Factors Impacting the Enactment of a Functional Curriculum in Self-Contained Cross-Categorical Programs

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Abstract: Factors relating to curriculum use in general education have been studied in considerable depth, yet little research has been conducted on what factors impact the enactment of curriculum in special education. This study specifically studied the enactment of a functional curriculum in two rural, self-contained, cross-categorical programs. The data revealed that it was the intersection and union of seven factors (policy/legislation, community, school, teachers, paraprofessionals, students, and curriculum materials) that shaped the enacted functional curriculum in both programs. The association between the factors and the enactment of the functional curriculum holds implications for policy, research, and practice.

“How we define curriculum makes a difference in how we think about it and how we plan it” (Morrison, 1993, p. 84). Little agreement exists among researchers or practitioners as to what constitutes curriculum, as it can refer to long-lasting educational programs, materials used in classrooms (i.e., textbooks), and experiences that students receive while in school (Morrison; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). Although disagreement exists, it is understood that curriculum is complex and reflects plans and activities that are to benefit students and help them achieve specific goals (Nolet & McLaughlin).

A curriculum is actually comprised of three components – the written (intended), enacted, and received curriculum. The written curriculum “is the official or adopted curriculum often contained in state or district policy”, and represents what students are expected to learn (Cuban, 1992; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 15). The enacted curriculum “is the operationalization of the intended curriculum”, and reflects the decisions a teacher makes during implementation (Nolet & McLaughlin, p. 16). It encompasses the formal and informal lessons and activities, as well as teachers’ behaviors, groupings, management strategies, beliefs, and comments (Cuban). The received curriculum “is what students actually learn as a result of being in the classroom and interacting with the intended and taught curricula” (Nolet & McLaughlin, p. 17).

Synder, Bolin, and Zumwalt (1992) expanded the definition of enacted curriculum to encompass a co-construction of educational experiences by teachers and students. They suggested that an enacted curriculum is a transactional process where teachers and students interact, construct, and make meaning of the curriculum and educational experiences within context. Yet, their expanded definition may still be too narrow. This study proposes that the enacted curriculum is a transactional process, co-constructed by teachers and students, and influenced by each one’s history; the school; the communities in which the school, teachers, and students reside; institutional factors, such as federal and state policies; and curriculum materials. This definition is depicted in Figure 1.

Factors Impacting Curriculum

According to Milner (2003) curriculum enactment and choice can be influenced by several
variables, including federal policies, state standards, school factors, and teacher factors. Morrison emphasized a sphere of influence on curriculum decision making consisting of society, legislation/policy, the local school district, individual people, professional organizations, business/industry, foundations/agencies, teachers, textbooks, lobbying/special interest groups, and testing.

Institutional policies and legislation. Federal policies affect curriculum enactment within special education, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997, 2004). NCLB is built upon four pillars: stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states and communities, encouraging the use of proven educational methods, and more choices for parents. This policy has led to a more rigorous general education curriculum and a presumed push towards using the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Under NCLB teachers are to be held accountable for students’ progress on state standards, suggesting that curricula must reflect teaching to the standards, or teaching to the test (Karp, 2003; Patton, Polloway, & Smith, 2000).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 is the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and reflects the government’s attempt to align IDEA ‘97 with NCLB. It is focused on greater accountability and having highly qualified special education teachers in classrooms. IDEA 2004 has also been attributed to an increased focus on preparing students with disabilities for further education.

Curriculum materials. Morrison (1993) discussed textbooks’ deterministic influence on curriculum enactment, indicating that they tend to cater to the lowest ability students in the classroom, rather than the average or the more able students. Dyck and Pemberton (2002) claimed that textbooks represent a central feature of curricula, particularly at the higher grades.

School and community factors. Schools can influence curriculum through a district’s curriculum and philosophy, as well as the building’s climate (Milner, 2003; Waldrup & Giddings, 1996). Other school variables affecting curriculum are a school’s setting (rural, urban, and suburban) and size (see Bouck, 2005; Monk & Haller, 1993). For example, rural schools are more likely to expose students to in-school jobs and work experience yet generally have fewer vocational educational choices (Baer et al., 2003; Hudson & Shafner, 2002). Research has suggested that rural schools are more likely to have cross-categorical programs than urban or suburban schools (Bouck, 2005). School size research shows similar results, with smaller schools offering fewer educational opportunities than larger schools (Monk & Haller, 1993).

Teacher factors. Teachers shape how curriculum is enacted in classrooms (Milner, 2003). Remillard (1997) suggested that teachers play a more direct role than textbooks in the enacted curriculum as they make the final decision about what gets taught. Teachers’ pedagogical approaches, beliefs about course content, knowledge about the community in which students live, content knowledge, and their own personal experiences all influence the delivery of curriculum (see Milner; Remillard & Bryans, 2003; Weiss, Pasley, Smith, Banilower, & Heck, 2003).

Functional Curriculum

While literature has explored these factors in general education curricula, little has been
studied in relation to special education. Although special education has a range of curricula types (see Bigge, 1988; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 1997), this particular study chose to focus on functional curricula. Functional curriculum has lost favor and declined in its use in practice due to recent federal policy pushing inclusion, yet it still remains an important option for secondary students with disabilities (Bigge, Stump, Spagna, & Silberman, 1999; Patton, Cronin, & Bassett, 1997; Polloway, Patton, Smith, & Roderique, 1991).

