21ST CENTURY FUNCTIONAL LIFE SKILLS

Educating Learners who need Intensive or Extensive Supports
A Historical View and Implications for Schools

Learners with disabilities that require intensive support are children and youth who have a variety of modifications designed to enable their participation in their home, community, and school. Some, but not all, of these children may have a significant cognitive disability and/or multiple disabilities. They may receive, for example, alternative and augmentative communication systems, mobility supports, curriculum modifications, and other specially designed services to address unique learning needs that result from their disability. They may also have a team of specialists such as occupational and physical therapist, speech/language therapists, or nurses, in addition to a general education classroom teacher and a special education teacher to design and deliver the supports in school. There may also be a paraprofessional assigned to facilitate their engagement in school.

Educational services designed in the 20th century were based on a medical model that believed "different" learning strategies and individual learning goals that were not on grade level meant that different environments were needed to teach these learners. Learners were grouped with others who had similar disability labels and instructed in separate classes and schools. It was thought that smaller sized classes were needed to provide individualized instruction. If the learner was eligible to take the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, educators assumed that meant an alternate curriculum and an alternate educational setting (separate classroom). Classes were given group program names such as a "Functional Life Skills" class based on the functional life skills curriculum approach that was popular in the 1980s. There was no vision for how to adapt general education lessons so that this child could learn academic skills at and above their current performance level with peers in the general education class. There was little consideration of any benefit to learning alongside nondisabled peers, despite the clear preference for that in federal law.

But by the 21st century, educators, researchers, and families recognized the impact of learning alongside nondisabled peers; we learned how to design curriculum and instruction using a universal design for learning approach, and how to differentiate and scaffold instruction for the variety of abilities and social-behavioral skills in the school community. We learned how to uniquely customize instruction to maximize learning for ALL learners, including those who

need the most intensive educational support. For learners who take the alternate assessment, the U.S. Department of education made clear that "alternate academic achievement standards must be aligned with the State's grade-level content standards" in a "Dear Colleague" letter (Department of Education, 2015, p. 4).

Below, we provide the historical context for educating children and youth with extensive support needs and how we have moved into a new understanding of what truly "functional" life skills are for any person.

Historical Context

1960s: A developmental logic assumed that the best way to teach children with "severe disabilities" was "to follow the sequence in which normal children learn." It was believed that curricula should assume that *specific behaviors cannot be taught independent from the various developmental levels; each level is prerequisite for achieving skills at the next level.*

1970s: Public Law 94-142 brought opportunities for learners with disabilities, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to attend public school. In some cases, special classes were designed, and special schools were built. But "In the early 1970s, parents and professionals began to question the appropriateness of the segregated school … School officials then started to move the learners to special education classrooms in regular schools." (Guess, Horner, et al., 1978). This often created "cluster schools" or "regional programs" in which neighborhood schools had an unnaturally high proportion of learners with low incidence disabilities and significant learning support needs.

Educators and families began to ask what skills will improve a "severely handicapped" child's ability to interact with the environment. They said: "*Teachers cannot afford to teach skills that have limited importance to the child, nor can they afford to perseverate on skills the child already knows.*" "*Curricula for the severely handicapped should be directed toward those skills that are immediately functional for the child with the overall goal of training a cluster of skills that will permit the child to successfully and productively interact with the environment at some future time*" (Guess, Horner, et al., 1978).

This thinking led to the development of various "life skills curricula" and "community-based instruction" programs. Early research in the latter half of the 20th century focused on three lines of inquiry:

- ☑ **HOW** to teach learners with extensive support needs, usually identifying and demonstrating the utility of various instructional methods, often applied in intensive 1:1 teaching sessions.

- ☑ **WHAT** To teach learners who are not expected to achieve the same curricula standards as others without cognitive disabilities:
    - Content/activities that was aligned with a learner's "developmental" age as measured by tests designed for younger learners, (e.g., matching colors, identifying coins) or
    - Activities that would be increase participation in home and community settings (e.g., setting a table, using a washing machine, making toast).

- ☑ **WHERE** to teach skills, particularly considering that there was evidence to suggest that learners with intellectual disabilities had difficulty generalizing from one setting to another. It was believed that teaching learners in the context in which the activity would occur was paramount.

