

INTRODUCTION AND CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

A primary purpose of special education is to help students with disabilities lead successful and personally fulfilling lives. A functional curriculum is designed to prepare students to function as independently as possible in a community setting (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001). A broad range of skills, therefore, must be included in the design of a functional curriculum appropriate for students with disabilities whether they are being educated in special settings or in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers (Browder, 2001; Valletutti & Dummett, 1992).

The skills needed by individuals with disabilities continue to expand as society becomes more complex. Moreover, with the increasing emphasis on inclusion, it is imperative that curricula taught in inclusive settings address the needs of students with disabilities, who, given the nature of the traditional teaching content, are less likely to be required or expected to develop functional skills to assist in achieving meaningful outcomes. Traditional ways of developing content for students with disabilities, such as through the watering down of the regular curriculum, do not work because they generally deal with atomized and often functionally irrelevant knowledge and skills. If students with disabilities are to be successfully included into the school and community, educational programs must be modified in functional, real-life ways in instructional goals and objectives and in the process of instruction. In essence, *life is the curriculum*.

According to Gast and Schuster (1993), “A functional curriculum is a primary *external support* for children with severe disabilities” (p. 471). Gast and Schuster have identified a number of principles that should be observed in the development and implementation of a functional curriculum. These authors believe that the designer/instructor should

focus on teaching skills that are chronologically age-appropriate and immediately useful to the learner. Use ecological inventories and compile a community catalog of current and future environments that are important to the students. Define goals based on the prior step. Prioritize goals based on their potential for enhancing independence. Task analyze the skills needed to perform successfully. Conduct a discrepancy analysis to determine what the student can and cannot do. Use principles of applied behavior analysis. Provide instruction in integrated and community settings. (p. 471)

The need for acquiring functional skills in an era of standards-based reform must be the cornerstone of programs designed to teach students with disabilities (Lewis, 2001). Fortunately, for some mainstreamed students with disabilities, the principles and contents of this approach are increasingly being incorporated into regular education programs (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Indeed the challenge for educators in this era of student achievement and accountability is

how to integrate functional skills within the content-based curriculum each teacher must implement. The educational benefits of a functional curriculum-based education in a reality-based approach including its motivational value and appropriate outcomes for all students being instructed in an inclusive educational setting should not be minimized (Kleinert & Kearns, 2001).

Defining the Functional Approach

The functional approach to educating students with or without disabilities is based on a distinctive philosophy of education that provides both the format and content of a curriculum and requires an instructional methodology that emphasizes the application of knowledge and skills in reality contexts (Bender & Valletutti, 1996; Valletutti & Bender, 1996). Some professionals view this approach as being different from the developmental approach in its emphasis on teaching age-appropriate skills that are immediately applicable to diverse life settings (Diamond, 1998; Gast & Schuster, 1993). Patton, Beirne-Smith, and Payne (1990), on the other hand, have posited: “The functional curriculum is a hybrid of the developmental and the behavioral curricula. It attempts to incorporate the best features of the two. Insofar as it emphasizes teaching interrelated classes of behavior and generalization within task classes, it is developmental, but it is behavioral in its emphasis on teaching skills that the infant or child needs now or will need” (p. 298). According to Kirk and Gallagher (1989), “Over the years, from research, common sense, and experience, a philosophy of teaching students with multiple and severe handicaps has evolved. Today our objective is to teach functional age-appropriate skills within the integrated school and community setting, and to base our teaching on the systematic evaluation of students’ progress” (p. 467).

Educators using the functional approach first identify life skills, which are articulated as instructional goals and objectives, and then seek to facilitate a student’s acquisition of these skills through real and simulated instructional experiences (Carr & Harris, 2001). A functional approach is adult referenced: It is a top-down approach that identifies behaviors deemed essential to a student’s successful adjustment as a functioning adult, as opposed to being a bottom-up design, which is characterized by a child-oriented focus (Polloway, Patton, Payne, & Payne, 1989). A functional approach fosters the development of skills that increase autonomy, as in self-care activities, as well as functional core academic skills, and encourages constructive codependency, as in cooperative enterprises and mutual problem solving in the home, school, community, and workplace. It endeavors to make individuals as successful as possible in meeting their own needs and in satisfying the requirements of living in a community. It also strives to make the individual’s life as fulfilling and pleasurable as possible (Cegelka & Greene, 1993).

The functional approach also determines the road map of the instructional process. It requires that specified content and instructional skills be taught in the reality contexts of classrooms. That is, skills are to be taught directly through typical home, school, or community activities, or, if a natural setting is not feasible, indirectly through classroom simulations (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976; Polloway et al., 1989).