Functional curricula represent curriculum models created to teach functional life skills, or in other words, the skills necessary to live, work, and have fun in an inclusive community (Brown et al., 1979; Falvey, 1989; Snell & Browder, 1987). Functional curricula resulted from the belief that what was occurring in schools failed to reflect the skills necessary for post-school success (Retish, Hitchings, Horvath, Schmalle, 1991). Components of a functional or life management curriculum supported in the literature 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).

In recognition that students with disabilities are not well prepared for adult life, there has been a growing number of authors calling for implementation of a functional curriculum (Bouck, 2004; Cronin, 1996; Dever & Knappczyk, 1997; Patton et al., 2000). Unfortunately a functional curricula approach is an under-researched area in the field of secondary special education. This includes its components, enactment, and its influence on post-school outcomes. Although some researchers and practitioners feel that a functional curriculum is only appropriate for students with severe disabilities (see Clark, 1994), others (e.g., Patton et al.) have argued that all students with disabilities need a functional curriculum, particularly at the secondary level. Billingsley and Alberston (1999) suggested that special education students’ quality of life is dependent on the acquisition of functional skills.

Research Study

This research sought to understand the factors affecting the enactment of a functional curriculum in two rural secondary self-contained cross-categorical programs. This article represents one aspect of a larger study of the enactment of a functional curriculum in these two settings. The study sought to answer the question, what is the nature of the influence of factors on the enactment of a functional curriculum when factors are hypothesized as policy/legislation, community, school, teachers, students, and curriculum materials?

Factors influencing the implementation of a functional curriculum in secondary special education classrooms are important to investigate as little current research exists on the use of a functional curriculum at the secondary level for students with disabilities educated in cross-categorical programs. Yet, a functional curriculum represents an essential option as it is not only used in practice but also desired by practitioners and parents. Research has shown that both groups have expressed concern that a functional curriculum will be replaced by a more academically focused curriculum without enough research on a functional approach to educating secondary students with disabilities (Bouck, 2004; Olson, 2004; Patton et al., 2000). Finally, knowing how well secondary schools prepare students with disabilities for their life and work roles should be central to curriculum implementation, particularly for secondary students with disabilities (Eisenman, 2001; Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002). However before the field can advocate for implementing a particular curriculum, research should be conducted to determine what the implementation of different curricula options look like in these classrooms and also what factors affect that implementation. This study undertakes this process for functional curricula.

Method

Participants

Teachers. One teacher from each of two districts participated in the project. Both teachers started their respective self-contained cross-categorical program and had been
teacher, Paula, had been a non-traditional teacher education student, returning to college for her teaching certificate after 25 years in the business world. The other teacher, Katie, had been a traditional teacher education candidate. Katie had focused her preparation on secondary special education while Paula had prepared herself for elementary special education.

Teachers were selected because they both stated they taught a functional curriculum to students educated in a cross-categorical self-contained secondary program, the study’s target population. Both teachers and their schools were also located in the same county, which was an intentional decision to minimize factors related to county services as well as geographical variables. Finally, the schools were selected because they were comparable in characteristics and each teacher was the only teacher in the school teaching a self-contained classroom, which differed from the resource room program at each school.

**Students.** Seven of Katie’s 14 students participated in the study (i.e., observations, interviews, and file reviews): one senior, two juniors, two sophomores, and two freshmen. Three of the students were diagnosed as having a learning disability, two as having a cognitive impairment (mild), one as Autistically impaired, and one as otherwise health impaired. The average IQ across the participating students was 77.6. One of Katie’s students was female, the other six were male. Paula had eight of her nine students participate: one senior, three juniors, and four freshmen. Four of her students were female and four male. The average IQ of Paula’s students was 68.5, and her students’ were diagnosed as a learning disability (3), having mild mental impairment (3), moderate mental impairment (1) and emotional impairment (1). All students in both classes had utilized special education services since early elementary; the majority attended each district’s pre-primary program (PPI, now known as early childhood developmental delay program).

**Paraprofessionals.** Each school had two paraprofessionals that worked with students in the program, although they were not necessarily in the room simultaneously. In River Bend High School, one paraprofessional worked in the morning and the other worked in the afternoon. In the second school, Harborville, one paraprofessional was assigned to the program while the other was assigned to two students in the program with Autism and followed them into general education classes. Each program also had a transition/job coach that served all of the students.

**Setting**

Two high schools in the state of Michigan were utilized for this project. One high school, Harborville, had a student count of 622 and was located in a rural community. The school had a special education rate of 14.1% and 10.3% of its students were considered economically disadvantaged. The school was relatively racially and ethnically homogeneous (97.1% Caucasian) (Standard & Poor’s, 2004). Purposeful sampling was used to select the second school, a rural school within the same county that also utilized a functional curriculum within their high school self-contained cross-categorical program. River Bend High School had a student count of 807, 11.8% special education rate, and 16.9% of its population considered economically disadvantaged. It was also a relatively racially and ethnically homogeneous school district (96% Caucasian) (Standard & Poor’s).

**Procedure**

Data were collected through multiple means in an effort to triangulate (Stake, 1995). Classroom observations were performed and each site was observed for an entire school day two days a week for three months (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). A total of 85 hours was spent at Harborville and 70 hours spent at River Bend. During the classroom observations the researcher took fieldnotes and observed the events within the classroom. Decisions about what to observe and when were based on purposeful sampling (Patton, 1980), such that observations were selected to present the most likely opportunity to understand and gain insight into the case. For example, Fridays at River Bend were game or movie day. Thus, Friday was not selected as a consistent day to observe at River Bend High School. The researcher also worked with both teachers to...
avoid inservice days, exams, and other such events. In general, the researcher observed every part of the school day for the students involved when she was present, including classroom activities, lunch, community-based instruction, and work experiences.

