

What do Students with Severe Disabilities Need to Learn?

In examining the issues underlying the provision of a curriculum devised for students who have a moderate mental handicap or severe intellectual disabilities, the question must be asked "Will this skill serve the student well in later life?"

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INTRODUCTION

One winter morning in Boston, a classroom of students in a special school welcomed their new teacher. Armed with youthful energy and a freshly-issued certificate from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, she shaped the small room to resemble the mainstream classrooms from which her students had been removed for months or years of special education. In due course, a tank for the turtles, a library corner for the books, shelves for the puzzles and posters about "Transport" appeared, just like the ones in the real school a few miles away. At three o'clock each day, the students left the school - a fine old building on its own grounds - by private taxi, homeward bound. In June, the curriculum for the term wound down and summer vacation unfolded.

These days, the Boston students are thirtysomething, living their lives with or without the difficulties which set them apart as children. Some questions about their special schooling are with us still. Was it helpful for them to be separated from their peers? Had they more to gain by staying in a world apart, or by rejoining their own classrooms as swiftly as possible? And what should they have been taught: the same lessons as students in the mainstream classes, or stepped-down versions, or perhaps games and activities suited to their developmental ages?

We can hear echoes today in Ireland, where practitioners involved in special education come to terms with new expectations for themselves and their students.

Tempests rage around a number of flags - integrated classrooms, "least restrictive" settings, pre-vocational training and Individual Program Plans. While policies are cut, pasted and printed, life in the classroom goes on. Students with very wide-ranging needs, some with severe or multiple handicaps, take their places each September. What do they need to learn, and what do we need to teach them?

WHAT CAN TODAY'S STUDENTS EXPECT?

Today's Irish students with intellectual disabilities are almost certain to live in the family home. Institutional placement, especially for young people, continues to decline (EHB Region Planning Group Report, 1989). These students' **daily** lives are bound up with their parents, brothers and sisters, friendships, **social** outings, personal development, sports and pastimes just as those of any other young people. What lies ahead for them?

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Students can expect that policies which promote their full social and vocational integration will be, at the least, recognised (Green Paper 1984). In many settings throughout Ireland, such policies are already being put into practice. A young person aged between 12 and 18 with severe disabilities may expect to welcome the year 2000 living as independent and satisfying an adult life as possible in his or her community. For most, some sort of work opportunities will be available. New community-based services are continually being developed and evaluated. For example, students from special classes may be spotted every day in supermarkets, shops and offices, building up real work experience under supervision.

HARD TIMES

At the same time, students should be cautioned to be careful out there: adult life is not without its challenges. Special services for adults are stretched to the limit. There is a dearth of places in training and day centres, especially in Dublin. Access to the new nationally-underwritten vocational training programmes is controlled. Overall unemployment remains high in Ireland relative to most other countries in the European Community. For young people with severe disabilities, employment may seem a faint hope, nearly out of reach.

Meanwhile, back in the classroom, teachers meet students and plan how to spend

their time together. For the teachers, buying time with individuals is desirable but costly. Accordingly, choices on how to spend it do not come easily. Every half hour spent teaching Sarah to greet her classmates appropriately is a half hour which cannot be spent helping her to budget for an outing - nor can it be spent encouraging Dermot in the next seat to pour out the tea uneventfully.

Learning time is precious too. Every minute must count. A student with severe intellectual disabilities who is twelve years old this summer has just about six years to get a job - or to get into the vocational track heading that way. By definition he or she learns very slowly. Singleminded effort is demanded if students are to learn what they really need in the long run, that is, in the settings where they will ultimately function. We have already noted that most will - ultimately - join us in the supermarket, library, sports complex and workplace, albeit with lifelong support for some.

Why not then, decide to focus classroom energies on helping each young person to acquire the skills needed most by an adult living as independent and dignified a life as possible? What sort of impact might this decision have on today's special education curriculum?

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

This approach may seem trite at first glance. Surely we have all laboured for years to help our students gain a foothold in adult life. But I am not certain that this stated purpose is always reflected in daily lessons. One way to test our resolve is to apply the criterion to many of the curriculum choices we regularly make.

Lou Brown and his colleagues (Brown et al, 1986) name a dozen good reasons why students with severe disabilities should learn one skill rather than another. Some are familiar, some perhaps surprising. The authors' yardstick for including any lesson in the special curriculum is a positive response to the query: "Will this serve the student well in adult life?"

Here are some of the questions which Brown and his colleagues suggest teachers ask before deciding what to teach a student with severe intellectual disabilities:

1. Is it functional? This is, are we teaching the student to perform a task which would have to be done by someone else (without a disability) if the student did

not do it? To take one example, filling, emptying and refilling a pegboard is not on my own list of tasks this week. Whether it gets done or not is of no consequence. Stamping and sealing envelopes, on the other hand, serves a useful purpose. It is something I must undertake if no one else helps me do it. If there is a curriculum choice to be made here, teaching the second activity is more likely to fulfil the functional criterion.

