
Functional Curriculum and Academic Standards-based Curriculum: Competing for your Child's Time?

Donna Wickham, Ph.D.
Director, ILSSA
Human Development Institute
University of Kentucky
drwick2@uky.edu
859-259-7672

Leslie Lederer, M.Ed.
Disability Rights Advocate
KY Protection & Advocacy
leslie.lederer@ky.gov
502-239-4922

Changing Curricular Context for Students with the most Significant Disabilities

Early 1970s

- Adapting infant/early childhood curriculum for students with the most significant disabilities of all ages

1980s

- Rejected “developmental model”
- Functional, life skills curriculum emerged

1990s

- Also: social inclusion focus
- Also: self determination focus
- Assistive technology

2000s

- General curriculum access (academic content)
- Plus earlier priorities (functional, social, self determination)
- Digitally accessible materials

Developmental Curriculum

■ What it looks like...

- ❑ Visually track object
- ❑ Find partially hidden object (object permanence)
- ❑ Put peg in pegboard (pincer grasp)
- ❑ Wash hands and use the toilet
- ❑ Motor imitation (Pat your head)

■ Current Status...

- ❑ Offers a sequence of skills to guide teaching
- ❑ Not chronologically age appropriate
- ❑ Not necessarily functional
- ❑ Promotes a readiness model
- ❑ Students may not follow a developmental sequence

Functional, Community Referenced Curriculum

What it looks like...

- Curriculum is based on what is needed to live and work in the community.
- Task analysis of 10 steps to place an order at Dairy Queen
 - (Go to counter...place order..., etc.)
- Repeated trials of counting out \$5.00
- Repeated trials of reading sight words: “hamburger”, “fries”

Current Status...

- Continues to be valued and promoted in texts in Severe Disabilities
- Some critics suggest that it promotes separate curriculum; atypical school experience
- Most educators blend functional with academics
- Applied behavior analysis provides the foundation for systematic instruction methods widely supported in research

Inclusion/Self Determination Added to Functional Curriculum

What it looks like...

- Choose restaurant; choose order
- Greet peer in English class
- Self instruction to perform job task
- Pass item to peer in cooperative learning activity
- Use switch to make choice or activate a device

Current Status...

- General curriculum access as a “right” versus earning it with a progression of skills
- Some state alternate assessment include these as quality indicators of the program
- Provide supports for inclusion

General Curriculum Access

What it looks like...

Same/similar materials and activities as peers

express comprehension of main idea by selecting picture

Use technology to solve math problem; chart data

Current Status...

- Access to grade level content not just the setting
- New for most educators; including experts in the field
- Many students receiving academic instruction for the first time
- Some educators worry that the focus on functional curriculum is reduced

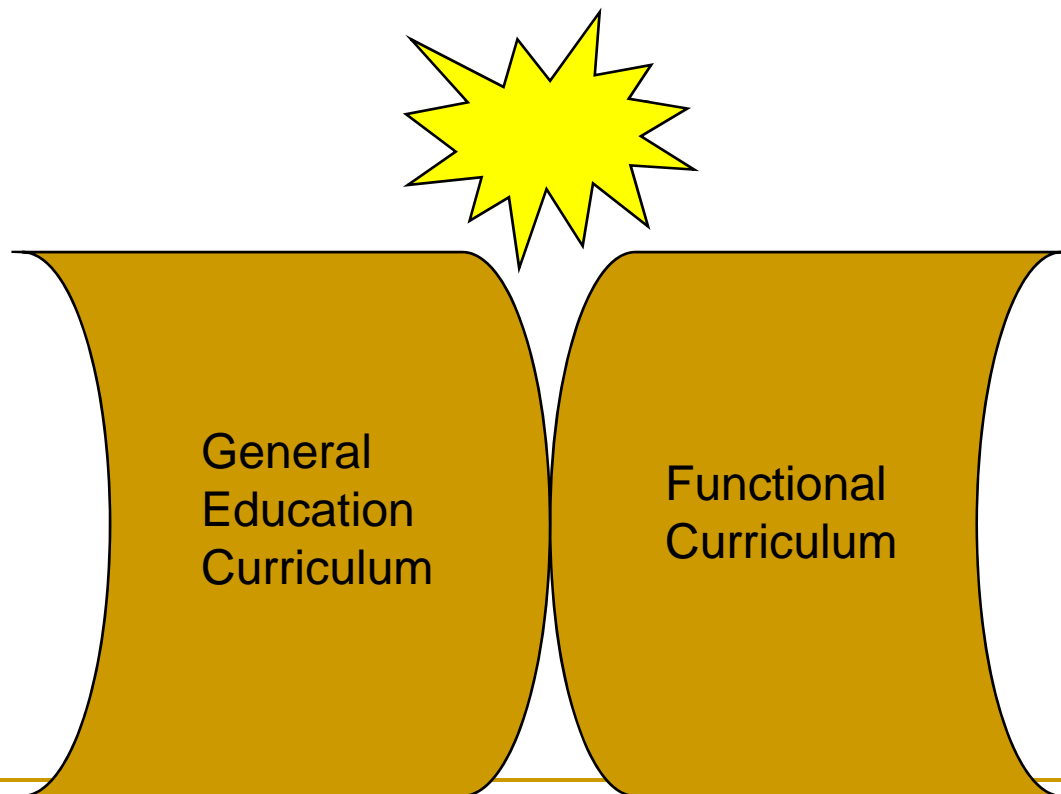
General “Lessons Learned”

Students with significant cognitive disabilities...

