State of Curriculum for Secondary Students with Mild Mental Retardation

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Abstract: Since passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, much debate has occurred regarding how to address curriculum in terms of meeting needs of students within various special education categories. Recently, more discussion has emerged regarding transition and curriculum geared towards assisting with this process, particularly as researchers discover dismal outcomes for special education students post high school. However, discussions and even passing further laws, such as IDEA of 1990 and its amendments in 1997, do not guarantee that these ideas and practices are implemented in the curriculum. This paper reviews research on curriculum for students with mild mental retardation, or impairment. Implications including exploration of functional curriculum in secondary settings and abandoning remedial curriculum are discussed.

The population of students with mild mental retardation, or sometimes referred to as mild mental impairment, is essentially a forgotten group. At one time this population generated the most research in special education; however, little current research is being conducted (Edgar, 1987). Just as the category of mild mental retardation is adrift, considered a low-incidence disability; yet referred to as a “mild handicap” and equated with Learning Disabilities and Emotional/Behavior Disorders, these students are also afloat in terms of their curriculum (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 1997). The problem of curriculum for students with mild mental retardation is far-reaching in terms of post-school outcomes, and complex as to what to teach and where to teach it.

Some scholars consider research and curricula suggestions for students with learning disabilities amenable to students with mild mental retardation, as a hypothesis came about in the 1970s and 1980s that few educationally relevant differences exist between these two special education categories (Polloway, Patton, & Smith, 1997). Overlap between the two categories was found in areas of characteristics, etiology, and relevant educational methodology. Polloway et al. further contended that especially for students who do not go on to attend post-secondary education or training, overlaps occur for students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities. A claim can be made that the closeness of students with learning disabilities and mild mental retardation exists because it reflects what occurs in schools today, as students with these two categories are typically lumped together in classes.

Despite claims by some researchers as to the close relationship between these two disabilities, the very nature of classifying students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities remains distinct. A learning disability reflects that an individual has a normal IQ, which is within the range of 100, but has achievement scores that differ significantly than what is to be expected given his/her IQ; whereas mild mental retardation involves an IQ that is significantly below the normal IQ, typically within the range of 55 to 70, and the individual has limitations in two or more areas of adaptive functioning (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2002; Polloway, Smith, & Chamberlain, 1999).

The types of curricula, or instructional en-
environments and approaches, utilized in special education today, in general and specifically for students with mild mental retardation are not explicitly known. Some researchers have conceptualized curricula approaches along the following lines: traditional academics; remedial academics; skills, such as home living, community living, personal-social, and leisure or recreational; and vocational preparation (Halpern & Benz, 1987). Conderman and Katsiyannis (2002) referred to similar ideas as instructional approaches and qualified them as: content instruction, learning strategies, academic remediation, transition instruction, functional living skills, and socio-emotional development. They also discussed services for special education in terms of where students receive the curriculum: resource room, self-contained classroom, general education classroom, worksites, community based instruction, and alternative schools (Conderman & Katsiyannis). Lack of knowing what teachers are doing, presumable inconsistency between teachers as well as variation between how researchers conceptualize this problem is inadequate and unacceptable.

Curriculum for students with mild mental retardation needs to be known and examined, as the trend of negative adult outcomes for this population needs to be reversed. Such outcomes include: unemployment or underemployment, low pay, part-time work, frequent job changes, non-involvement in the community, limitations in independent living, and restricted social lives (Patton, Cronin, & Jairrels, 1997).

Schools today have a responsibility to address demands of adulthood with their students (Blalock & Patton, 1996). And for students with mild mental retardation, this means utilizing a functional, or life management curriculum, which addresses academics and other adult skills. The purpose of this paper is to review literature on curriculum for students with mild mental retardation.

Options for Special Education Curriculum

It has been said “... curriculum is the essential organizing tool in any educational institution. Curriculum is that total content of instruction, an overall structure that provides continuing sequenced challenges, and meaningful learning that mediates the needs of both students and society” (Bigge, 1988, p. 1). Yet, curriculum does not explicitly exist in special education. Goldstein (as cited in Pugach & Warger, 1993) suggested that knowledge about curriculum is generally absent from the special education world. The majority of special education involves the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as the typical curriculum; however, the selection of curriculum within the IEPs can be quite idiosyncratic and lacking continuity not only between special education and general education, but also between sequential years in special education (Pugach & Warger, 1993). Bigge (p. 4) further emphasized, “when no appropriate overall curriculum serving as a framework or no recommended course of study with specific skills and concept objectives exists, special education students can experience fragmented programs.”

