

Functional Curriculum Models for Secondary Students with Mild Mental Impairment

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Abstract: This paper analyzed 10 commercially available functional curriculum models designed for secondary students with mild-to-moderate mental impairment. The models were examined with respect to the inclusion of functional curriculum components, the domains and subdomains of adulthood, the materials identified by the model to be used to deliver the curriculum, and the incorporation of best practices for teaching. Results indicate that none of the models reviewed adequately addressed the needs of this population for learning in terms of providing a functional curriculum. Overall, the analysis suggests that more appropriate curriculum models need to be developed, such as one that is designed to be balanced, comprehensive, and coherent for secondary students with mild mental impairment. In addition, more research is needed on functional curricula, including the components of this approach.

Following recent federal and state policies (i.e., *No Child Left Behind* [NCLB], 2002; *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* [IDEA], 1997, 2004), the focus of special education has shifted from process to outcomes. It is now mandated that teachers of students with disabilities be held accountable for their students' academic progress and outcomes. Thus, in this era of accountability and achievement, questions arise as to what should be the targeted outcomes for students with mild mental impairment and what educational programming best meets their needs at the secondary level in terms of successfully achieving post-school outcomes (Bouck, 2004, 2007). This article advocates for the use of a functional curriculum for secondary students with mild mental impairment, yet discusses limitations that may be imposed through implementation of the functional curriculum models currently available. It discusses issues teachers need to consider if they use or are considering a currently-available commercialized functional curriculum model.

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Functional Curriculum

A functional curriculum is a curriculum designed to teach functional life skills, or in other words, the skills necessary to live, work, and have fun in an inclusive community (Brown et al., 1979; Falvey, 1989; Snell & Browder, 1987). Components of a functional, or life management, curriculum are presumed to include the functional skills and applications of core subject areas (academics), vocational education, community access, daily living, financial, independent living, transportation, social/relationships, and self-determination (Patton, Cronin, & Jairrels, 1997). A functional curriculum is utilized when students with disabilities are deemed to need assistance in the above-mentioned critical life skills areas, and when the educational experiences these students are receiving in schools through the general education curriculum fails to reflect the skills necessary for their post-school success (Bouck, 2004; Retish, Hitchings, Horvath, & Schmalte, 1991).

While using a functional curriculum to educate secondary students with mild mental impairment may be at odds with current federal policy (i.e., NCLB, 2002; IDEA, 2004) (Bouck, 2009), the concerns about the post-school success, or lack thereof, by this population suggests that a curriculum focused on social skills, finances, vocational skills, and

other life skills may be what these students need (Patton, Cronin, & Bassett, 1997). This is especially so considering the lack of positive post-school outcomes for students with mild mental impairment. The population is traditionally associated with low employment rates, low independent living rates, and difficulty adjusting to life after school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Edgar & Polloway, 2004; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Although recent data have suggested improvement in some post-school outcomes for secondary students with mild mental impairment (i.e., decreased dropout rates, increased employment rates, increased rates of independent living), an alternative, such as a functional curriculum, to providing the general education curriculum, which is focused on preparing students for high-stakes tests and rigorous higher education, needs to be examined for this population which has a statistically low post-secondary education rate (13.4% in 2003) but potential for meaningful post-school contributions outside of higher education (Wagner et al.).

Although calls for the use of functional curriculum to educate secondary students with mild mental impairment have been made (Bouck, 2004; Cronin, 1996; Dever & Knapczyk, 1997), the field of special education has not given enough deliberation to the curriculum models commercially available to implement such an approach. This study explored and reviewed commercially available functional curriculum models targeted towards educating secondary students with mild mental impairment (i.e., marketed towards students with “mild” to “moderate” disabilities). While students with mild mental impairment were the target population, the curriculum models examined included ones that were geared towards students with moderate disabilities, given the position that mild mental impairment is not a “mild” disability (see Polloway, 2004). Specifically, this study sought to explore functional curriculum model options that exist at the secondary level and consider if these models are appropriate in terms of serving the needs of secondary students with mild mental impairment and supporting teachers who elect to implement a particular model.

Method

Materials

Ten commercially available functional curriculum models were reviewed: *The Syracuse Community-Reference Guide* (Ford et al., 1989); *Functional Independence Skills Handbook* (Killion, 2003); *Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook* (Neel & Billingsley, 1989); *Community-Based Curriculum* (Falvey, 1989); *Functional Curriculum for Teaching Students with Disabilities* (Bender, Valletutti, Baglin, & Hoffnung, 1996); *Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs* (Cronin & Patton, 1993); *Functional Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Students with Special Needs* (Wehman & Kregel, 2004); *Life Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs* (Mannix, 1995); *Adaptive Living Skills Curriculum* (Anderson, Bruininks, Morreau, & Gilman, 1991); and *Everyday Life Skills* (American Guidance Service, 2001). Brolin’s (2004) *Life Centered Career Education* (LCCE) is mentioned in this review, but is not evaluated as it represents a fundamentally different functional curriculum model in terms of cost, professional development opportunities, number of revisions, and endorsement by the Council for Exceptional Children.