Conducting an ecological inventory has been suggested as a strategy for generating a functional curriculum that is community referenced. The steps involved in this process include identifying curricular domains (e.g., vocational, leisure, communication, and academic core content), describing present and future environments, prioritizing the activities relevant to success in the community environments, specifying the information and skills needed to perform these activities, conducting a discrepancy analysis to determine required knowledge and skills missing from the student’s behavioral repertoire, determining needed adaptations, and, finally, developing a meaningful Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Brown et al., 1979).

A functional curriculum identifies *what* is to be taught, whereas the functional approach to instruction determines *how* a specific skill is to be taught. A functional curriculum is, in most cases, absolutely essential to instructional programs employed in special classes or special schools, but it is particularly valuable to teachers of mainstreamed or inclusive classes. These teachers must make functional adaptations to existing curricula if life skills are to be addressed, even in view of the requirements fundamental to the core academic subjects of the No Child Left Behind Act of reading, math, and science traditionally found in school curricula (National Center on Educational Outcomes; NCEO, 2003). Therefore, teachers must, when possible, integrate those elements of core academic curricula that need adaptations to life skills or analyze the academically driven goals and objectives of curricula, identify their potential practical applications, and implement these applications in their reality context.

Developing a Functional Curriculum

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires a standards-based approach to the development and implementation of curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Integrating meaningful content outcomes for students with significant cognitive and physical disabilities into the general education classroom has been the goal of inclusive educational practices for the past decade, particularly with the reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 and 2004 (Twenty-Five Years, 2002). Although educators may remain divided on the intrinsic educational value of this approach, the impact on curriculum and assessment has been undeniable. The convergence of these curriculum changes and the accountability mandates require a reconceptualization of functional skills and academic content areas. Both special educators and general educators are redefining the general curriculum to reflect the inclusion of functional skills and their community implementation. These skills are to be translated into the tasks of daily living, and specific outcomes for individual students are to be identified. Expanded strategies for instruction within authentic settings *must* become the focus of a standards-based program for students with significant disabilities.

An analysis of the social roles that people play as children, adolescents, and adults serves as the foundation for designing a functional curriculum (Bender & Valletutti, 1982; Valletutti & Bender, 1982). Social competency is thus primary in a functional curriculum. "Social competency dimensions are critical to the child's acceptability in the classroom, peer relationships, the efficiency and success of academic efforts, current life adjustment, and future social and vocational success" (Reschly, 1993, p. 232). Closely allied to the concept of a life-skills curriculum is the concept of social competence, often referred to as "adaptive behavior." *Adaptive behavior* refers to the individual's effectiveness in meeting the demands and standards of his or her environment based on age and the cultural group to which the individual belongs (Grossman, 1983). According to Drew, Logan, and Hardman (1992), "Adaptive skills are necessary to decrease an individual's dependence on others and increase opportunities for school and community participation" (p. 257). Drew et al. specified that "adaptive skill content areas for school-age retarded children include motor, self-care, social, communication, and functional academic skills" (p. 258).

Curricular models based on the concept of career education emphasize effective participation by the individual in all of life's "occupations." Career education, thus, requires an educational program that starts early in the school career and continues into adulthood (Clark, 1979). Brolin's (1986) life-centered career education (LCCE) model identifies 22 major competencies needed for effective functioning in school, family, and community. These skills are divided into three domains: daily living, personal/social, and occupational. Cronin and Patton (1993) have produced a life-skills instructional guide for students with special needs. This guide provides information that addresses the importance of life-skills instruction and insight as to how to identify

major life demands and specific life skills. Professional sources such as these yield a wealth of information on ways of integrating real-life content into the curriculum.

Developers of functional-skills curricula, whether identified as life skills, adaptive behavior, content based, or career education, must examine the content faced by members of society and specify the behaviors expected of them as they function at different stages in their lives. The long-range orientation of education, however, requires that competencies needed by adults be given programming priority with an individualized-outcome approach for students with disabilities.

Functionally oriented curricula must have an adult-outcomes emphasis. This is especially true for those students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers for whom postsecondary alternatives other than traditional higher education are appropriate. Life-skills outcomes curricula have abandoned a vocational myopia and now deal more comprehensively and realistically with the many elements needed for successful personal and social adjustment in adulthood (Cronin & Gerber, 1982). Students categorized as having diverse learning and behavioral disabilities, as well as students who are at risk for school failure but have not been so classified, are required to have research-based instructional opportunities and are more likely to be stimulated by learning activities that emphasize their present and future priorities, needs, and concerns. Regardless of age or grade, students should be prepared for the challenges of life that will occur after they graduate or pursue postsecondary options.

