Abstract: Curriculum content is an essential component of the field of special education for students with moderate and severe disabilities. This study updates the twenty-year curriculum content review by Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, and Shrikanth (1997) and provides an overview of the last 15 years of research on this topic. A hand search of ten relevant journals within the field was conducted to identify and categorize the research on curriculum content for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Results indicate a very low percentage of the research literature focused on curriculum content for this population. Curricular articles published in the past fifteen years primarily focused on functional life skills, with a recent increase in cognitive academics. The articles consist mainly of quantitative methods and non-data based studies. Over half did not clearly list the educational context of focus. Implications of these findings for the education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disability and directions for future research are discussed.

Curriculum has been described as the content of instruction (Williams, Brown, & Certo, 1975) as well as a "defined course of study" (Browder, 2001, p. 2). Curriculum, a foundational component of education, can be simply referred to as the “what” of teaching or the knowledge and concepts driving pedagogy and assessment in instruction. However, curriculum in public education does not exist absent of controversy (Giroux, 1994). Discussion of curriculum can lend itself to conversation on the intent of education (e.g., job creation, citizenship; see Beane, 1998) or the role of science as a knowledge base (e.g., evolution, climate change; see Aguillard, 1999). Curricular research has played a significant role in the identity and continual formation of the field of special education for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability (Dymond & Orelove, 2001; Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, & Shrikanth, 1997).

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Curriculum in the Research Literature

Dymond and Orelove (2001) summarized the history of special education for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. The curricular content of the 1970’s was dominated by the idea of developmental stages followed by an emphasis in the mid 1970’s toward functional life skills and the criterion of ultimate functioning (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976). In the 1980’s an ecological approach to curricular content (Brown et al., 1979) dominated the research literature followed by an emphasis on social inclusion as a curricular element. More recently, concepts such as self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001) and emphasis on the adoption of the general education curriculum (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Browder et al., 2007; Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005) have guided the research and services for this population of students.

During this time, Nietupski et al. (1997) completed a review of the literature on curricular content for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Nietupski et al. presented the trends in curricular research in terms of quantity, focus, and research methodology. The authors reported a low and declining number of curricular-focused articles over the twenty-year span of 1976–1996. Their
results in terms of research focus coincided with the curricular practice timeline presented by Dymond and Orelove: nearly half (44%) of the curricular articles during the time frame focused on functional life skills content. However, research on inclusive practices experienced an increase from the beginning to the end of the twenty-year span, and by the end functional life skills and inclusion were the primary topics of curricular content. In terms of methodology, the researchers found quantitative methods and non-data based studies dominated the curricular literature of the time with very little examples of qualitative methodology. From the beginning (1976–1980) to the end (1991–1995) of the study, quantitative methodology increased from 48% to 69% and non-data based (i.e. position papers, theoretical papers, and program descriptions) literature experienced a significant decline from 52% to 27%. The review by Nietupski et al (1997) highlighted the future directions and needs within curricular research, namely greater emphasis on overall content in the research, more variety in research methodology, and an increase in research incorporating multiple skills together.

Legislative Influence on Curricular Research

Curriculum does not exist in a vacuum—even for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability (Bouck 2008; Milner, 2003). Aside from shifting philosophies, curriculum, practice, and research are influenced by a range of factors including federal legislation (i.e., The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004). IDEA (2004, § 601 [c] [5] [A]) required that students eligible for special education services “have access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible, in order to meet developmental goals.” The intention of access to the general education curriculum, although questioned by some (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011), was to facilitate high expectations for students with disabilities and help elevate the poor post-school outcomes of students, including those with the most severe intellectual disability (IDEA, 2004). Despite dispute of the terms or conditions of sufficient access (Halle & Dymond, 2008) and what constitutes the general education curriculum (Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006), an abundance of research is focused on providing general curriculum access for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability (Agran et al., 2002; Browder et al., 2007; Cushing et al., 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Spooner et al., 2006; Wehmeyer, Lattin, & Agran, 2001). Within the shifting philosophy in the field and legislation is the mounting tension between an emphasis on curricular content from the general education curriculum and that of functional life skills (Alwell & Cobb, 2009; Ayres et al., 2011; Spooner et al., 2006). The evident division draws attention to the potential for an emphasis on academic content to overshadow functional life skills and vice versa (Ayres et al., 2011).

