in their future studies and employment.
• To introduce students to academic scholarship, evidence-based interdisciplinary research and university life.	• Identify and use the learning skills required for success at independent living and employment.
	• Apply interdisciplinary knowledge and translatable skills to real world situations, such as when participating in the community or within the employment sector.