If the functional and social roles are accepted, then teachers, parents, counselors, and other trainers must decide which competencies should be included in a curriculum with such a nontraditional approach. This task is not an esoteric or an insurmountable one, however. Through an examination of their own lives and the lives of other adults, educators can easily identify what life skills should be included in a functional curriculum. Moreover, listening and attending to the writings of the students themselves, especially during the adolescent years, will also prove a superb source of functional instructional goals and objectives (Polloway et al., 1989).

The process of selecting the goals and objectives and establishing the functional priorities of a life-skills curriculum requires the designer to focus on core academic tasks consistent with the general curricula. The determinant of task inclusion is whether the skill in question is aligned or likely will be needed by the individual now or at some time in the future. Patton et al. (1990) have suggested that the selection should be governed by an objective's adaptive potential and its direct and frequent application to the individual's environment, the likelihood of its successful acquisition, its potential for improving the quality and level of services available to the individual, and its impact on the reduction of dangerous or harmful behaviors.

Once the functional curriculum has been developed, the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) must be formulated based on core content priorities within the general curriculum, with attention to the establishment of instructional priorities. Priorities are determined, in part, on the basis of answers to the following questions:

- Will the acquisition of a skill with less-than-obvious functional relevance lead to the later development of a key functional skill? For example, will it be important to teach an individual to hop and skip because these movements will be incorporated in games, sports, and other leisure activities, such as dancing?
- Is the skill of practical or current value to the individual as he or she functions on a daily basis?
- Will the skill be needed by the individual in the future? A skill that is immediately needed must be assigned greater priority than a skill needed in the future. Age appropriateness is always to be honored whether it applies to the choice of suitable instructional materials or to establishing instructional priorities.
- Has the individual demonstrated an actual need for the development of a particular skill? Teachers, support personnel, and other instructors need to observe the

individual to identify the areas in which he or she is experiencing difficulty and utilize these observations in setting programming priorities.

- Has the individual expressed the desire to acquire a specific skill? Students will often ask for needed assistance in acquiring a skill that has psychological importance. These self-identified needs should never be ignored and often will determine educational priorities.
- Do the parents believe that the acquisition of a particular skill will increase their child's adaptive behavior or performance in the home?
- Will the individual's acquisition of a specific skill improve his or her performance in school-, community-, and home-related tasks?
- Does the skill have survival value? Clearly, teaching a person how to cross a street safely has greater priority than teaching a youngster to chant or sing a nursery rhyme.
- Will the development of a particular skill facilitate the acquisition of skills pertinent to the goals of other human-services professionals who are providing related services?

On the basis of the responses to these questions, and with essential and mandated input from parents and relevant human-services professionals, teachers and trainers must develop the student's IFSP or IEP with relevant instructional priorities based on participation in the general curriculum uniquely addressed in various ways with specialized materials and resources.

Functionality as an Instructional Process

In order to teach in a functional way, instructors must ask the questions, "Under what circumstances is this skill and its accompanying knowledge applied?" and "Why and when is this skill needed?" The answer to either question determines the functional scenario that will structure the instructional plan and process. For example, if the short-term instructional objective is, "The student draws water from the sink," the response to the questions "Under what circumstances . . . ?" or "Why and when is this skill needed?" may be, "when washing vegetables in preparing a meal," "when filling ice cube trays," or "when getting water to fill the fish tank." The responses to either of these two questions provide the creative vision out of which the lesson should emerge. The lesson might then involve making a meal for guests in which a salad is prepared and ice cubes are made for the meal's accompanying beverage. A further example, if the short-term instructional objective is, "The student says, 'Excuse me' whenever appropriate." The response to the questions "Under what circumstances . . . ?" or "Why and when is this skill needed?" may be, "when one wishes to pass in front of someone," or "when one has belched." The responses to either of these two questions provide the creative visions out of which the lesson should emerge. The lesson might then involve a trip to a supermarket in which the students must excuse themselves as they pass other shoppers through crowded aisles or when they have role-played a meal with their fellow students and have inadvertently belched.

Once the circumstances under which a skill is typically practiced have been identified, teachers, parents, and other instructors, if possible, should provide instructional activities in the skill's usual setting or, at a minimum, in its simulated setting. Whenever the realistic setting for a skill's application is the home, teachers must make the student's parents part of the instructional team by helping them to be effective teachers of their children, assisting them in carrying out functional "homework" assignments, such as doing simple household chores and engaging in simple conversations. Teachers, of course, have primary responsibility for skills that are best developed in the school setting, such as teaching cognitive or academic skills in their functional applications. The community setting is the shared responsibility of both parents and teachers.