Regardless of the debate or its outcome, curricular research related to the education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disability is important and needed. First and foremost, curricular research guides practice—or in other words, the education which students with moderate and severe intellectual disability receive (Browder, 2001). The curriculum students are provided can impact their assessment in school as well as post school outcomes school (e.g., access to vocational experiences and skill development, skills in independent living; Ayres et al., 2011; Browder, 2001; Downing, 2006; Kearns et al., 2010; Kleinert, Browder, & Towles-Reeves, 2009). Further, curriculum can and should impact teacher preparation (Browder, 1997, Ryndak, Clark, Conroy, & Stuart, 2001). Hence, there is a significant value in having a pulse on curriculum related literature for this population.

In light of the significance of the findings from the past review (Nietupski et al., 1997), current legislation (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002) affecting special education, as well as the current tensions in direction of curricular content for this population (Ayres et al., 2011), an updated review of the recent trends in curricular research is in order. The purpose of this systematic review is to examine the last fifteen years of curricular research for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Specific questions in the present investigation included: (a) how was curricular research represented in the overall research of the ten key
journals?, (b) what was the curricular foci of the past fifteen years?, (c) what methods were used to conduct curricular research?, and (d) which educational environments were highlighted in the curricular research?

**Method**

Using ten key journals significant to the field, this systematic review applied a structured approach to identify and describe the research literature relative to curriculum content for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Each journal was examined for articles with a focus on curricular content for this population of students. The identified articles where then systematically categorized by focus, research methodology, and context and finally checked for inter-rater reliability.

**Journals Reviewed**

Journals were selected for their emphasis on special education and inclusion of research specifically related to students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. All journals are referred to by their current title as of 2011. All issues under previous names are implied by the use of the current journal title. The six journals reviewed by Nietupski et al. (1997) were retained in this present study due to their continued applicability within the field of special education for this population: *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Teaching Exceptional Children, The Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, and The Journal of Special Education*. Four additional journals were included in this review to reflect the breadth of research for this population in broadly focused special education journals (i.e., *Exceptional Children and Remedial and Special Education*) and specific disability-focused journals including students with intellectual disability (i.e., *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities and Research in Developmental Disabilities*).

**Procedure**

Each journal was reviewed over the 15-year time span of 1996 through 2010. Specifically, each article within each issue of each journal was screened against the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To do so, the first author read each article’s abstract for meeting the inclusion criteria, and, if necessary, the entire text to make a determination. To assure adherence to the criteria, inter-rater reliability was conducted with regards to the inclusion of articles.

Articles were excluded if they were (a) an editorial, reader comment, introduction to special topics, annotated bibliography, interview, or special feature on a historical figure or (b) primarily focused on behavior management or intervention, pedagogy, or technology applications. Articles were included if they (a) focused on enhancing skills or participation; (b) included at least one individual or a population with moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disability by described by name or IQ score (below 55), regardless of a co-occurring diagnoses; (c) included at least one individual or a population between the age of 3–22; (d) used or focused on school or school-based community settings within the United States; and (e) the location of the research or practice occurred within a U.S. school-based setting.

**Categorization**

Following identification as curricular articles, 25% of the curricular articles were categorized individually by both authors in terms of primary focus, research methodology employed, and curricular context used or focused on. Disagreements in this test of categorization led the authors to further clarify the distinctive labels within each category (e.g., specific definitions for functional life skills, or the general education context). These refined categorization labels were then used to categorize all included curricular articles by primary focus, research method, and context.

**Curricular Focus**

Seven categories existed for curricular focus. Six were retained from the previous review (Nietupski et al., 1997): *functional life skills, interactions, communication, sensorimotor, cognitive-academic, and other*. The present study in-
cluded the category **mixed** to classify curricular articles that presented an equal combination of two or more of the original six categories.

**Functional life skills.** A curricular focus of functional life skills represented articles addressing “the variety of skills that are frequently demanded in natural domestic, vocational, and community environments” (Brown et al., 1979, p. 83). Brown et al. further defined functional life skills as age appropriate, meaning activities typically performed by an individual’s same-age peers without disabilities. Included within this category was content addressing domestic or self-help, community, vocational preparation and training, and recreation and leisure skills (Brown et al.). Studies in this category also included those related to instruction in self-determination (e.g., Wehmeyer, Garner, Yeager, & Lawrence, 2006), choice making (e.g., Guess, Benson, & Siegel-Causey, 1995), and health and safety (e.g., Madaus et al., 2010) due to their impact on functioning in everyday life.

