

## **Seven Reasons to Promote Standards-Based Instruction for Students with Severe Disabilities: A Reply to Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers (2011)**

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*Abstract: This article was written as a response to Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, and Sievers (2011) who commented on the degree to which promoting the teaching of functional skills had a higher probability of leading to a more independent life for students with severe disabilities. In doing so, the authors take issue with the use of a standards-based curriculum and suggest that working on grade-level content seizes time that could be allocated to teaching skills for adult life. We suggest that a standards-based curriculum affords students with severe disabilities a complete educational opportunity and need not preclude personally relevant instruction. In our rejoinder, we first describe our points of agreement (evolving curriculum, contribution of research on teaching functional skills, dismal transition outcomes), and then suggest seven reasons why a standards-based curriculum is appropriate. Our reasons include: (a) right to a full educational opportunity, (b) relevancy of a standards-based curriculum (c) unknown potential of students with severe disabilities, (d) functional skills are not a prerequisite to academic skills, (e) standards-based curriculum is not a replacement for functional curriculum, (f) individualized curriculum is limited when it is the only curriculum, and (g) students creating their own changing expectations through achievements.*

In a recent article, Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, and Sievers (2011) proposed that focusing on functional skills for students with severe disabilities leads to a more independent life. The authors question the use of a standards-based curriculum as not addressing the individualized skills students will use in adult life that are referenced to the locale in which they live. They proposed that working on grade-level content standards usurps time that could be

invested in teaching skills students need for adult life (e.g., consumer skills [Mechling, 2004; Mechling & Gast, 2003], community living skills [Branham, Collins, Schuster, & Kleinert, 1999; Browder, Snell, & Wildonger, 1988; Collins, Stinson, & Land, 1993], domestic and self-help skills [Bates, Cuvo, Miner, & Korabek, 2001; Fiscus, Schuster, Morse, & Collins, 2002; Snell, Lewis, & Houghton, 1989]). Research on functional skills instruction is cited as evidence that this approach leads to a more independent life. The purpose of this response is to propose that a standards-based curriculum provides students with severe disabilities a full educational opportunity and need not preclude instruction that is personally relevant. In this article we use the term “severe disabilities” to refer to students with moderate/severe intellectual disabilities who may also have physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, or autism.

Before describing reasons why students with severe disabilities should receive a full educa-

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tional opportunity, we would like to begin with our points of agreement with Ayres et al. (2011). As the authors note, curriculum for students with severe disabilities has been evolving. This evolution was described in some detail by Browder et al. (2004) who considered what was occurring in the early development of alternate assessments. As individuals, we have been through many of these changes as teachers and researchers and were especially invested in teaching skills derived from students' current and future daily activities outside of school (e.g., books by Browder, 1987, 2001; Cipani & Spooner, 1994). We agree with the excellent summary of Ayres et al. (2011) of the contributions of the research on functional skills. We agree that these skills continue to have importance in educational programs for students with severe disabilities, should appear as IEP objectives, should be taught during the school day, and linked to the student's specific current and future environments.

We also agree that the transition outcomes for students with severe disabilities have been disappointing. Despite efforts to focus on transition, and to bridge the gap between school and adult life for students with disabilities, unemployment for persons with severe disabilities has been found to be over 60% (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003; Wehman, Kregel, & Seyfarth, 1985). Unfortunately after age 21, options for this population have been limited and in some cases this has meant returning to segregated day services (Spooner, Browder, & Uphold, 2011). It will be unfortunate if educational programs for students with severe disabilities *only* focus on grade-aligned state academic content standards without providing opportunities for community-based instruction and job tryouts. As Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002) and Agran, Cavin, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (2010) note, access to general curriculum does not mean only teaching state standards.