In addition to classroom observations, document reviews were conducted. Students’ CA-60 files were analyzed. Data was gathered on students’ IQ, achievement test scores (reading and mathematics), disability classification, years in special education, age, and other pertinent information. Interviews were also conducted with the teachers, students, and paraprofessionals involved in the study. All were formally interviewed, in addition to informal conversations that occurred. Teachers were informally interviewed several times across the data collection period.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was followed in the teachers’ formal interview (protocol available upon request). It focused on curriculum choice and understanding how curriculum became enacted as well as factors influencing the curriculum. Students’ formal interviews addressed the curriculum in their classes and their ideal curriculum. Students were asked to respond to questions regarding their high school experience and what they were learning in the program (protocol available upon request). Paraprofessional formal interviews focused on the program and their perspectives (protocol available upon request). All interviews of participants were audiotaped, unless an individual requested that s/he not be recorded (1 student out of 15 requested as such). The interview questionnaires were designed by the researcher with feedback from colleagues and adjusted as needed during the research project.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was that of a participant-observer. At the beginning the researcher attempted to maintain more of an observer role. However, as observations continued the role shifted to more of a participant. At different times the researcher had to assist with instructional activities and intervene for behavioral reasons. The more active participation was at times sought by the teacher or students. It was also unsolicited as times, such as when student safety or the lack of instructional assistance to a struggling student necessitated involvement.

Data Analysis

Data (interviews, field notes, researcher reflection notes, and archival review notes) were read and re-read, and then parsed along the research question, specifically noting the nature of the influence of the pre-determined factors on the enactment of functional curriculum: policy/legislation, community, school, teachers, students, and curriculum materials. Next, data were parsed by patterns that emerged. Data that supported or challenged the factors was color-coded and/or highlighted in the hard-copy of the fieldnotes and then cut-and-pasted from the electronic version of the fieldnotes into a working document of patterns and emerging themes by factor.

Data analysis began by organizing the hard copy of the fieldnotes, researcher reflective notes, and interviews in chronological order by school site. The researcher then read each site’s hard-copy fieldnotes notebook and noted patterns and any potential additions or deletions from the pre-determined factors. This process was repeated several times, both condensing and expanding. Key and/or typical analytical vignettes were located within the data to support the assertions being made. Parsing the data by emerging patterns and factors occurred for each school site separately and then comparisons were made between the two sites. Overarching patterns were noted to cut across both field sites. The patterns under each major theme were then organized with the analytical vignettes as well as any negative case analysis. While both cases had the same overarching factors, they differed across the patterns.

Triangulation was sought among the multiple data sources (i.e., observation fieldnotes, researcher reflective notes, and interviews). Observations formed the main source of fieldnotes and interviews were used to support or challenge what was observed in the classrooms. Archival or document reviews were
also used to support and challenge the data from both observations and interviews.

**Results**

Results indicated the pre-determined categories of policy/legislation, community, school/school district, teachers, students, and curriculum materials affected the enactment. The data also indicated that another factor influenced enactment, yet was not originally hypothesized – paraprofessionals. This factor emerged from the data as patterns and themes were explored. Although the enactment of a functional curriculum in both secondary programs revealed that the hypothesized factors were influential, they were enacted in each program differently and had differential impact.

*Factors Influencing the Enactment of a Functional Curriculum*

**Policy/legislation factor.** Policy and legislation were found to affect the curriculum enactment in both programs. One of the most poignant illustrations involved student assessments. In Michigan students take the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP), the state’s general large scale assessment. Students in both programs qualified for one of Michigan’s alternate assessments, and took the one created for students with mild mental impairment or who functioned as such. This is in opposition to most other states in which alternate assessments have only been created for students with more severe impairments (see Alper & Mills, 2001; Kleinert & Thurlow, 2001).

Both teachers commented that their program planning needed to consider students’ participation in state assessments. Katie discussed reconsidering her functional mathematics class because fractions and graphs appeared on the alternate assessment but were absent from her math curriculum. Katie stated that the alternate assessment was “a lot more in-depth than the functional stuff I teach” (Interview, January 27, 2005). Katie felt some frustration towards the policymakers and the state department of education as she perceived them to devalue the functional nature of classrooms such as hers. She referenced her work with the state committee on creating this particular alternate assessment, saying “we tried to state the importance of what we do in the classroom at the meetings” (Interview, January 27, 2005). Paula also stressed the importance of state assessments, stating, “Oh yes...it is one of those things driving what I do” (Interview, March 15, 2005).

Yet, the teachers implemented their version of a functional curriculum without regard to policy or legislation, suggesting that perhaps the value of this factor was given more “lip-service” than the role it really played. For example, when both teachers were questioned about the alternate state standards the alternate assessments were designed to align with both admitted that they had not used them to guide their planning. In response to the question regarding alternate state standards, Paula stated that she did “not have time yet to align those with my curriculum” (Observation, January 24, 2005) and Katie did not even possess a copy.

