21st Century Functional Life Skills
Educating Students with Intensive Support Needs
A Historical View and Implications for Schools

Educational services for students with disabilities who have intensive support needs (including, for example augmentative communication systems, mobility supports, and curriculum modifications) were designed in the 20th century on the basis of a medical model that argued that “different” learning strategies and goals meant that different environments were needed to teach them. Students were grouped with others similar to themselves, and instructed in separate classes and schools. It was thought that with smaller sized classes could enable more individualized instruction, and there was little consideration to any benefit to learning alongside nondisabled peers, despite the clear preference for that in federal law. But what and where these students learn has changed over time. Educators, researchers and families have recognized the impact of exposure to the same educational experiences offered to nondisabled students, and have learned how to provide quality instruction that is uniquely customized to maximize learning for ALL students, including those who need the most intensive educational supports.

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 be based on the assumption 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 students with disabilities, especially students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to attend public schools. 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 students to special education classrooms in regular
This often created “cluster schools” or “regional programs” in which neighborhood schools had an unnaturally high proportion of students 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, Utley, Holvoet, Maxon, Tucker, & Warren, 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:

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

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

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

Initial research suggested, however, that when students 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 students who had "severe and profound handicaps," as they were called at the time, began to change the practices in our country. It became evident that “…segregation of even the most severely handicapped (SH) youth from their nonhandicapped peers greatly reduces their personal growth and development.” It was argued that “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.” And “The probability of an SH (severely handicapped) student performing a skill in a setting different from where he or she originally learned it is highly unlikely without sufficient practice.” Further: “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 that “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** students were learning began to shift to include the social skills for interacting with non-disabled peers and modified general education curricula. **WHERE** students learned also began to shift to neighborhood schools, although placement continued to be primarily in separate classes designed only for
students with disabilities, often placing those students with similar disabilities together. There was an increased focus on “integrating” students 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 students 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 students should learn was in general education classes with nondisabled peers.

By 2000, evidence of the benefits and outcomes of inclusive education practices for students 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 students 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 students with disabilities make progress in the general curriculum (the same curriculum as offered to nondisabled students). 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 students with disabilities. Research (Copeland & Cosby, 2008/2009) and commentary (Whemeyer, 2006) clearly points to the advantage of inclusive education for ALL students 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 students 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 learning (UDL; Curry, 2003) could be especially influential for increasing the extent to which students 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 coupled with other recent innovations (e.g., self-determination, teaching standards), they provide the foundation for students with extensive support needs to access the general education curriculum.

Ryndak, Jackson, and White, 2013

OLD Definition of Functional Skills

Functional Skills refer to skills that are frequently demanded in natural home, vocational, and community environments. They include skills/activities that are required or expected of peers, as well as skills that will be required to participate in supported living and work settings in the 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 real community settings. Skills such as time-telling and counting coins are considered “functional math” while reading emergency and common signage are considered “functional reading” skills.
NEW Definition of Functional Skills

Functional skills include content derived from curricula in the core curricula offered to all students, such as science, art, music, history, English literature, geography, and math. In middle and high schools, the rich variety of elective classes available offer opportunities for matching student interests with general education classes with nondisabled classmates. These classes provide opportunities to practice skills that are important and functional for success in the community and future work place, such as communication, cooperation, following a schedule, problem solving, and self-initiation. These are more related to job stability than skills in specific job tasks.

Instruction is delivered in regular, integrated school classes through early high school. By 10th or 11th grade, supported employment and job sampling in the community provide additional opportunities to use communication and other skills. “Functional math: involved those numeracy skills important to the student’s school participation (e.g., following step directions), but money skills – if not acquired by high school are deferred in favor of using a meal or other debit/credit card in cooperation with the family. Literacy skills focus on technology applications and accommodations available through the vast array of alternative ways to communicate and learn through aural or visual reading.
References


## Identifying “Functional” Skills

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<tr>
<th>Is the target skill:</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age-Appropriate&lt;br&gt;Are the skill and materials and the methods used to teach the skill appropriate for the chronological age of the student?</td>
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<td>2. Relevant: Required now&lt;br&gt;If the student does not perform the skill, will an adult or another person have to do it for him/her?</td>
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<td>3. Relevant: Required as an adult&lt;br&gt;Is this an important skill that will be required for community participation, future employment, or interactions with peers when the student is an adult?</td>
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<td>4. Useful&lt;br&gt;Will the student have the opportunity to use the skill in other places and at other times?</td>
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<td>5. Interesting to the Student and Family?&lt;br&gt;Do the student and the family want the student to learn and use this skill?</td>
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<td>6. Socially Elevating&lt;br&gt;Will this skill increase the student’s likelihood for:___ increased social contacts &amp; relationships ___ social competence?</td>
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<td>7. Increasing Access&lt;br&gt;Does the skill enable the student to participate in more activities with same-age nondisabled peers?</td>
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<td>8. Acquirable in a reasonable time frame&lt;br&gt;Is it likely that the student will acquire this skill in the school year?</td>
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**TOTAL:**