2. Will the student require this skill as an adult? This is a hardy perennial, and still we see young people and even older adults hunched over Lego or cast-off childrens' jigsaw puzzles. How much hand-eye co-ordination does anyone really need, and why? Managing the buttons on an audio cassette player may achieve the desired results in a way which is more appropriate to the student's age and daily living requirements. Yes, it may take longer to teach. But learning to express a preference for a particular kind of music is a skill which is likely to serve the student well long after schooldays are over.

3. Will it promote physical well-being? Many persons with severe intellectual disabilities have physical or motor difficulties as well. Their general well-being and posture may be served best by helping them to take part in activities such as swimming, bowling, yoga or massage. Using this criterion, a teacher may opt for swimming instruction in preference to another activity which does not involve the student physically.

4. Will it enhance the student's status? Encouraging a young woman to learn rudimentary keyboarding skills or to collate papers places her right alongside the rest of us dealing with such everyday chores. People in every workplace in the land, even in Aras an Uachtarain, rely on these sorts of activities. Learning to use a garden hoe or a spanner can transform the student into a useful pair of hands at home. Being adept lends status.

5. Will the skill or activity increase the number of environments available to the student? Think back over the working day: it's likely that most of us spent part of it in the home, car or bus, classroom, staffroom, other office, shop, with friends, playing sports, at the cinema or simply out of doors. A young person with severe disabilities, on the other hand, is less likely to have these opportunities to see and be seen, to greet and be greeted. Motor difficulties may limit the student to home-minibus-classroom-minibus-home. Therefore, one teaching strategy is to increase the number of ordinary environments available to the student and teach the skills he or she will use there.

SOME OBSTACLES?

Some of the notions underlying functional curriculum choices may not sit well at first. Here are some "Yes, but..." arguments which frequently arise:

- 1. "It sounds interesting, but our school (or centre, or unit) has no resources".** If it were not scarce, it wouldn't be a resource at all, is the retort. The point is that everyone's time and energy are valuable and must be carefully managed. This thrift must apply to the students as well. Therefore, teaching resources ought to go to the areas most useful to the students. It may be that several teachers may join forces to plan their priorities and how to meet them. Their experiences may then provide compelling evidence for managers planning next year's budget.
- 2. "Functional sounds cold-blooded: what about enjoyment and personal growth?"** This is a crucial point. Of course the enjoyment of painting, music, theatre, books, picking flowers or simply relaxing to talk with friends should be fostered for every student. These are just the sorts of activities which people find most rewarding throughout their lives. Without them, the quality of a person's life would be diminished (Brown et al, 1984). Every curriculum should leave room for teaching related skills. For example, learning to choose a picture book from the library which matches an individual interest or pastime.
- 3. "I don't know how this approach would fit with our school/agency's policies."** This comment points towards issues which may be beyond any one individual's control. Certainly, special education and vocational training policies are striding off in new directions. It is hard to predict the shape of things to come. But we do know that students face new expectations on the part of trainers and employers and that they are being readied to play a more active part in ordinary, integrated community activities. Individual plans should therefore match personal needs to what is most likely to make up the students' daily lives.
- 4. "But we've always taught in this way."** No innovation prizes awarded here. We didn't always expect young people with severe handicaps to take part in sex education, local youth clubs or adventure sports, either. And not so long ago special school leavers graduated to special training centres and special workshops, with special clubs at the weekend. Things are different for them now. Has the curriculum kept up with changing times? Have we?

POSITIVE STEPS

What steps might be taken by any teacher who wishes to adopt a more functional approach to curriculum design?

1. Individual needs. First: hold fast to what is good. Individual planning for each student is here to stay. It makes good educational sense to consider the student's needs, tastes and preferences. But the learning goals listed in the plan may take on a more functional shape without drastic changes in the system used to set them.

2. Consultation. Most of us work as part of a team, often with professional or clinical support. It is wise to consult with anyone who has the student's interests at heart, including the student. Family consultation is especially worthwhile. There is little point in devising an elegant plan for helping the student to butter toast if the family kitchen is off limits.

3. Set priorities. As we know, teaching and learning time are precious resources. If there are two options, ask which of the two is the more useful to the student now and in adult life. A functional approach directs us towards age-appropriate skills geared to the demands set by the student's community. It directs us away from pointless or childish pursuits ill-matched to the student's needs.

Rethinking the curriculum will not be done in a single day. Rethinking why and how teachers and students with severe intellectual disabilities spend their time together is an activity open to all, and probably never out of fashion. Any of us can make it happen.

Finally, what about the young teacher in the Boston classroom? No longer in Boston, she is alive and well, still involved in the education of people with special needs, and still asking awkward questions.

Note: The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the St Michael's House Association.

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