**Community factor.** The community that both schools resided in provided influence over the enactment of a functional curriculum. One of the biggest influences was the location of the community (i.e., rural), and the school. The ruralness made transportation difficult and finding jobs for work experience more challenging. The lack of public transportation primarily limited students’ work-based experiences to in-school options. The teachers repeatedly commented on their frustration with the transportation and its role in their educational programming, stating “The hardest part is transportation...It is hard to get students to places for work...to walk takes a good chunk of time” (Interview, February 12, 2005) as well as “I think something that could make the class better is a large van or dial-a-ride. Transportation...Getting out into the community is one of the weakest areas of my program” (Interview, June 12, 2005).

At the same time, community-based instruction opportunities illustrated the tolerance and acceptance of the programs and students within the community. Katie’s program was involved in multiple community-based instruction (CBI) experiences including doing inventory at the local hardware store, cleaning at an assistive living home, and painting buildings.
for the city parks and recreation department. Marilyn, the school job coach, organized the CBI opportunities for the students. She discussed using a barter system to arrange these experiences, stating that knowing her personally and using the facilities was helpful in getting businesses to agree to CBI opportunities for the students. Community businesses appeared to feel a connection to program personnel and thus were more willing to provide the students work-based experiences.

School and school district factor. One of the major school factors impacting the enactment of a functional curriculum involved the school and its location within the community. Both schools were situated in a part of their rural communities that was away from the business district, making walking to work-based opportunities for students not possible. The location of the school also made it difficult to drive students to a work-based experience. Thus, most work-based experiences for the majority of students occurred within the physical confines of the school, such as working in the school store or being an apprentice to a custodian. Transportation was a large challenge, which Paula iterated in her statement “can’t get to downtown, get a good instructional work experience, and get back . . . in the middle of the day” (Interview, March 29, 2006).

Besides the school’s location, the physical location of each classroom was an issue. It affected students’ social behavior, particularly between classes. Katie’s classroom was located in the last hallway of the school, surrounded by other special education classrooms, which was significant since these rooms housed most of the other peers that the students in Katie’s program socialized with outside the self-contained program. In contrast, Paula’s program was surrounded by core content classrooms. The influence of the physical location of the classroom was evident in Paula’s program when the bell rang and she asked students to walk around the hallways. Her students preferred to stay within the classroom during break between classes. Paula had to instruct them every few classes to walk in the hallways, which was a signal to walk around, look peers in the eyes, and say hello. The resistance of Paula’s students stood in contrast to Katie’s students who practically bolted out the door when the bell rang and frequently stood around the door waiting for it to ring at the end of class.

The actual features of the classroom were also influential on the enactment of a functional curriculum. When Harborville High School expanded, Katie’s program was moved from a small room to one specifically designed for her program. The most important aspect of the room was the kitchen, which was equipped with a refrigerator, a stove, and a sink. Katie also purchased other important kitchen necessities, such as dishes, a Kitchen-aid, a griddle, and microwave. Having a kitchen enabled Katie and her students to enact daily living skills, such as cooking, within the confines of the classroom. At least once a week, the students cooked during their life skills class as well as other times for special occasions, such as a student or staff member’s birthday.

In contrast, Paula’s classroom was actually two small offices combined to make a room. Paula’s classroom did not have kitchen or laundry facilities, over which she lamented. Paula discussed that she “would love to have the physical room that home ec does,” and emphasized its laundry and kitchen spaces (Interview, March 15, 2005). Paula noted that she could use the facilities of the home economics room, but she had not done so because she felt that the room belonged to the home economics teacher saying, “It was her domain.” The importance Paula placed on these resources was evident when she discussed her ideal curriculum for her program, I would have to have a lot of equipment. The setting would take place in a mixture of reading center with couches and proper lighting, technology center where each student has access to user-friendly computers, and living center like a home economic room. Just like home would be and a shop, where we would be using hammers, nails, and wood. All in one place, we would have sewing machines, craft centers. That would be the setting and I could take it from there. Access to the community as well, with good transportation. And a job liaison to help me. I would teach what they need to know here. And I would say onsite learning lab, like school store (Interview, March 14, 2005).
Despite Paula’s description of an ideal curriculum, her students received little-to-no activities in daily living at school. Her life management class involved students reading a textbook, answering questions, and discussing topics, rather than the hands-on activities she talked about in interviews.

Data also revealed an association between each school’s philosophy and the enactment of a functional curriculum. Yet, it was not the schools’ explicit philosophies “to make lifelong learners out of these kids and have them participating in the community” (Interview, March 15, 2005) and “safety and the importance to learn something new each day and to strive to better yourself everyday” (Interview, June 14, 2005) that were as relevant as the schools’ implicit philosophies.

At Paula’s school, the office often asked her students to do things that were not asked of other students. One day the office called and asked Paula if her students could stuff and address envelopes the next day. Paula agreed to the request, but expressed distress in her comment, “so much for my lesson plans tomorrow” (Fieldnotes, January 28, 2005). In another instance, the principal stopped by Paula’s classroom and asked if her students would clean the outside of the school that day. Even though Paula felt that there was some educational value to this activity in terms of work experience, as she designed it so students had a supervisor and were rewarded for hard work, she still felt trapped into doing this activity when asked by the principal, saying, “how could I say no to the principal, my boss?” (Fieldnotes, March 28, 2005). Paula’s interpretation of this situation was evident when a student questioned the request and she clarified why her students take time out of their school day to clean the school.

Why we do it is that we have pride in our school. Second reason is that it helps our school look nice and helps our custodians. And in this class, like Mrs. Murphy’s class [middle school cross-categorical program teacher] we have more freedom. When the principal asks us to do something, he looks for someone in the school who can get the job done (Fieldnotes, March 28, 2005).