- Can and need to learn academic content
- Can and need to learn functional skills and activities
- Benefit from instruction in actual settings
- Benefit from skill instruction that taught in a functional activity
- Need to learn academic content in progression rather than a menu approach typical for functional curriculum
- Need to learn skills, not just activities

Specific “Lessons Learned”

- Using an inclusion model we found ways for him to participate in general education while working on functional skills.
- However...
 - We assessed functional skills (eye gaze, switch use, greeting)
 - We didn't assess academic learning...we missed out on finding out what he was learning of the content



Copyright ©2009 University of Kentucky,
ILSSA

12/06/2007

Its all about the fit – Curricular approaches

- A Functional Curriculum is often directed at learning an activity—cashing a check, taking a bus, etc.
 - Functional performance of the activity is the goal
 - Skills are taught as part of the activity – adding, comprehending, greeting, etc.
 - Supports allow a student maximum participation in the activity.

- A General Access Curriculum is often directed at learning a skill – adding, comprehending, etc.
 - Performance of the skill is the goal; functional use isn't the goal
 - Activities serve to practice the skill
 - Supports allow the student to perform the skill

Its all about the fit – Special and general education

■ IEP

- ❑ Not a curriculum
- ❑ Describes how the student will access education, make progress in the general curriculum and address other unique needs
- ❑ State standards are too specific - they are the curriculum

■ State Standards

- ❑ Curriculum assessed by NCLB
- ❑ Not the whole of what students with severe disabilities need to learn

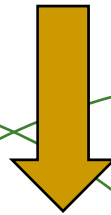
What can we do to ensure a balance?

- Reject choosing - Students will benefit from both
- Use the student's team to “define” functional
- Consider the student's age to adjust the balance
- Don't choose functional because the student is too disabled – Low expectations

Students will benefit from both curriculum approaches

Grade level
General Education
Curriculum

Functional
Curriculum



- Identifying different types of clouds; types of warfare;
- Knowing signs of erosion;
- Identifying main character and plot of story

- Activate switch to greet a colleague; activate switch to indicate the main character of Harry Potter
- Comprehending print materials by reading a shopping list to buy groceries; by answering comprehension questions about Huckleberry Finn

- Reaching and grasping Text Book;
- Toileting;
- Dressing appropriate for weather
- Orienting to book being read

Use the student's team to “define” functional

- Reading a Stop Signs is considered functional
 - For who and how and when
- Functional should not be Pre to being taught grade level academic content
 - Students should not have to wait until they are able to do laundry, purchase a soda from a vending machine using correct change, or make a peanut butter sandwich before
 - they are taught to read or identify initial letter sounds
 - or before they are taught literature
- Help in where you are and where you are going. Context is important – social environment
- Students should be presumed competent and not denied instruction offered to students of the same age (grade level content standards and curriculum)
- Talk about what is important for the student in the future/quality of life

Consider the student's age to adjust the balance

- High school vs. Elementary
 - Students are preparing for further education & training, employment and independent/community living.

- Student's future life
 - Transition activities in high school are based on preferences, interests and needs. Exposure all through school to rich curriculum can help students discover preferences and interests. Academics can enrich life – provide source of further interest leading to adult hobbies and community participation.

Don't choose functional because the student is too disabled – Low expectations

- Students with significant cognitive disabilities have not been taught general education content consistently before.
- Think about how your child has continually surprised you and taught you.
- General education curriculum provides a lot of novelty, something especially important for students with the most significant disabilities.
- General education activities that may appear to be nonfunctional may serve as opportunities for shared conversations with classmates; they may become hobbies or interests (civil war, types of clouds)

Ways we miss the balance

- Teaching an access skill instead of the grade level content
- Teaching a functional skill instead of the grade level content
- Teaching the content at a younger grade level

Teaching an access skill instead of the grade level content

Grade 8 Standard: *Students will use, interpret, and analyze informational text to locate information for school or personal use.*

Grade 8 Activity is to read a biography about JK Rowling and identify facts about her in a book report.



Leslie will activate her switch to begin an audiotape of JK Rowling's biography.

After listening to an audiotape of JK Rowling's biography, while following along with pictures of facts about JK Rowling, Leslie will activate her switch to indicate a fact about JK Rowling when presented with a fact and a distracter.

Teaching a functional skill instead of the grade level content

Grade 8 Standard: *Students will use, interpret, and analyze informational text to locate information for school or personal use.*

Grade 8 Activity is to read a biography about JK Rowling and identify facts about her in a book report.

Sarah will read a city bus schedule and locate the correct buses to get from her job to school.

Sarah reads the biography with print and accompanying pictures to illustrate main points and facts. She may listen to an audiotape of JK Rowling's biography to augment her understanding as well. She will then locate 3 facts about JK Rowling and write them in a paragraph.



Teaching the content at a younger grade level

Grade 8 Standard: Students will use, interpret, and analyze informational text to locate information for school or personal use.

Grade 8 Activity is to read a biography about JK Rowling and identify facts about her in a book report.

Josh will read a 1st Grade text book and identify facts about the story.



Josh reads the biography with print and accompanying pictures to illustrate main points and facts. He may listen to an audiotape of JK Rowling's biography to augment his understanding as well. He will then write 3 facts about JK Rowling and write them in a paragraph.

To not miss the balance: Follow the 4 step process

STEP 1: Identify the standard the unit of instruction will address.

STEP 2: Define the outcomes of instruction.

STEP 3: Identify daily instructional activities to help all students achieve unit outcomes.

STEP 4: Target specific objectives from the IEP to address during the unit.

Summary

- Teaching to standards is not in opposition to a functional curriculum
- Function is still a guidepost for determining priority
- Standards establish a guideline for teaching progression of a concept.
- It can begin to shatter the glass ceilings we might have believed these students could achieve.

Resources

- Donna Wickham drwick2@uky.edu
- National Alternate Assessment Center
naac.org
- No Child Left Behind Ed.gov
- National Center on Educational Outcomes
NCEO nceo.org