Initial research suggested, however, that when learners received instruction alongside their same age peers who were developing "typically" without evidence of disability, they actually acquired more skills (Certo, Brown, Belmore, & Crowner, 1977).

Functional Skills at this time were defined as ***"the variety of skills that are frequently demanded in natural domestic, vocational, and community environments."*** And it was recommended that "*the teaching of skills that are only appropriate in school environments should be minimized, and the teaching of skills that are appropriate in the least restrictive non-school and post-school environments should be maximized.*" (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, Certo, & Gruenewald 1979).

1980s: Research and experience with teaching learners who had "severe and profound handicaps," as they were called at the time, began to change the practices in our country. It was argued that:

> *...segregation of even the most severely handicapped (SH) youth from their nonhandicapped peers greatly reduces their personal growth and development. Programming that occurs exclusively in the classroom and simulation activities alone are clearly inadequate for SH individuals who are expected to function in heterogeneous community and domestic*

> *environments. The probability of an SH student performing a skill in a setting different from where he or she originally learned it is highly unlikely without sufficient practice. SH youth cannot be expected to develop more sophisticated behavior if they are only exposed to other SH youth. It is critical that higher functioning and nonhandicapped youth be available for interaction.*
>
> (Wehman & Hill, 1982).

By 1989 it was recognized that **"**any important skill, attitude, or value that can be developed in a clustered school also can be developed in a home school.**"** And **"**there are many important skills, attitudes, and values that can be developed in a home school that cannot be developed in a clustered school." (Brown, Long, Udvair-Solner, Davis, VanDeventer, Ahlgren, Johnson, Gruenwald, & Jorgensen, 1989)

- ☑ **WHAT** learners were learning began to shift to include the social skills for interacting with non-disabled peers and modified general education curricula

- ☑ **WHERE** learners learned also began to shift to neighborhood schools, although placement continued to be primarily in separate classes designed only for learners with disabilities, often placing those learners with similar disabilities together. There was an increased focus on "integrating" learners with disabilities, particularly in non-academic classes.

1990s: In the last decade of the 20th century, there were many books, research articles, and commentary on what we called the "inclusion" of learners with disabilities, especially in high schools. It was noted that "…high schools provide a wealth of opportunities for the development of interpersonal relationships and effective work habits" and "…more than preparation for work" (Fisher & Sax, 1999).

Research began to demonstrate the benefits of inclusion, such as

- **membership** (Schnorr, 1997),
- **social relationships** (Kennedy & Itkonen, 1994),
- access to **interesting core curriculum** (Jorgensen, 1998), and
- increase in **literacy** (Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999).

- ☑ It became clearer that **WHERE** learners should learn was in general education classes with nondisabled peers.

By **2000**, evidence of the benefits and outcomes of inclusive education practices for learners with intensive support needs (usually with disability labels of Down Syndrome, Autism, Intellectual Disability, and Developmental Disability) was plentiful.

> *It is now widely affirmed that lifestyle improvements require participation in general education environments in which learners with disabilities are welcome as full members of school and classroom communities where social relationships with typically developing peers can flourish.*
>
> Bilingsley and Albertson, 1999

Moving Toward the 21st Century

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as reauthorized in 2004, mandates that learners with disabilities make progress in the general curriculum (the same curriculum as offered to nondisabled learners). The intent was to communicate high expectations, reduce poor post-school outcomes, and promote a shift in philosophy about how, what, and where to teach learners with disabilities. Research (Copeland & Cosby, 2008/2009) and commentary (Whemeyer, 2006) clearly points to the advantage of inclusive education for ALL learners with disabilities and notes a distinction between placement per se and inclusion as a process that requires careful planning. The use of collaborative teaming requires collaborative planning time built into the school schedule and teachers who know how to use effective collaborative techniques. The promise of a school-wide approach that recognizes ALL learners as fully participating members addresses the structural, functional, and human resource challenges (McCart, Sailor, Bezdek, & Satter, 2014; Sailor and McCart, 2014).