Although we share these points of agreement, we also would like to offer a differing perspective on the role of standards-based instruction. Our reasons are based on the values we hold that students with severe disabilities should have full access to their schools, communities, and future job opportunities. When Lou Brown and colleagues (Brown et al.,

1979) first challenged the field to focus on chronological, age appropriate skills for students *vs.* basing instruction on student's mental age, there were few studies to guide this approach. In the decades to follow the research on teaching skills referenced to the community, as well as research on social interaction, grew rapidly (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtain, & Shrikanth, 1997). In contrast, there was minimal research on teaching academic skills in this era (Nietupski et al., 1997). Despite this focus, there has been research to support academic learning (e.g., see the following reviews: Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Spooner, Mims, & Baker, 2009; Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, & Wakeman, 2008; Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006; Courtade, Spooner, & Browder, 2007; Spooner, Knight, Browder, Jimenez, & DiBiase, in press). As educators began to embrace the value of standards-based instruction, research also has emerged on teaching skills that link to grade-level content (Agran, Cavin, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 2006; Browder et al., 2010; Collins, Evans, Creech-Galloway, Karl, & Miller, 2007; Jameson, McDonnell, Johnson, Riesen, & Polychronis, 2007; Jameson, McDonnell, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2008; Jimenez, Browder, & Courtade, 2009; Johnson, McDonnell, Holzwarth, & Hunter, 2004; McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2002; McDonnell et al., 2006). The following are seven reasons to continue to pursue standards-based instruction.

*Reason #1: Students with Severe Disabilities Have the Right to a Full Educational Opportunity*

Prior to the mid-1970s, the general expectation was that most students with severe disabilities would not benefit from a public education and might need to reside in an institutional setting. PL 94-142 (1975) opened the door for opportunity and participation in educational programs. Prior to this time, there were no systematic plans for developing preservice and inservice teacher training programs, no doctoral level training in severe disabilities, few programs for parents, and fewer still life encompassing service plans (Sontag, Burke, & York, 1973). At this juncture, educators were exploring

the optimal way to serve this population of individuals. As a field, educators relied heavily on the guidance of people like Lou Brown (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976), Marc Gold (Gold, 1980), Norris Haring (Haring & Brown, 1976, 1977) and organizations like TASH, known then as the American Association for the Education of the Severely and Profoundly Handicapped (AAESPH) founded in 1974 (Sontag & Haring, 1996). Similarly, more students began to live in the community as supported by the principles and philosophy of normalization (Larsen, 1977; Nirje, 1969; Roos, 1970; Wolfensberger, 1972). By the early 1990s, educators began describing ways to serve students with severe disabilities effectively in inclusive settings (Gent & Mulhauser, 1988; Haring, 1991; Haring & Romer, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Meyer, 1994; Meyer & Kishi, 1985). Spooner and Brown (2011) have described this history and propose future directions for educating students with severe disabilities. What seems surprising, in retrospect, is that early inclusion often focused on physical placement and social belonging, but continued to embrace the use of a separate curriculum (e.g., only teaching IEP goals like social greetings). Several educators led the way to expect not only presence in general education, but learning general curriculum content (e.g., Calculator & Jorgensen, 1994; Downing, 1996; Ryndak & Alper, 1996, 2003; Ward, Van De Mark, & Ryndak, 2006). Soon, the stories about how students acquired this content began to emerge in the literature (e.g., Heron & Jorgensen, 1994–1995; Jorgensen, 1994–1995; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999; Siegel-Causey, McMorris, McGowen, & Sands-Buss, 1998).

The opportunity to learn general curriculum content is a right of every child who attends school. The primary reason students with severe disabilities have not had this right is that educators may not have recognized the full capabilities of this population of students. We have come a long way in the last 40 years. Students with severe disabilities have taught us that: (a) they can learn in public schools, (b) they can learn skills related to their community contexts, (c) they can benefit from opportunities to be with peers who are nondisabled,

and (d) they even can learn state standards that are adapted for alternate achievement. To deny someone an opportunity that all other members of a society are afforded should require a compelling rationale. We propose in our following points that the rationale to deny some students the opportunity for full access to the general curriculum is not compelling.

*Reason #2: A Standards-Based Curriculum is Relevant to Students with Severe Disabilities*

The purpose of state standards for all students is to prepare them for functioning as adults in the community, as well as preparing some to pursue college preparation. Increased academic competence adds to the options students with severe disabilities will have as adults for jobs (e.g., jobs that require mathematics), leisure activities (e.g., access to books; using science knowledge in hobbies), and overall independence (e.g., being able to read one's own mail or participate in government/ civics activities).