**Interactions.** Articles in this category exhibited a clear focus on curricular activities specifically intended to increase or enhance interactions of individuals with moderate or severe intellectual disability with their peers without disabilities. Included articles focused on specific skills and issues regarding the content of instruction for including students in classroom, school, or community settings.

**Communication.** The primary emphasis of articles deemed communication-focused was student expression. Specifically, the category of communication represented content in expressive and receptive communication as well as augmentative and alternative communication.

**Sensorimotor.** Sensorimotor refers to developmental skills involving one or more senses (e.g., vision or ambulation; Nietupski et al., 1997). Articles were included within this area when the primary focus was on building or maintaining sensorimotor skills alone and not on sensorimotor skills as a means to achieve an end, such as learning to move ones hand in order to make a choice (i.e., this example would instead be described as a functional life skill).

**Cognitive-Academic.** Articles deemed cognitive or academic in nature included a focus on cognitive development or traditional academic subjects (i.e., mathematics, science, reading, social studies, writing, and spelling). Included within this category were articles focused on general academic standards, pre-academic skills, or specific general curriculum content related skills.

**Mixed.** Mixed articles represented those decidedly split between two or more of the topics listed above. One example included a study on curricular content taught in a personnel preparation program for pre-service teachers of students with severe disabilities, including a range of topics (i.e., self-care skills, reading, and social skills; Agran & Alper, 2000).

**Other.** Articles that met the criteria for inclusion yet did not clearly fit into any of the categories listed above were grouped as **other**. For example, Ault’s (2010) review of the literature on religion in special education and transition planning was included within this category.

### Methodology

Classification of articles by research methodology was also used to describe the curricular literature. Five classifications were used to categorize the methodologies: quantitative, qualitative, and non-data based—as in the initial review (Nietupski et al., 1997); two additional classifications were added—**literature review** and **mixed methods**. Quantitative studies included those with single subject, group comparison, meta- or other statistical analyses designs. Qualitative research was comprised of studies under the qualitative umbrella such as case studies and ethnographies (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Non-data based studies included position papers, theoretical papers, and program descriptions. The literature review category was created to group studies from the quantitative and non-data based categories with a shared primary focus on reviewing the previous literature and reporting those findings. These articles were described as having a central focus on discussion or summary of a compilation of previous research on the topic. The mixed methods category included those articles with a clear mix of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, such as
Browder et al.’s content analysis of alternate assessments (2003).

Context. Context was used to categorize curricular articles through a focus on the environment utilized in a research study or the context highlighted in a non-data based article. Seven location categories were used to discriminate studies: general education, special education, community, special school, mixed, other, and unspecified. General education included the classroom or other areas within a school not primarily occupied by students with disabilities (e.g. general education classroom, cafeteria, playground). The special education context referred to settings occupied solely or primarily by students with disabilities (e.g., segregated special education classroom, speech therapy room). Community represented school-sponsored settings apart from school grounds (e.g., grocery store, restaurant). The special school context was used to describe schools that serve only students with disabilities. Mixed contexts referred to articles conducted at or focused on two or more settings. Other included contexts not listed above, such as one article conducted in a laboratory setting (Fidler, Most, & Guiberson, 2005). “Unspecified” signified research or non-data based articles that did not clearly state the location of the investigation or contextual focus.

Reliability

Data from both the inclusion search and categorization was initially coded by the first author and checked for reliability by the second. Inter-rater reliability was conducted for 25% of the 5,812 articles for inclusion (n = 1,454) and 29% of the 134 (n = 39) included curricular articles. Reliability was calculated by dividing the sum of agreements by the sum of the agreements plus disagreements, multiplied by 100. Reliability for inclusion criteria among raters was 97% with a range of 91%–100% among the ten journals. Within the curricular categorization of articles, data indicated 85% reliability for both focus and methodology and 69% reliability for context. Specific details and implications of the low context reliability are provided in the discussion section.