Paula continued to explain to her students why they picked up trash outside the school. We stop what we are doing and go do that. You might think golly the other kids don’t do this. But it gets hot in the school and they are sitting there doing their homework. And if you find money, you get to keep it (Fieldnotes, March 28, 2005).

Although office personnel did not ask Katie’s students to engage in work around the school, other school personnel interrupted Katie’s program and had students participate in non-classroom work. Marilyn, the school job coach, asked Katie’s students to stuff registration bags for a community 5K. Marilyn requested and Katie agreed that her students would take time from classroom activities to stuff the bags with running information and free objects. Katie set aside time in two of her classes and indicated that if there was still a lot to do her students could start first hour and continue throughout the class periods until they were completed.

Teacher factor. Although it seems intuitive that teachers affected the enactment of a functional curriculum, it is the intricacies of the teacher factor that are worth discussing. Teachers were influential in terms of their histories, preparation, beliefs and philosophies, and expectations for students. Both teachers had created their programs. Paula started at River Bend five years ago, the year the program was started at the high school. She was given relative freedom over the curriculum to choose the classes that were included in her program and the content that would go into those classes. Katie assumed the role of the cross-categorical program teacher at Harborville the year after the program was started. However, the first teacher had done little to establish the program and Katie was able to choose the curriculum. Yet, she had restrictions on her curriculum in that it was supposed to align with the state’s general education benchmarks and guidelines.

Teachers’ pre-service preparation was influential. Both teachers attended the same mid-sized teacher preparation university about four years apart, yet, they had different teacher preparation experiences. Katie focused her preparation on secondary education, with a plan to teach at the high school level. Her field experiences occurred in high school programs, both resource and categori-
cal. She also took a long term subbing position at a nearby high school in a categorical program before she started teaching at Harborville. Paula, who returned to get her bachelor’s degree in education following 25 years in the business world, planned on working in an elementary resource room program and her pre-service teacher preparation reflected this goal. Yet, she ended up working in a high school resource room for her first job. Although Paula referred to her high schoolers as, “not scary . . . same needs, just taller,” she seemed to sometimes struggle with the fact that her students were in high school with adolescent issues, needs, and desires (Interview, March 15, 2005). Paula’s elementary background filtered into the classroom. She had a tendency to enact more traditional “elementary activities” and treat her students in a younger fashion. For example, on Valentine’s Day she brought in a Valentine’s Day cake, Valentine’s Day pencils, and had her students engage in Valentine’s Day activities, including estimating the number of candy hearts in a jar and a Valentine’s Day word search. Paula indicated that she had not used these activities since her elementary field placement. Her students acknowledged her predisposition towards elementary as well, remarking to her and the researcher on numerous occasions “we aren’t in kindergarten” or other similar statements.

Teachers’ beliefs and philosophies, both explicit and implicit, were influential. Katie articulated her philosophy as giving “students an opportunity to find something they can relate to and to teach them the basics of respect. Having respect for others is probably one of the most important things for me” (Interview, June 14, 2005). However, Katie’s implicit philosophy involved a strong devotion to preparing students to be employable and to have success post-school in terms of employment and independent living. For example, Katie indicated that cooking was one of the most important curricular components for students, along with budgeting and basic reading for job applications, descriptions, and directions.

Katie expected most of her students to seek employment after they graduated and that became a focus of the program. She discussed getting students out into the community, allowing them to see job opportunities, and helping them figure out what they might like to do. She expected that the vast majority of her students could hold down jobs, stating “. . . maybe a little different, but all can work at something.” Katie believed her students could be successful in life, yet she knew her students would always carry a label with them, commenting “stereotypes will always be there. These kids will always be that special education kid” (Interview, June 14, 2005).

Paula stated that her philosophy was simple, “to help students reach their goals and make decisions” (Interview, March 15, 2005). Yet, she exhibited low expectations of some of her students. Paula stated that her students were, “really low functioning” and implied that some would not live independently. Similarly, she indicated that she felt all her students would qualify for one of two after-high school programs organized for the local districts through the county intermediate school system. These programs were designed for students with moderate and severe disabilities who were in need of additional life skills for a greater chance of success post-school. Paula also expressed doubts about her students’ performance on the alternate assessment designed for students with mild mental impairment, fearing it would be too difficult for her students; yet the majority of them were students with learning disabilities or mild mental impairment.

Paraprofessional factors. Although not originally hypothesized as being a factor, paraprofessionals were found to influence the enactment of a functional curriculum. At times the paraprofessionals acted as teachers and created activities, and at other times their roles were more of an “aide,” where they performed duties such as making photocopies. The confusion over the role was evident in the discourse. One day Paula told one of her paraprofessionals, “You are a teacher. You are one of us” (Fieldnotes, February 15, 2005). Yet the paraprofessionals did not always see it that way. One commented that she lacked power in the classroom, stating, “I am just a parapro” (Fieldnotes, February 25, 2005). She indicated that she lacked power because she was not making decisions and she did not agree with decisions made.
The paraprofessionals at Harborville, Whitney and Brenda, positively affected the enactment of curriculum in Harborville as they assisted in the construction of curriculum within the program. This occurred when Katie was present and when she was absent, as evident in the following vignette.