In 2010, a consortium led by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), and involving parents, teachers, and school administrators established a shared set of educational standards for English Language Arts and mathematics that states can voluntarily adopt. Currently, 42 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, <http://www.corestandards.org/>) were developed to ensure that no matter where students live, they will be prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce. The initiative helps to define the skills that are most important for students as they transition through K-12 and become adults. The needs of students with disabilities are addressed in the CCSS. Specifically, the CCSS provide “an opportunity to improve access to rigorous academic content for students with disabilities” with the outcome of preparedness “for success in their post-school lives, including college and/or careers.” College programs for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are increasing. Interestingly, research on transition outcomes

indicates that the only post-high school transition goal which was a predictor of employment for students with ID was having the goal of attending a two or four year college (Grigal & Hart, 2010). For the first time educators are talking about helping students with severe disabilities become career or *college* ready upon graduation because of these new opportunities and the potential importance of continuing education to transition outcomes.

Even if students do not attend college upon graduation, academic learning can enrich their overall adult lives. The CCSS and similar general curriculum standards (e.g., science and social studies) are developed to help students think about the world in which they live. If the world of students with severe disabilities should be as small as the trip from their home to the local discount store, fast food restaurant, and back then what educators have taught in the past will suffice. In contrast, students with severe disabilities also live in a universe, travel nationally and internationally, encounter people of other cultures, are impacted by world events, and engage with the natural world. Their lives are impacted by historical events and changes in the natural world. They are members of communities where adults only spend so much time talking about going to the restroom, ordering a cup of coffee, or crossing the street. Having vocabulary and experiences to communicate about the broader world provides a better foundation for adult social interactions.

Educators do need to consider how to promote the personal relevance of standards-based instruction for students with severe disabilities. For example, Jimenez, Browder, and Courtade (2008) provided opportunities for students to learn how to solve algebraic equations to complete job tasks. The students then used this problem-solving skill to generalize across materials. This personal relevance also is sometimes demonstrated through social validity measures (e.g., parent survey, Courtade, Browder, Spooner, & DiBiase, 2010; general education peer and students with disability survey, Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & DiBiase, in press; teacher and paraprofessional survey, Johnson et al., 2004). Perhaps most important, educators need to ask students themselves what experiences mean the most to them. Although it is not typical in most

American schools for students to choose their entire curriculum, older students often do have choices about what classes they take and how much to emphasize academic learning versus on-the-job training in high school. Elementary students often have choices within academic subjects such as what book to read, what topic to research, and which materials to use for a class project. This type of choice-making has been an important value in educating students with severe disabilities (Brown, Belz, Corsi, & Wenig, 1993; Brown, Gothelf, Guess, & Lehr, 1998; Brown & Cohen, 1996) that can and should be preserved in teaching standards to students with severe disabilities.

### *Reason #3: We Do Not Yet Know the Potential of Students with Severe Disabilities*

From comprehensive reviews of research on teaching academics (Browder et al., 2006, 2008; Spooner et al., in press), it is clear that what we know about the potential of students with severe disabilities to learn academic content has been severely restricted by educators' own priorities. In reading, most research focused on sight words, in mathematics mostly computation and the use of money, and few researchers have considered science. In social studies, a comprehensive review is not possible because there have been so few studies (Zakas, 2011). We do not yet know the potential students have to learn more complex academic content or how they may use it in their lives.

Researchers are beginning to discover this potential. Some have discovered that students with moderate intellectual disability can learn to read (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Jones, & Champlin, 2010; Al Otaiba & Hosp, 2004; Bradford, Alberto, Shippen, Houchins, & Flores, 2006). Others have discovered that students with severe intellectual disability can acquire early literacy skills (Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, & Lee, 2007), identify and define content vocabulary (Jameson et al, 2007; Riesen, McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, & Jameson, 2003), and comprehend passages adapted from grade-level text (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007). Even students with the most severe disabilities can learn to comprehend read alouds (Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee & Spooner, 2009). Stu-

dents can learn and generalize algebra skills (Jimenez et al., 2008), learn social studies concepts (Dugan et al., 1995), and learn and generalize science concepts (Jimenez et al., 2009).