Whenever it is not possible to practice a skill in its reality context, learning experiences should be provided in classroom simulations that are as authentic as possible. Instructional materials and equipment in a functional and functioning classroom also must be reality based. Furniture, decorations, appliances, and materials typically found in the home must then be found in the classroom or somewhere else in the school as well. To simulate the community, the school might set up a mock traffic pattern in the gymnasium to practice safely crossing streets, establish a supermarket to practice shopping skills, and assign classroom duties as work tasks that mirror jobs available in the community.

The Scope of the Functional Curriculum

A functional curriculum, if it is to meet the needs of students with disabilities, should be formulated in terms of the social roles people are expected to play. Suggested instructional activities should be designed to assist students to fill these roles as successfully and productively as possible even when the curriculum is organized around traditional academic core subject areas, and even when it is arranged around special skill areas such as vocational, leisure, motor, communication, and interpersonal skills. Included among these roles are the individual as a

- socially competent person who works cooperatively with others for mutually agreed upon goals.
- capable student who learns from others, and, as a helper, assists others to learn.
- contributing member of a family unit.
- successful member of his or her own personal community (e.g., as a neighbor and friend).
- responsible and responsive citizen of the general community.
- skilled consumer of goods and services and participant in financial transactions.
- productive worker.
- skillful participant in diverse leisure-time activities.
- competent traveler who moves about the community while meeting all other social roles.

Assessment and the Curriculum

Assessment is fundamental to the educational decision-making process for all students. For students with significant cognitive disabilities, the process of assessing the student's current level of performance in functional academic and life skills is especially important to identify academic content to be taught, as well as lessons, and resources needed. For comprehensive assessment students must be viewed within the context of their grade-appropriate level, school, family, and community.

The importance of evaluation and assessment was firmly established for special education through the enactment of the IDEA Amendments of 1997, Public Law 105-17. Through the amendments in 2004 the IDEA again requires that local school systems implement specific procedures for the evaluation and assessment process for all students with disabilities.

When developing an assessment protocol for children, it is always important to select and administer measures in a way that is not discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis. Assessment measures should be administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication and take into consideration any sensory, manual, or speaking impairment that is presented by the student. Input from the parent or

individuals who are familiar with the child should be included, and the student should participate in the assessment.

Although standardized assessments are useful in measuring student achievement, developmental measures, such as checklists and portfolios, can be useful in documenting growth. NCLB requires that each state measure every child's progress in reading and math in Grades 3–8. *Assessing and Monitoring Progress of Functional Skills (AMPFS)*, the instrument designed for this edition, can be used by the classroom teacher to obtain a continuing point-in-time measure of the student's progress. Teachers can apply this information within the classroom to adjust instructional objectives and reinstruct to assist the student in achieving the goals.

By assessing a student's initial abilities, with degrees of support, a pretest baseline is established. The teacher then prioritizes the objectives and selects intervention activities that best meet the student's current needs. Mastery of a specific skill and data on successful intervention strategies are documented. This simple checklist system is used to note when the skill or progress toward the skill was observed. By revisiting this checklist at predetermined times a postmeasure of success or partial accomplishment can be documented. This information will help determine if specific goals and objectives need to be repeated or adjusted and can also be used for reporting to school teams, interdisciplinary staff, and parents.

The AMPFS checklists provided at the end of this introduction have been developed to address progress on specific goals and objectives undertaken by the student. Document the present status of a student's ability by noting the date of the assessment on the instrument with the use of the following scale.

Not Evident	Emerging	With Assistance	Independent
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These terms are defined as

Not evident: An objective is considered to be not evident if there is no outcome measure that reflects an observable and measurable response or if the behavior cannot be performed. This would also include those objectives that do not align with the state standards.

Emerging: An objective is considered to be emerging if it is in the process of development or if the objective is intermittent in performance by the student. This would also apply if the subskills required to complete the objective are not entirely performed by the student.

With assistance: An objective is considered to be performed with assistance when the student requires intervention and support by the instructor to perform the objective consistently. Prompts used can be of a verbal, nonverbal, gestural, or physical nature.

Independent: An objective is considered to be independent in performance if the objective and related subskills are performed consistently and without support. The data must be measurable and observable as well as being able to measure the student's response. The objective must also be aligned with state standards.

For easy reference, the AMPFS is designed to record the teaching priorities for each goal, comments on individual needs, and the date each goal is mastered.