It is third hour. Katie is not in the class. She is at an IEP, which started during 1st hour. The students have entered the classroom and the bell has rung. The students are sitting and standing around talking. Brenda and Whitney are standing around as well. Katie has not left anything for lesson plans for third hour as she thought she would be back from the IEP. Whitney speaks up. She tells the students to get a newspaper, pick an article, read it, write at least four sentences on it, and be prepared to read what they wrote in front of the class. The students grab a newspaper and start to work (Fieldnotes, February 14, 2005).

Whitney constructed the curriculum when Katie was absent and no curriculum was prearranged. When Katie returned to the class, she saw the directions and told the students they needed to be prepared to share their article with the class; thus, supporting the curriculum enacted by Whitney.

However, at other times, the paraprofessionals gave students misleading, incorrect, or biased information when constructing or assisting in the construction of the curriculum, such as telling students the Geneva Convention did not apply to Iraqi insurgents, another time stating that people in India and China ate food made from blood, and often shutting down student comments that differed from their own beliefs.

The paraprofessionals in Paula’s program were assigned to be with students in general education classes and/or to help students in Paula’s room. Paula described their role as, “to be the students’ aide in general education classes, but when in my room, it is to help the students in here” (Interview, March 15, 2005). At times, they were also responsible for leading instruction. This allowed Paula to do other things, such as grade or talk with an individual student. For example, Laura frequently led instruction in Paula’s history class. Paula would typically tell Laura what she wanted and Laura would enact the curriculum, while Paula graded student work.

**Student factor.** The impact of the students on the enactment of the curriculum was commented on by the teachers. Paula stated, “Everything I do [in my program] is driven by them [the students]” (Interview, February 22, 2005). Students’ personal and school histories influenced curriculum enactment and were largely tied to being in special education. Students may have been in general education classes in elementary school, but they were placed in pull-out programs by middle school; and these experiences in middle school impacted what took place in high school. Katie, her students, and other school personnel shared that students were asked to do little in the self-contained middle school program in the Harborville District. Thus, when the students came to high school they had little motivation, which she saw as one of the largest impediments to the positive enactment of a functional curriculum. For example, Adam stated that “high school is better than middle school, there are more opportunities” (Interview, February 4, 2005). Sara echoed similar sentiments, saying that middle school did not help her as all they did was play games and she was not happy nor did she learn anything. Brenda, a paraprofessional, supported the students’ beliefs regarding the middle school program and its impact on the high school program, stating, “Forget that they are ruining these kids during the middle school year. The kids hate school over there because they don’t do anything” (Interview, February 24, 2005).

Paula also expressed frustration over her students’ middle school experiences and the impact of the program on her own cross-categorical program. Her frustration existed with the teacher. Paula explained that once she selected curriculum materials (i.e., textbooks), the middle school teacher selected the same textbooks. She felt that this negatively affected her curriculum and program as students would be forced to possibly learn the same material twice.

Students’ personal histories were also important. Many students came from single parent homes, lived with other family members or in foster care. Katie described how some of her students could be successful if they were
able to break away from their families, that some of her students were the glue that held their families together and that they might forever need to come home and “bail them out.” Yet, other students were held back from independence out of their parents’ fear that they might then leave them. Katie implied that she incorporated independent skills into her curriculum through her use of budgeting and daily living skills. Katie felt that her students had a lot of family issues that needed resolving and the assistance a school social worker could provide an important part of curriculum enactment.

Students’ certification or level of functioning was also influential. Both teachers spoke of their students’ functioning levels with regards to academic abilities and skills. Paula indicated that her current students were at higher levels than her past students, that her previous students had lower reading abilities and were generally lower in cognitive ability. As a result of her perception that this group of students had “higher abilities,” Paula contemplated adding some different (and new) things to her program. Katie commented on the opposite, as she felt her current students were at a lower ability level that her previous groups, and that their behavior was worse. Katie stated that, “when you have more behavior problems and self-esteem issues, it impacts it [curriculum enactment]. It absorbs more of your time.” Katie also mentioned that her current group of students had less interest in cooking, so they did not do it as much because the students complained and generally seemed not to get much out of the experience.

Curriculum materials factor. Neither program employed a commercially-available a functional curriculum model, but instead the teachers created theirs through a piece-meal approach. The motto was to use whatever was available and “be flexible.” As a result of Katie’s and Paula’s “piece-mealing,” their functional curriculum consisted of purchased materials, borrowed materials, created materials and photocopied materials. Many of Katie’s materials were photocopies of workbooks, novels, and other materials. She explained that photocopies were used because she did not have resources to secure curriculum materials. The program was given $800 when it was started and it had not received any additional funding. To purchase any additional materials, such as kitchen equipment, novels, and workbooks, Katie used money made from the school store that her class ran.

Paula explained that the curriculum materials in her program were “piece-mealed” because of a lack of appropriate materials available for her cross-categorical program. Paula expressed frustration because the reading level of materials was often above those of her students, stating “most stuff is designed for students with learning disabilities. Their reading levels [her students] are low, as low as 2.3, but generally between 3 and 4” (Fieldnotes, January 28, 2005). She indicated that the special education director at her district encouraged the use of research-based materials, which she could not find any for the population she taught. The lack of an appropriate functional curriculum was supported by the researcher’s review of functional curricula models. Despite that many exist, few were designed for this population – students with mild mental impairment and learning disabilities. Most models were designed for students with moderate or severe mental impairment, such as The Syracuse community-referenced guide and Impact: A functional curriculum handbook (Ford et al. 1989; Neel & Billingsley, 1989). Ones that focused on students with high incidence disabilities were designed as workbooks that students filled out rather than providing application of functional curricula components, such as Life skills activities for secondary students with special needs (Mannix, 1995).