The current era of discovery of the academic potential of students with severe disabilities is similar to the explosion of studies on teaching community-referenced skills that occurred in the 1980s after educators embraced the value that students with severe disabilities could learn more and different skills. The fact that we know more about this population's potential to learn functional skills is not an indictment of their potential to learn academic content. Educators need to continue to find creative ways to address state standards and much more research is needed on how to teach this content. In contrast, there is now a foundation of research that meets rigorous criteria for evidence-based practice that provides a foundation of how to teach these skills. Spooner, Knight, Browder, and Smith (2010) have suggested that using principles of behavior analysis such as task analysis and systematic prompting with feedback, previously found effective for teaching many daily living and community skills, can also be effective in teaching academic content.

#### *Reason #4: Functional Skills Are Not a Prerequisite to Academic Learning*

What should be noted is that there is no research indicating that students cannot learn academic content until functional skills are mastered. There is nothing about learning to tie one's shoes or use a vending machine or eat with a spoon that must be mastered before learning to read or solve math problems. While all may be important life skills, they are not *prerequisites* to academic learning as has sometimes been assumed in the past. In fact, this creates a double standard. What students without disabilities are required to master all their life skills before they get the opportunity for standards-based instruction? In contrast, there are graduate students and even university professors who have not mastered keeping a room clean or preparing meals, but fortunately these were not gatekeepers to their academic success.

Some students with severe disabilities may

excel with academic learning and will need lifelong support for functional routines. There are individuals who are nondisabled who rely on others to prepare food, clean their house, wash their clothes, and help with their finances. While all students, with or without disabilities, should have opportunity to acquire independence in these areas through instruction, not everyone will master every life domain. All people are interdependent to some degree.

#### *Reason #5: Standards-Based Curriculum is not a Replacement for Functional Curriculum*

If a person purchases a new home, there usually are decisions to be made about what to pack and bring to the new home, what to discard, and what new items to purchase. Rarely does the homeowner discard everything from the prior home. Similarly, in planning curriculum for students with severe disabilities, educators need to make decisions with students and their families about what to bring into the new era from the past. Promoting self-determination, providing access to assistive technology, teaching skills needed for daily living and future job success, and positive behavior support are examples of "valuables" from the past to include in this new era. Because there are only so many hours in the day (as there is only so much space in a new home), some things from the past also must be relinquished. These may include not teaching skills before they are relevant to most other children that age (e.g., not teaching elementary children to vacuum), not teaching skills rarely used in daily life (e.g., naming coins; reading "survival" sight words like "railroad" rarely encountered in real life without other cues), assuming some skills are best taught at home (e.g., showering), and not teaching skills that may be "life skills" but not necessarily relevant to an individual child (e.g., not every child is interested in making drinks from a powdered mix). For the new context, there also will be skills never taught before (e.g., inquiry science; graphing points on a plane). These are like the new furnishings in a home. In creating this new context, thought also needs to be given to how to balance the old with the new. For example,

while teaching students inquiry science, the teacher also may incorporate some skills of daily living (e.g., washing hands after the experiment) or generalization to everyday activities (e.g., caring for a plant while learning about life cycles). There also is time across the school years for balance. Some skills like beginning reading may be given heavy emphasis in the elementary years; others like job training may be more important in the high school years. The final years in public school (ages 18–21) may be a time when standards-based instruction becomes a lower priority and students receive intensive community-referenced instruction. Many adult programs for students with severe disabilities, including some college programs, also continue to teach life skills.

Because educators are new to this blend of individual life skill goals and state standards, what is occurring now in classrooms is probably not the goal for the future. The criticisms of Ayres et al. (2011) provide a useful reminder to keep asking how to preserve the best of the past with the finest of the future. Educators sometime embrace new trends like fashion without carefully weighing the benefits of both the old and new practice. For example, developing an IEP in which every goal links to a state standard will either overlook some important life skill needs the student has or result in some impractical links (e.g., linking self care skills to a math standard). In contrast, a standards-based IEP can have both goals that link to state standards and others that incorporate individual life skill needs (Browder, Spooner, & Jimenez, 2011; Kearns & Quenemoen, 2010; Donnell & Copeland, 2011).