Although assessment is focused and defined for the student, the integration of the assessment information within the student's instructional program allows teachers to make effective decisions on behalf of students. Current educational best practices link the outcomes of assessment to interventions that are specific to functional skills and behaviors.

Fundamental to the process of identifying the child's learning status in multiple contexts is the embedding of measurable skills within the functional curriculum. When developing instructional plans, previous assessment data can be useful in the selection

of instructional objectives and can be connected to other content areas such as music and art through an integrated instructional model. Additional information concerning assessment and measurements can be found in the following resources:

- Tests in Print (TIP), 6th Edition, 2002.
Publisher: The Buros Institute for Mental Measurements
TIP is a bibliographic encyclopedia of detailed information for published tests in psychology and achievement. The tests included are in print and available for purchase.
- Mental Measurements Yearbook (MMY), 15th Edition, 2003.
Publisher: The Buros Institute for Mental Measurements
Tests are listed alphabetically by title. Included are the test name, target population forms and prices, author, and publisher.

Developing Instructional Plans

Instructional plans serve as the blueprint for coordinating and teaching functional skills. In this curriculum, activities are presented in terms of Teacher Interventions and Parent Interventions. Subsumed under these interventions are four age and grade-level designations appropriate to teaching different age groups of children and youth with disabilities: infant and toddler/preschool, primary, intermediate, and secondary.

With its identified annual goals and their short-term instructional objectives, the curriculum serves as the framework for systematically observing and assessing the student's performance in terms of both his or her progress and the final product. Evaluation occurs as the learner functions on a daily basis in natural settings and as he or she responds to structured and simulated activities. These observations, supplemented by more formally acquired test data, aid in selecting what goals and objectives are to be placed, for example, in the student's IEP. Once these decisions are made, lesson planning can commence as follows:

- Lesson planning begins, based on instructional insights acquired from assessment data that describe the student's present level of functioning vis-à-vis a specific functional behavior. It continues with the identification from the student's IEP of a priority *annual goal* and its associated *specific objective*.
- Following this identification, a pertinent *lesson objective* is then constructed. The lesson objective, like the short-term instructional objective, is student oriented and has the dual purpose of structuring the instructional sequence and suggesting the assessment strategy and its performance criterion level. Toward these ends, a lesson objective has three key elements:
 - Clarification of the stimulus situation or conditions: "When given . . ." or "After being shown . . ."
 - Specification of a desired response: "The student will . . ."
 - Establishment of a performance level: "He will do so in four out of five trials" or "She will do so without assistance."
- Next, *materials and equipment* are listed, even though a complete list is not really known until the total plan is developed. This segment is placed in the beginning of the plan for ease in reading when the instructor skims the plan immediately prior to its implementation.
- The *motivating activity* is then stated. Identifying an appropriate motivating activity may be a challenging task, because it is not always easy to identify age-appropriate

motivating activities that will capture the attention and encourage the involvement of the different age groups of students with disabilities who are functioning at depressed levels.

- *Instructional procedures* are then enumerated. These are instructor oriented and are sequenced in logical steps arising out of the motivating activity and leading to assessment. The instructional procedure itself is divided into four steps: initiation, guided practice, independent practice, and closure. Evidence that teaching is taking place must be carefully articulated in each of these steps. Demonstrations, assistance, and problem-solving challenges are ways of ensuring that instruction is occurring.
- The *assessment strategy* to be employed is then specified. This procedure should reflect the desired response and performance criteria indicated in the lesson objective. It is instructor oriented and should specify the method to be used in recording observational data.
- At this point, a proposed *follow-up activity or objective* is written to ensure that the sequence of instruction is honored. The hoped-for follow-up activity or objective is composed in positive terms because it can be pursued only if the student successfully meets the plan's lesson objective. If the learner fails to meet the lesson objective, a remedial lesson plan must be written on an ad hoc basis (because it is not possible to predict the reason for failure, especially given that the lesson was designed and taught with the likelihood of instructional success).
- A concluding section, *observations and their instructional insights*, is appended. This section is included in the instructional plan as one means of recording student behaviors and for identifying one's instructional insights as to programming implications for later reference and for use in completing checklists, writing progress reports, and designing and modifying the student's IEP.

Then, introductory information should be provided at the beginning of the instructional plan, such as the following:

- topic area
- name of the designer of the plan
- required time for implementation
- student(s) for whom the plan is intended
- relevant background information on the involved student(s) that led to the development of the specific lesson plan.

© Finally, an instructional (lesson) plan should be written in a simple and direct way and be relatively free from jargon so that parents, teacher aides, volunteers, and other appropriate instructors can readily understand and implement it.

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