When Katie started teaching in the program, she found the Life Centered Career Education (Brolin, 1997) as the only formal model available. She referred to the curriculum that she developed and enacted in terms of “taking different things and piecing them together” (Interview, January 27, 2005). Katie talked about the varying abilities of students in her room and that a range of curricular materials would be helpful because students come in at different levels and have different interests. The lack of a “formal” curriculum model in Katie’s program was noted by the paraprofessional Brenda, “I don’t understand what the
The nature of the impact of factors on the enactment of a functional curriculum in these two cross-categorical self-contained special education programs could be discussed as a conjuncted process. It was the intersection and union of the seven factors that created the enacted curriculum, illustrated graphically in Figure 2. It was not one factor, or even all factors working singularly, but the union and intersection of the different factors that enacted the functional curriculum in both programs, for better or worse. Both Katie and Paula would likely have enacted different versions of a functional curriculum if factors had been different.

This study raises concerns about use of functional curricula in light of current federal policy and legislation. The teachers involved in this study referenced the increasing role of policy and legislation with respect to their functional curriculum enactment, particularly citing the pressure towards academics and increased rigor. Yet these teachers were in a unique position in that Michigan is one of the few states that has more than one alternate assessment, and one created specifically for students with mild mental impairment or those who functional as such (i.e., students educated in self-contained cross-categorical programs). The state test supposedly focused on functional independence; yet, these two teachers were still concerned and commented how they felt the alternate assessments did not truly value the functional curriculum their students were receiving.

The question of using a functional curriculum may be a bigger issue in other states. If states do not have alternate assessments designed for this population than most likely the students would be tested using the general large scale state assessment. For students in these programs, whose average grade level equivalency in reading was 3.3 and in math was 3.6, it would mean taking an assessment at least six years developmentally ahead of their learning. Unfortunately, although a functional curriculum holds much potential for educating secondary students with disabilities and preparing them for post-school success, it is not designed to close a learning gap this large and thus is not likely to be supported as a curriculum option in today’s push towards passing state tests. Teachers and schools are being forced to decide if they will educate their students with a functional curriculum to prepare them for daily living, work, and independent living after school or if they will prepare them to hopefully, somehow, pass a general large-scale state assessment.

Regardless if states have one test for all students or alternate assessment for special needs students, all special education teachers will be faced with the challenge of teaching to the test. Teaching to the test has been cited as negatively affecting students’ education. Peha (2005) stated that teaching to the test resulted in less teaching to students and less real learning. If teachers like Katie and Paula feel pressure to have their students pass the alternate assessment, or the general large-scale state as-
essment, and alter their curriculum to focus more on teaching to the test, one has to question what will be cut from the curriculum. Perhaps the curriculum will have less focus on functional skills, such as daily living and social skills as, for example, Michigan’s alternate assessment focuses on mathematics, literacy, and vocational skills. What about the authentic activities within and outside of school that have benefited these students? Unless high stake assessments are expansive enough to capture many of the performative experiences students should engage in, there is a risk that these could be dropped from the curriculum, further narrowing what counts as valued learning and a narrowed focus on curriculum that disperses information which can be measured on paper and pencil tests, and usually multiple choice tests at that.

The seven factors identified in this study as influencing curricula enactment may be more pronounced in special education than general education, as general education teachers typically use a formal, commercially-available curriculum, published by the likes of Prentice Hall, Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, and Houghton-Mifflin. Special education is more acurricular, particularly so for the population of students with high incidence disabilities educated in a self-contained cross-categorical program, environments where debates occur over what curriculum is most appropriate.

The lack of a formal commercially-available curriculum model may be the very reason that the identified factors were so pronounced in the enactment of a functional curriculum for the students in this study. The few models that exist for students with high incidence disabilities educated in a self-contained cross-categorical program, environments where debates occur over what curriculum is most appropriate.

The influence of the factors on the enactment was evident through the impact that school and community resources played. For example, a component of a functional curriculum can be learning to use multiple forms of transportation, yet public transportation is often nonexistent in rural settings, such as the two schools in this research. Similarly, a functional curriculum typically involves a community access and/or skills component, which can be achieved through community-based instruction. However, utilization of community-based instruction (CBI) opportunities requires businesses or agencies in which to conduct the CBI, as well as transportation to and from the site. A rural setting with few transportation options and few businesses further exasperates the situation, leading to experiences being restricted to the school. This is what happened in Katie’s and Paula’s program, where much of the students’ work experience was gained in-school through working at the school store or cleaning the school.

Along similar lines, both teachers’ educational programming was influenced by the resources available in the schools, particularly resources that supported the teaching of functional curricula components. The resources (or lack of) within a school, such as materials and equipment necessary for engaging in daily living skills and/or vocational education, raises questions about the ability to adequately provide this curriculum. How can teachers tell parents, students, and other educators they are providing a functional curriculum if they lack in-school (i.e., a kitchen) and out-of-school (i.e., work experiences, CBI) resources to satisfactorily deliver the curriculum? Just as teachers and parents expect, and demand, the appropriate resources be made available for students to learn mathematics, economics, and physics, so should the necessary resources be available to enact a functional curriculum. This consideration, along with other data from the study, suggests that a functional curriculum is viewed as an inferior approach.