Bigge (1988) outlined six approaches or options for special education curriculum. These included an identical curriculum, which uses general education curriculum and implements the same standards but with special services or accommodations; a parallel curriculum which also uses the general education curriculum but reduces the complexity; a lower grade level curriculum; a practical academic curriculum, which utilizes different, although related curriculum through substituting skills to achieve the general curriculum; a life management curriculum, which involves a unique curriculum; and other curriculum, which utilizes other components students may need knowledge in. If students with mild mental retardation are to achieve knowledge and skills that enable them to compete and function in the daily activities of society, the curriculum to best meet these goals appears to be the life management, or functional, curriculum.

Sabornie and deBettencourt (1997) reconceptualized the curricular approach options as categorized by Zigmond and Sansone (1986). While Zigmond and Sansone originally oriented these approaches, with specific service delivery model connotations, for students with learning disabilities, Sabornie and deBettencourt expanded them for the other disabilities typically captured under the term “mild disabilities” or high-incidence disabili-
ties – students with emotional impairment and students with mild mental impairment.

The following six options were highlighted: basic skills model, remedial instruction for basic skills; tutorial model, assistance with specific academic course content; compensatory model, modifications or alternations to tasks or requirements; vocational model, preparation for employment; functional skills model, a different curriculum that addresses one’s ability to function in society and meet the demands of daily living; and learning strategies model, teaches how to learn rather than what to learn.

Both Bigge’s (1988) and Sabornie and de-Bettencourt’s (1997) curriculum options offer ways to classify secondary special education. While some overlap occurs between the options of the different authors, differences do exist. These differences highlight not only the multiple approaches that practitioners utilize for curriculum, but also the various ways researchers conceptualize it within the field.

Historical Perspective

Curriculum approaches for students with mild mental retardation have undergone pendulum swings over the past half-century. Klein, Pasch, and Frew (1979) analyzed past curriculum approaches for students in this population. They indicated that during the 1950s curriculum emphasized preparing educable (mildly) mentally retarded learners for life. Goldstein and Siegle (1958) wrote a curriculum which included the core subjects of math, science, and language arts, but whose focus on achievement in academics was valued in terms of its application to problems of real life.

Garton (1964) echoed similar views in the 1960s in her book, Teaching the Educable Mentally Retarded: Practical Methods. She stated that a teacher’s aim for a student who is educable (mildly) mentally retarded involves developing self-realization, social competence, economic efficiency, and civic responsibility. She suggested that a suitable curriculum for secondary students labeled educable mentally retarded would consider social experiences as being functional as well as stressing the importance of teaching transportation and communication units, particularly drawing upon their relevancy to employment. Garton emphasized that a major component to the high school curriculum for students considered educable mentally retarded is job preparation – filling out applications, discussing interviews, and also other essential life skills, such as working with a budget, understanding taxes, and unions. Garton’s (p. 65) practical approach is grounded in real life experiences and she recommends that teachers “think of everyday living and there is a field of study for the seniors of high school mentally retarded youth.” Garton’s implicit and explicit focus on the curriculum as being relevant to preparation for life beyond high school, in terms of employment and life skills, still remains applicable and important today.

Ten to fifteen years after Garton’s book, the pendulum shifted as Klein et al. (1979) addressed the state of curriculum for students with mild mental retardation in the late 1970s. The authors stated that the most pervasive practice in regards to curriculum for this population involved a “watered-down” general education curriculum. They asserted, “the time has come to determine what to teach, systematically and to continue instructional sequence” (Klein et al., p. 184). However, the time has passed, and the same problem still exists in 2004.

The 1980s continued with a similar trend, as the main focus in secondary special education programs consisted of remediation. Despite that this approach has continued into the 1990s, and even today into the 2000s; we cannot continue with the process of remediating students with mild mental retardation as they will never be fully “remediated” given their IQ range is typically between 55 and 70. Research exists to illustrate the failure of remediation for students with mild mental retardation (Edgar, 1987).

It is interesting to note that the pendulum swing towards a lack of secondary programming for “mildly impaired” children and placement of these students within the general education curriculum of core subject areas – social studies, science, math, and language arts – came after the legislation PL 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), which guaranteed special education students the right to a free and appropriate public education (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). Placement of students with
mild mental retardation in general education or even resource room classes has been the trend for the past two decades, school districts typically do not have mildly mentally retarded programs, and instead create cross-categorical classes and rely on resource rooms to meet the educational needs of students with mild mental retardation.

Argument for a Functional Life Curriculum

Despite the curriculum options for students with mild mental retardation, research suggests that this population of students is not being well prepared for life as adults (Dever & Knapczyk, 1997). In recognition of this, there have been a growing number of authors calling for implementation of a functional curriculum (Cronin, 1996; Dever & Knapczyk). The call for a functional curriculum gains some of its support from the educational needs identified as being crucial for students with mild mental retardation. Mental retardation “is characterized by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skills areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work” (Polloway et al., 1997, p. 299). These very deficits that create the definition of mentally retarded are equivalent to the skill areas highlighted in a life management or functional curriculum (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Bigge, 1988; Dever & Knapczyk, 1997).