Results

A total of 5,812 articles represent the 15-year span of research from the ten selected journals. Results are reported both as an overall representation of the fifteen years and also summarized in three five-year spans (1996–2000, 2001–2005, and 2006–2010) to illustrate the trends in the research, as well as to maintain consistency with Nietupski et al.’s (1997) original review.

Inclusion

Of the 5,812 articles searched, 2% (n = 134) were found to have a curricular focus. Table 1 provides a depiction of the distribution of curricular articles among selected journals. Within the five-year spans, the percentage of curricular articles ranged from 2% (n = 48) of the 1,941 published articles in 1996–2000 to 3% (n = 47) of the 2,067 articles published in 2001–2005 and back to 2% (n = 39) of the 1,804 published articles in 2006–2010. Over the three five-year spans, the curricular research identified among the journals declined. In the initial span, 1996–2000, 48 articles were identified as primarily curricular, which accounts for 36% of the curricular articles over the fifteen years. The following span, 2001–2005, produced 47 articles (35%
of the included literature), followed by 39 in the final span of 2006–2010 (29% of the included literature). Curricular research experienced a 19% reduction in quantity from the first to the last five-year span. On average, the ten journals yielded 9.6 curricular articles per year in the first span (1996–2000), followed by 9.4 (2001–2005), and 7.8 per year in the final span (2006–2010), for a fifteen-year average of 8.9 articles per year.

The highest percentage of curricular articles per total published articles over the fifteen-year span were found in the journals Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities (6% of the published articles, \( n = 23 \)), Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities (5% of the published articles, \( n = 28 \)), and Exceptional Children (4% of the published articles, \( n = 15 \)). Over half (56%, \( n = 74 \)) of the curricular articles identified from all published articles (\( n = 134 \)) came from the three journals: Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities (21% of the curricular articles, \( n = 28 \)), Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities (17% of the curricular articles, \( n = 23 \)), and Teaching Exceptional Children (17% of the curricular articles, \( n = 23 \)). The remaining 44% (\( n = 60 \)) of curricular articles came from the other seven journals included in the search.

Categorization

Focus. Nearly half of all identified curricular articles (43%, \( n = 58 \)) were focused primarily on functional life skills (see Figure 1 for a graphical representation of article focus overall as well as for each of the five-year spans). The following two most frequent curricular foci included cognitive-academics (19% of the curricular literature, \( n = 25 \)) and mixed content (16% of the curricular literature, \( n = 21 \)). Over the five-year spans, functional life skills experienced a 4% increase from 1996–2000 to the 2006–2010 span. Articles with a focus on cognitive and academic related content saw a substantial 365% increase from 6% in the initial five year span to 36% in the final span of the included studies. Research with a focus on interactions saw a decrease over the three time spans from 6% in 1996–2000 to 2% in 2001–2005 and finally to 0% in 2006–2010 with a fifteen year average of 3%. Communications related curricular studies decreased by 90% over the five-year spans from an initial 21% of the literature base in 1996–2000 to merely 3% of the articles in the 2006–2010 span. Articles focused on sensorimotor and other remained relatively stable minorities of the included studies, 2% (\( n = 3 \)) and 6% (\( n = 8 \)) respectively.

![Figure 1. Percentage of Curricular Article Focus by 5-Year Span. Note: FLS = Functional Life Skills, INT = Interactions, COM = Communication, SEN = Sensorimotor, COG = Cognitive-Academic, MIX = Mixed, OTH = Other](image-url)
Research Methodology. Over half of the curricular articles used one of two methods: quantitative design (34%, \( n = 46 \)) and non-data based (30%, \( n = 40 \)) (see Figure 2 for a graphical representation of research methodology across the 15-year span). Literature reviews (19%, \( n = 25 \)), qualitative studies (15%, \( n = 20 \)), and mixed method designs (2%, \( n = 3 \)) followed in prevalence. All of the designs remained relatively stable over the five-year spans, with the exception of qualitative studies, which dropped from 21% of curricular articles in 1996–2000 to 8% in 2006–2010.