The education and/or curriculum occurring in these programs were not being valued. In fact the education these students received was devalued, as school personnel placed tasks such as cleaning and stuffing envelopes or bags before the intended curriculum. Students who are educated in self-contained cross-categorical programs have just as much right to learn, and to learn what is appropriate and what will benefit them in terms of post-school outcomes. Although the activities school personnel asked the students to do (i.e., stuffing envelopes, cleaning the school, stuffing bags) might have had some connection to vocational experiences and other
learning opportunities relevant to a functional curriculum, they were not designed in this capacity. Instead these activities were used to assist staff or serve as time-fillers. Rather than demonstrating the many functional curriculum learning opportunities that could occur naturally within a school, the data suggested that these students, their educational programming, and their learning were valued less than others.

The lack of formal curriculum materials further suggests that perhaps a comprehensive, flexible, balanced functional curriculum heuristic needs to be developed for the population within these programs. The words of a paraprofessionals working in one of these programs summarized it best when it came to the enacted curriculum, “I don’t understand what the curriculum is . . .”. A proposed balanced, yet flexible, functional curriculum heuristic would include utilization of different learning theories and pedagogical approaches (i.e., skills, cognitive apprenticeship, modeling, social mediation direct instruction, etc.). It would attempt to balance the various components of a functional curriculum (e.g., functional academics, community access, daily living skills, financial, transportation, leisure and recreation, communication, self-determination, social skills, vocational education, independent living skills) as well as direct skills instruction with a cognitive apprenticeship, students as consumers with students as producers, and individualization with community.

A balanced approach to a functional curriculum would resemble a balanced literacy approach (see Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003), moving on a continuum, with shifting emphasis from “learning to function” (i.e., performance) to “functioning to learn” (i.e., cognitive apprenticeship), which is represented graphically in Figure 3. The balanced approach distributes expertise across multiple individuals and activities, to avoid self-contained cross-categorical teachers having to be all. Although a balanced a functional curriculum heuristic is suggested, it must be flexible enough to address various factors. This heuristic must be flexible to work within the confines of various community and school variables as well as fluid enough to address what students bring to the program and how the composition of students will impact the enactment and curricular decision-making.

Although the data analysis was approached with an apriori lens in terms of factors, because the researcher approached it with an open mind and looked for evidence to support and challenge these factors, another factor was found – paraprofessionals. It is likely that the role of paraprofessionals was not acknowledged because the limited literature on factors influencing an enacted curriculum came from general education, in which paraprofessionals play less of a role, if present at all. Paraprofessionals added benefits and limitations to the enactment of a functional curriculum. One major challenge for paraprofessionals involved confusion over their role. At times they were treated and given privileges as a teacher and at times that of a secretary or assistant, and these two distinct roles hold implications for the education of students.

One major contention when discussing paraprofessionals and their impact involves the fact that they are often instructing or teaching some of the most vulnerable students in schools. Research has suggested that some paraprofessionals spend almost 50% of their time providing individual instruction to students without a teacher present (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001). Some students have been found to receive as much of 80% of their instruction from a paraprofessional, rather than a certified teacher (Ashbaker & Morgan). Thus, our students who may be most in need of a highly "qualified" teacher’s assistance are furthest away (i.e., secondary students educated in self-contained cross-categorical programs) and being educated by paraprofessionals – individuals who may not have a college degree and potentially little training in teaching or working with children.
Limitations

This study presented several limitations. One limitation involved the cases, as the study consisted of two programs, and hence generalizability is limited. Another limitation is that the two cases were observed for a bounded period of time, although the data did become saturated prior to ending observations. Additionally, the cases were not observed for the same amount of time. More hours of observation were recorded at Harborville High School in Katie’s program than at River Bend High School in Paula’s room. This resulted from the teacher at River Bend getting sick, the school having snow days, and students being away on field trips.

Limitations also arose in the data collection. Not every student in both programs returned approved parental consent forms, and/or gave student assent. The enactment of a functional curriculum in the programs was left to be understood by only those students for whom consent was granted. Little is known regarding the students for whom consent was not obtained, in terms of their personal and school data as well as their perspective of the enactment of a functional curriculum. A limitation also existed with the student interviews. Some students had difficulty understanding some of the interview questions. Even when students appeared to understand the questions, their responses consisted of a few words rather than expansion of their thoughts.

Future Directions

Research needs to continue to explore not only the relationship between factors and a functional curriculum, but between factors and the influence of curriculum in special education in general. The field needs to better understand what is occurring curriculum-wise in its service-delivery options as well as what factors are affecting the enactment. Future research should examine the enactment of a functional curriculum given other factors, such as urban or suburban self-contained cross-categorical programs. It should also examine the enactment with other types of service delivery models, such as resource rooms and general education classes, if applicable. As this study was limited to functional curriculum models that were “piece-mealed” by the teachers, as opposed to formal commercially available functional curricula, research needs to be undertaken to understand the enactment of commercially available functional curricula as well.

Exploring the enactment with different teacher characteristics may also lead to understanding. The role of teacher preparation on the enactment was under-explored in this study and additional research is needed regarding the impact of preservice education and experience on inservice actions and decisions. Variations in others factors should also be analyzed, such as studying enactment across categorical versus cross-categorical programs or the influence of the lack of paraprofessionals. Given the factors that were found to be influential in this study, the next step is to manipulate the factors and study the relationship between the intersection and union of the various factors and students’ in-school and post-school success, such as employment, independent living, and life satisfaction.

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