#### *Reason #6: Individualized Curriculum Is Limited When That Is the Only Curriculum*

When choosing curriculum in the 1980s–1990s, educators typically used a catalog approach (Ford et al., 1989; Wilcox & Bellamy, 1987). In a catalog approach, the planning team selects what students need and want from a list of options. This is similar to selecting items from a store catalog where the consumer views the options and makes selections. The consumer does not begin on the first page and order everything on page one be-

fore moving to the next page. The advantage of this approach was the strong emphasis on individual student need. The disadvantage is that there was not necessarily a longitudinal plan. Students might work on identifying coins or reading the same set of sight words year after year. In contrast, state standards have been carefully planned to promote sequential learning. The mathematics skills in 4<sup>th</sup> grade build on those of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. When this sequential development of academic competence is paired with supplemental instruction in high priority life skill needs, students will have an educational program that promotes increased competence.

Functioning as an adult with few to no academic skills is difficult. To do so requires dependence on others for deciphering the mail, managing finances, and translating everyday events typically learned in school (e.g., What is a hurricane?). Jobs increasingly are requiring academic competence. For example, a machinist no longer simply guides the machine. Most now must apply geometry and even trigonometry to program computerized machines. A baker's assistant may be asked to set out trays of 25 buns in rows of 5. While teachers may try to anticipate every possible academic demand of a student's future opportunities referenced to the local area, it seems much more efficient to promote generalized academic competence with many opportunities for practice. For example, the student who has generalized the concept of creating sets of 5 from 25 (division), may do so in a bakery, landscaping, store display, party setup, or a variety of other activities.

#### *Reason #7: Students Are Creating the Changing Expectations with their Own Achievements*

The most important reason for standards-based instruction is that students are the ones ultimately driving this expectation with their own achievements. In the last decade, states have increased the academic expectations of their alternate assessments (Thompson, Thurlow, Johnstone, & Altman, 2005; Towles-Reeves, Garrett, Burdette, & Burdige, 2006). To some extent this was due to the policy requirements of NCLB, but to some extent it also was due to the fact that stu-

dents taking alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards were performing the academic items presented. In our (the authors') professional development workshops five years ago, we spent a large portion of time introducing the rationale for standards-based instruction. Currently, in workshops across the nation, many teachers share their own stories of students doing more than they ever expected possible. The following is a quote from one of the many teacher emails we have received in the last decade "The best part is that my students LOVE reading group!! I have a non-verbal student who is learning to eye gaze to answer questions. She has significant cognitive/ behavior/ sensory /physical issues. Her most challenging time of day is the afternoon, so I SAVE her reading instruction FOR the afternoon, because she loves it so much it will usually calm her and engage her interest. . ." (Nancy Pursley, personal E-mail communication, October 15, 2008).

### Summary

We appreciate the criticisms offered by Ayres et al. (2011) and this opportunity to present our perspective as a rejoinder. We acknowledge that not all teachers, parents, or students embrace the emphasis on standards-based instruction. This is true not only for students with severe disabilities but for all students in the overall standards-based reform in today's schools. Not all stakeholders embraced the transition from using mental age to focusing on chronological age for planning in the 1980s. We have offered seven reasons why we endorse standards-based reform for students with severe disabilities.

We also advocate for promoting dignity of students with severe disabilities. Although we may disagree on curricular priorities, we advocate avoiding demeaning people with disabilities in the process. Our strongest objection to the Ayres et al. article was the authors' choice to include a pejorative quote about a student's toileting skills. This quote stigmatizes both students with severe disabilities and their parents. As the popular press reflects, it is possible to procure demeaning examples and quotes about almost anyone's life skills (e.g., sending lewd text messages; public

drunkenness; weight gain). Some of these issues require real problem solving for people with and without disabilities, but they do not define people or their potential. In contrast, in promoting the best in each other through naming strengths, celebrating achievements, and honoring preferences, quality of life is enhanced for each and every member of a community.

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