Importance of utilizing a curriculum that engages special education students in meaningful activities is highlighted by the high dropout rates for this population. One study found the median dropout rate for special education students was 26.71% (as cited in MacMillan et al., 1992). National estimates for students with mental retardation dropping out of school range from 25% to 50% of students and most of these are individuals with mild mental retardation (Sinclair, Christianson, Thurlow, & Evelo, 1994). Research has also shown that only 14.6% of students with any kind of disability, who received special education services in school, take courses from any post-secondary institutions (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Specifically, only 2.5% of students with mental retardation go to college (Kaye, 1997). Participation in the labor force is also low for individuals with disabilities, as researchers concluded the employment rate is about 30% with completion of high school (as cited in Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002).

In addition to the dismal outcomes illustrated above, opinions from parents, teachers, and students regarding the curriculum need to be analyzed. Research in the field has found that students in special education want challenging and relevant instruction and curriculum that would prepare them for life after high school (Guterman, 1995). In a study by Benz et al. (2000) special education students expressed frustration with traditional high school curriculum, as it failed to adequately prepare them to achieve their post-secondary goals. These students desired to gain the functional skills necessary to succeed in the adult world, instead of receiving an education of meaningless facts and rote memorization. Just as students indicated that curriculum was a concern of theirs, secondary special education teachers also identified a more appropriate curriculum as an intervention to improve their classrooms; an intervention second to only more preparation time (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). Parents also have concerns regarding their child’s special education curriculum (Love & Malian, 1997). While both parents and students tend to express satisfaction with student’s achievement levels in reading, writing, and mathematics; they have concerns about the lack of acquisition of more functional life skills, such as the ability to use public transportation, live independently, and knowing how to access community services (Love & Malian).

Further support for a functional curriculum is found in outcome data collected from students whose education was guided by such a curriculum. Benz et al. (2000) studied the Youth Transition Program (YTP), a collaboration of the Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Division, the University of Oregon, and local school districts. The YTP provides services for special education students in their last two years of high school and involves transition planning based on post-school goals and self-determina-
tion; instruction in academic, vocational, independent living, and personal-social content areas; paid work experience; and follow-up services for two years on an as needed basis. Students in the YTP graduated at rates of 72%, and within that figure, the rates doubled for those who had two years in the program as opposed to one or less years (Benz et al.). Furthermore, 68% of participants were engaged in productive work or postsecondary education of some sort.

Another example of effectiveness of a functional curriculum in preparing special education students for life after high school is a school-to-work program in Delaware, Ohio, which exists solely for special education students (Tamasovich, 2002). The program focuses on the hospitality industry, but also works on survival units for the adult world, with such skills as reading for survival, developing social skills needed for employment, and problem-solving. Students experience the functional aspects of work, such as understanding hours worked, schedules, income, and evaluations (Tamasovich). However, these are isolated incidents of functional curriculum approaches for special education students, few and far between.

General education is also taking an interest in the role of transition in the curriculum (Conley, 2002). Similar to how researchers have found that special education students are ill-prepared for life after high school (Benz et al., 2000); Conley asserted that the general education curriculum does not typically prepare general education students for life after graduation. An important distinction between these similar situations in special education and general education is the degree to which the lack of preparation affects students. While Conley stated that general education students are often unprepared for postsecondary academic learning environments and the world of work, it is not at the same level that special education students experience negative impacts from their lack of life preparation. Cronin (1996) supported that all students need life skills preparation, not just special education students and contended that the curriculum should include it across all content areas and throughout all school years.

**Elements of a Functional Curriculum**

Students with mild mental retardation need a distinct curriculum; a curriculum geared towards meeting the specific needs of this particular population. Smith and Smith (1978) proposed a curriculum be devised for each special education program that is practical and targets the skills needed for independence for the population within particular programs. Components of a functional or life management curriculum include the functional applications of core subject areas (academics), vocational education, community access, daily living, financial, independent living, transportation, social/relationships, and self-determination (Patton, Cronin, & Jairrels, 1997). A distinct curriculum for students with mild mental retardation that is geared towards their goals is not far from what exists in America’s colleges today. In colleges and some preparatory secondary schools, students are prepared and taught subjects, knowledge, and skills geared directly towards their life post college; knowledge that will enable them to be successful in the adult world. This same opportunity should be available for students with mild mental retardation at a high school level.