> *Organizing both planning and instruction around the principles for universal design for leaning (UDL; Curry, 2003) could be especially*

influential for increasing the extent to which learners with extensive support needs are involved and make progress in the general curriculum in general education contexts. As observed by Spooner et al. (2006), when practices that reflect UDL principles are couple with other recent innovations (e.g., self-determination, teaching standards), they provide the foundation for learners with extensive support needs to access the general education curriculum.

Ryndak, Jackson, and White, 2013

OLD Definition of Functional Skills	**NEW Definition of Functional Skills**
Functional Skills refer to skills that are frequently used in natural home, vocational, and community environments. These generally are related to making purchases, ordering from a menu, cleaning a house, making a bed, cooking, doing laundry, buying groceries, and community Curricula are typically grouped in categories such as domestic living, self-care, community living (including mobility), and pre-vocational skills. Instruction is often delivered in simulated special education classes as well as in community settings near the school. Skills such as telling time and counting coins are considered "functional math" while reading emergency and common signage are considered "functional reading" skills.	Functional skills refer to skills that are frequently demanded in schools, community settings, and future post-secondary (work and living) settings. These include content derived from curricula in the core curricula offered to all learners, such as science, art, music, history, English literature, geography, and math. Literacy skills that can be applied within age-appropriate regular classrooms are functional. In addition, communication skills that enable a learner to give an opinion, interacting with peers and adults, sharing knowledge, and asking questions are particularly functional. Self-advocacy and self-determination skills will function to help a learner participate in planning his or her transition to middle school, high school, and the community after school. By conducting an assessment of the skills required in the variety of school settings, "functional" skills such as following a schedule, swiping a lunch card, initiating a voice-output device, can be incorporated into the school day.

Instruction that is delivered in inclusive settings with nondisabled peers from early childhood through high school provides all learners with access to the curriculum. And as our colleagues Cheryl Jorgensen, Michael McSheehan, and Rae Sonnenmeier describe in their 2010 publication **The Beyond Access Model**, authentic inclusion is more than curricular access: it is about being a valued member of the school community, participating in social and academic activities that are meaningful and intentionally designed by a team, which results in learning skills that could not be acquired in a separate, segregated classroom.

What about "functional" skills?

In the 20th century, "Functional math" typically focused on identifying and counting coins (sometimes on paper and sometimes plastic) and "functional reading" focused on reading safety signs and a few social words such as greetings. Today the majority of people use debit and credit cards; schools even use lunch cards to *paying* for lunch. Literacy skills focus on core content vocabulary, telling jokes, adapting literature with pictures and simplifying to the essential story lines. Assistive and communication technology applications are available and used by peers as well as the learner who "needs" the device for their communication – normalizing alternative communication as a natural part of the human experience. Functional skills are those skills that enable a person to be a social communicator, and classroom learner or a workplace employee; they are social skills, communication skills, self-advocacy skills, and self-regulation skills. They are skills in using accommodations as a part of life.

Based on Lou Brown's writings, the following checklist is provided to identify if skills are truly "functional" for a child or youth with an Individualized Education Program.

IDENTIFYING "FUNCTIONAL" SKILLS

Is the target skill:	YES	NO
1. Age-Appropriate *Is the skill like skills demonstrated by peers without disabilities?* *Are the materials and the methods used to teach the skill appropriate for the chronological age of the learner?*		
2. Relevant: Required now *If the child/youth does not perform the skill, will an adult or another person have to do it for him/her?*		
3. Relevant: Required as an adult *Is this an important skill that will be required for community participation, future employment, or interactions with peers as an adult?*		
4. Useful *Will the child/youth have the opportunity to use the skill in other places and at other times beyond the teaching and learning experience?*		
5. Interesting to the Learner and Family? *Is this a skill that is a priority for the child/youth to learn?* *Does the family want their child to learn and use this skill?*		
6. Socially Elevating *Will this skill increase the likelihood for:* ✓ *increased social contacts & relationships?* ✓ *social competence?*		
7. Increasing Access to Social and Learning Activities *Does the skill enable the child/youth to participate in more activities with same-age nondisabled peers?*		
8. Increasing Communicative Competence *Is it likely that the child/youth will have enhanced communications and interactions with peers as a result of learning this skill?*		
TOTAL:		

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