Context. Unspecified contexts (i.e., those settings that could not be determined from the text) accounted for over half (52%, \( n = 70 \)) of the included curricular studies. Together, unspecified and mixed contexts represented 81% (\( n = 109 \)) of the settings of included articles. The remaining one-fifth were special education (7%, \( n = 9 \)), general education (6%, \( n = 8 \)), special schools (3%, \( n = 4 \)), community and other settings (combined at 3%, \( n = 4 \)). General education settings experienced a slight increase from 2% in 1996–2000 to 10% of the literature in 2006–2010. Research with unspecified context also experienced an increase in prevalence from 46% in the first five-year span to 51% in the final five-year span. Figure 3 provides an overview of the distribution and trends on reported context in the curricular articles.

Discussion

This study employed a systematic review to highlight the current status and trends of curricular research for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability from 1996–2010. Findings indicate that curricular articles constitute a very low percentage of the research published in the primary journals devoted to special education and individuals with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Within the limited literature, the majority of curricular articles over the fifteen-year span focused on functional life skills content while instruction in cognitive academic skills experienced a significant increase over the review span to rival functional life skills as the most common focus of curricular research from 2006–2010. However, problematic is that the majority of curricular studies did not provide a clearly defined environmental context or focus. Results of this review shed light on the themes and directions of curricular research for students with moderate and severe intel-
lectual disability during 1996–2010 and extended the findings of the previous review by Nietupski et al. (1997).

Curricular articles represent a very small portion (2%) of the overall literature among the ten journals within the fifteen-year span. The set of 134 curricular-related articles in the present study is drastically less than those reported by Nietupski et al. (1997). On average, the present review found 77% fewer articles per five-year span than the previous review, which raises the question “why?” The authors hypothesize at least two possible explanations for this discrepancy: (a) a previous saturation within the literature reduced the publication of curricular research, or (b) a shift in emphasis from curricular content specific to students with severe disabilities to adaptation of the general education curriculum. In terms of the saturation perspective, it is important to consider whether or not there is a need for curricular research focused on students with moderate and severe intellectual disability. Nietupski et al. (1997) indicated curricular content, although not dominant, accounted for 16% of the literature from 1976–1995; the present authors question whether this research alone is sufficient to guide and support practice. Educational opportunities for students with disabilities change and in many cases improve over time due to technological advances and changes in social perspectives of disability (Rose & Meyer, 2000). IDEA (2004) alone more pointedly refers to access to the general education curriculum as a mandate for instruction of all students with disabilities. The fifteen-year span (1996–2010) reviewed here includes concepts such as self-determination and college inclusion, as well as new technological applications adding to the curricular content repertoire for these students. With this in mind, we conclude the field is in fact not saturated with curricular research and hence saturation is not a plausible explanation for the lack of research. Instead, more research is necessary to continue to keep track with the advances in education and society so as to provide high quality opportunities and experiences for individuals with moderate and severe intellectual disability.

Another, more plausible, explanation for the lack of prevalence of curricular research may be the increased emphasis on access to the general education curriculum and standards (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006; Cushing et al., 2005; Downing, 2006; Lee et al., 2006). Both the 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA emphasized the access of all students to the general education curriculum. An increased legislative emphasis on the general education curricular
content for this population could explain the overall decrease in curricular focused articles. However, a focus on general education curricular content creates some concern as it is unclear that the general curriculum can sufficiently ensure the basic principles of IDEA and assist students in making successful post-school transitions (Ayres et al., 2011; Dymond & Orelove, 2001). Ayres et al. equated an exclusive focus on general education standards for instructional content as a denial of students’ individualized education rights afforded by IDEA.

Related to the argument that the small amount of curricular research for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability can be explained by a shifting focus (i.e., access), is an increasing emphasis on cognitive/academic curriculum in the literature. Although, functional life skills emerged as the most prevalent topic (43%) of curricular articles across the 15 years, the most recent five-year (2006–2010) time span experienced an increased prevalence of articles addressing cognitive academics nearly equal to functional life skills focused articles. While the prevalence of articles on functional life skills suggests Brown et al.’s (1979) seminal work in this topic has remained an essential component of the curriculum for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability, based on the emerging data trend over the fifteen-year span, cognitive academics may surpass functional life skills as the most researched curricular content in the future. The focus on increased academic curricular content aligns with the shifted focus on access to the general education curriculum and further highlights the growing philosophical divide between functional life skills and general academics (Ayres et al., 2011).