A separate, unique curriculum does not inherently imply not as good, just one geared towards the different needs of a particular population. For example, functional mathematics does not just refer to basic skills, but also to more everyday computation and problem-solving skills, which are embedded into experiences individuals with mild mental retardation might encounter in life (Butler, Miller, Lee, & Pierce, 2001). Researchers stress the daily use of mathematics, regardless of one’s mental capacity. Some degree of math proficiency is required for most jobs and therefore, special educators need to devote attention to teaching functional math skills that are applicable on the job, at home, and in the community (Patton, Cronin, & Bassett, 1997). Patton, Cronin, and Bassett pushed for this “life skills instruction” for students with learning disabilities who do not usually attend postsecondary education and therefore do not need to focus on higher mathematics. It can be rationalized that for the same reasons students with learning disabilities need func-
tional math, so do students with mild mental retardation.

In addition to functional academics, the other skills of daily life are also important and need to be explicitly taught to students with mild mental retardation. Cronin (1996) illustrated this point clearly, implying that while many teachers, administrators, and parents assume students in special education need no formal instruction in life skills, this is hardly an accurate representation. Research suggests that many of these students fail to learn the necessary skills without instruction, as they do not gain them on their own or from parents and peers (Edgar, 1987; Halpern & Benz, 1987; Sitlington et al.; Wagner et al., as cited in Cronin). A similar stance that basic life or survival skills are not readily picked up by most students in special education is echoed by Dr. Lavoie in a video he conducted for PBS entitled Learning disabilities and social skills: Last one picked... First one picked on (WETA-TV, 1994). Dr. Lavoie stated that if students with learning disabilities just acquired the skills they needed from watching others, then they would be demonstrating them at rates far exceeding those that exist today. He advocated for the explicit instruction approach for special education students.

**Implications**

A specified curriculum for students with mild mental retardation may inadvertently lead to specific programs or placement considerations, which may not be popular in today’s trend of inclusive education. However, this idea warrants discussion and consideration, as Kauffman (1999) stated, “without a separate, distinctive, visible structure the interests of exceptional children are going to be lost” (p. 245). Kauffman asserted that segregation is not inherently evil; and that setting a standard, for example a mandated state curriculum, for all to achieve is not possible; as special educators cannot cure or fix their students to be successful in the same curriculum or assessments as their full-time general education peers. This attacks the very heart of remediation; special education students will never acquire full remediation. Kauffman further explained that if special education students did catch-up to their full-time general education peers, it would suggest flaws within the general education curriculum and teaching practices; predominantly since science has illustrated that many of these disability categories suggest a biological basis as the cause.

This proposal for a functional curriculum is not by any means attempting to limit the academic knowledge or skill acquisition of students with mild mental retardation. It is not attempting to limit their ability to reach their potential, but rather a declaration that watered-down general education curriculum is not effective. Students in special education have just as much right to a practical and appropriate curriculum as any other student. Academics are still important and play a vital role in a functional curriculum; however, it is functional academics that are needed.

Within a specific curriculum for students with mild mental retardation, individualization can and should occur. Individual needs and instruction can occur within the framework of an established curriculum. Having a strong curriculum will not diminish individualized programming, but instead improve upon the programming that is provided. With that being said, current research exists questioning whether individualized curriculum or education occurs for each student today within the current systems considering IEPs curriculum (Pugach & Warger, 2001). Some researchers (Weston & Deno; Ysselayeiti, O’Sullivan, Thodow, & Christenson, as cited in Pugach & Warger) found that “individually tailored” programs have been found to be eerily similar to others and/or without substance.

**Conclusion**

The current state of curriculum for students with mild mental retardation raises many issues. Students with mild mental retardation need to learn in secondary school the skills necessary for life after graduation. Research has shown the negative effects that result when students in special education, particularly students with mild mental retardation, are not adequately prepared for the adult world. Their dismal outlook for success after high school acts as a wake-up call that the current curriculum approaches for these individuals are not sufficient. The time has come
to meet the needs of our students. As the United States government acclaimed in 1990 and reaffirmed in 1997, transition, the preparation of students for life after high school, is needed. But it is not enough to just say that students need transition and to write superficial goals and objectives with no real value to the lives they are intended to benefit. Rather we must create a curriculum based on functional academics and functional life skills to truly address transition for students with mild mental retardation. Just as we see that general education students in American are not being prepared for the world after high school, we should also acknowledge that we fail to prepare special education students for the adult world they enter.

Students with mild mental retardation have a right to be different and different does not mean deficit, deviant, or disadvantaged, it can just mean different, with different learning styles, needs, strengths, and curriculum (Hatlen, 1996). Barton (1997, p. 235) said, “difference is now to be viewed as a challenge, a means of generating change and an encouragement for people to question unneeded generalizations, prejudice, and discrimination.” Students with mild mental retardation have a right to a different curriculum that fits their needs and goals. The time for a functional life curriculum to be implemented for students with mild mental retardation is now. We must move forward to do what is best in the interest of our children and prepare them for the adult world they will inevitably enter.

References


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