Taking a closer look at the cognitive-academic data indicates half of the articles in 2006–2010 are non-data based and the majority of these do not clearly specify the educational context. Several articles stand as exceptions to this data such as Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, and Spooner’s (2009) study on increasing comprehension during shared stories and Kliewer’s (2008) ethnographic research on literacy access. However, given the importance for specificity in research context for the purpose of applicability in practice and future research and the need for rigorous research methodologies (Browder et al., 2007; Odom et al., 2005), the recent surge in academics-related curricular articles as a whole leaves something to be desired. In order to effectively guide practice and scholarship, research in the area of cognitive and academic curricula should increasingly employ research methodologies such as quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. In addition, this research should increasingly provide explicit descriptions of the context, to increase the applicability of the research (Odom et al., 2005).

Although what and where to teach are two separate issues, the context of instruction is often closely tied to the content (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008). Due to the breadth of the continuum of educational contexts for this population, curricular researchers have a duty to specify the context used in order to accurately describe the environment and conditions for the purposes of replication and application (Odom et al., 2005). Additionally, the increased rigor demanded of educational research (NCLB, 2002), the recent debate between functional life skills and academic content, and the large number of unspecified contexts observed in this study indicate the need for future research to include more clarity in context descriptions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include the extent to which comparison of the findings in this review can be made with those in the previous review (Nietupski et al., 1997). Although careful planning and consideration were given to the procedures and operational definitions used in the review by Nietupski et al., the researchers in this study deemed some changes necessary for the purpose of additional clarity (i.e., the added restriction of U.S. only studies to avoid conflicts in disability terminology). In addition, the authors added four relevant journals for this review. Exceptional Children and Research in Developmental Disabilities provided a substantial amount of the curricular-related literature, followed by Remedial and Special Education. However, the journal, Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities,
produced the least amount of curricular articles per journal (2%), yet accounted for 7% of the articles searched for inclusion. While inclusion of this journal may have lowered the overall percentages of curricular articles within the literature, the general consistency in results from each journal combined as well as the results from the previous study (6%-34% range among journals containing curricular articles) and the pertinent focus of the journals led the researchers to justify their inclusion as contributing to the overall findings of this study.

While the inter-rater reliability for inclusion, focus, and methodology were all reported at or above 85%, the inter-rater reliability for context was much lower at 69%. Upon closer review, it was found that in each of the disagreed upon articles, one reviewer used either unspecified or mixed contexts to describe the location. Hence, both reviewers were able to identify clear-cut contexts (e.g., special education, general education, community-based settings), but struggled with mixed and unspecified contexts, which reiterates the lack of clarity over context within the research. Future research should include more precise definitions for the curricular context of focus.

The minimal research based on instructional content is particularly troubling as it leaves a gap for directing the educational opportunities and experiences for this population. While potentially limiting the pool of curricular research, articles focused on technological applications (e.g., Cihak, Fahrenkrog, Ayres, & Smith, 2010) and instructional methodology (e.g., Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Spooner, Mims, & Baker, 2009) were not included in this review. Although these studies may imply instructional content, the primary focus did not include the content of instruction. Clear curricular-specific research that helps to direct the field in content plays a vital role in the education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disability by informing practice and building the knowledge base of the field (Nietupski et al., 1997). Future research in moderate and severe intellectual disability should include an increased concentration on curricular content.

Conclusion and Implications

What is the current state of curricular research for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability? The results of this study indicate curricular research continues to be a minority of the literature within the field. As research inevitably guides practice and helps build field as a whole (Browder, 1997), an increased emphasis on the content of instruction is necessary. The current pool of curricular articles suggests scholarship in special education for this population continues to be rooted in functional life skills but is experiencing a rapid emergence of general curriculum-related academics. In addition, the increased variety in research methodology observed can be said to have a strengthening effect on the research base as a whole. The reported lack of clarity in context among curricular articles can lead to reduced research replication as well as difficulty in accurately applying the research findings to practice. It is imperative that clarity in reporting context in scholarship becomes more common. Overall, our assessment of the literature on curricular content for this population is cautiously optimistic. There are many exciting studies from the previous fifteen year span that significantly add to the knowledge base of instructional content, however much work yet to be done, particularly in the area of increased quantity of articles and clarity in reporting context.

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