Four charts were created or adapted by the researcher to analyze the commercially available functional curriculum models (all available from the author by request). The first chart (Chart A) was created by the researcher to analyze basic information, such as the age and disability focus, research conducted on the curriculum, resources available with the curriculum, number of revisions, and associated professional development opportunities available for teachers. It also focused on evidence of functional curriculum components, as defined by Patton, Cronin, and Jarrrels (1997), within each model, including: functional academics, vocational education, daily living, social/relationships, independent living, community access or skills, transportation, financial, self-determination, leisure and recreation, and communication skills. The second chart (Chart B) was adapted from Marriage and Patriarca’s (2002) review of “best teaching practices.” It identified the instructional strategies offered in each model, such as the use of sequencing, drill and practice

review, segmentation, directed questioning and responses, level of difficulty of tasks, technology, grouping of students (individually, pairs, small group, whole group), any supplement to teacher and peer involvement, and strategy cues.

The third chart (Chart C) was adapted from Cronin and Patton's (1993) domains and subdomains of adulthood. The curriculum models were analyzed for their inclusion of Cronin and Patton's six domains of adulthood and 23 subdomains. The six domains of adulthood included: employment/education, home and family, leisure pursuits, personal responsibilities and relationships, community involvement, and physical/emotional health. The subdomains fell within the six domains and included aspects such as goal setting, family life, general job skills, and travel. The fourth chart (Chart D) was based off of Hammill and Bartel's (1990) materials analysis, which had 10 major sections: instructional areas and skills, scope and sequence; component parts of material; level of the material; quality; format; support materials; time requirements; field test and research data; bibliographic and price; and method, approach, or theoretical base.

Procedure

The functional curriculum models reviewed were first selected from a list of commercially available functional curriculum models identified by the Center for Innovations in Education (n.d.). Major publishing companies were also explored for functional curriculum model materials. The complete list was narrowed by excluding any curriculum models that were deemed as not being comprehensive (i.e., only dealt with a specific functional area, such as self-care or self-determination), not geared towards secondary students, or were clearly focused on students with severe mental impairment or other severe disabilities.

Data Analysis

After selecting and purchasing the functional curriculum models that met the criteria (i.e., comprehensive, focused on secondary students with mild-to-moderate mental impairment), the models were then analyzed with

respect to the charts previously discussed. Thus, the curriculum materials were reviewed, the charts completed, and then the functional curriculum models discussed in terms of most comprehensive (i.e., covered most components) or "best value." When analyzing the models with respect to components covered, each curriculum model was given one point if it fully addressed a component (e.g., vocational, social skills) and a half-point if they partially addressed a component, such as within the component of transportation if the model discussed walking safely within the community, but not public transportation (Charts A and C). The other two charts (Charts B and D) were marked with respect to yes or no if they addressed components of best teaching or specific information, such as having a research base or offering support materials.

Results

The 10 functional curriculum models examined were all marketed towards secondary students with disabilities and, at a superficial analysis, could be considered appropriate for use with students with mild mental impairment. All models addressed students with "mild" or "moderate" disabilities, although they used various terminologies, such as developmental disabilities, moderate disabilities, and special needs students. While the models supposedly focused on the same curriculum components (i.e., functional) and the same student population, they were quite divergent. For example, in price alone, the curriculum models had a wide range (see Table 1). The lowest cost was \$29.95 for *Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Disabilities* (Cronin & Patton, 1993) while the most expensive was *Everyday Life Skills* at \$519.93 (American Guidance Service, 2001). Brolin's (2004) *Life Centered Career Education* (LCCE), which was not reviewed, was priced at \$995. Five of the 10 curriculum models were under \$100, two more under \$200, and one was out of print and no longer available for purchase from the publisher (i.e., *Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook*, Neel & Billingsley, 1989).

All the curriculum models addressed most aspects of a functional curriculum, as defined by Patton, Cronin, and Jairrels (1997): Func-

TABLE 1

Functional Curriculum Models' Price from Lowest to Highest

Order	Title	Cost
1	<i>Life Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs</i>	\$29.95
2	<i>Community-Based Curriculum</i>	\$30.00
3	<i>Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs</i>	\$39.00
4	<i>Functional Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Age Students with Special Needs</i>	\$52.00
5	<i>The Syracuse Community-Referenced Guide</i>	\$59.00
6	<i>Functional Independence Skills Handbook</i>	\$62.00
7	<i>Everyday Life Skills (without extras)</i>	\$114.97
8	<i>A Functional Curriculum for Teaching Students with Disabilities</i>	\$125.00
9	<i>Adaptive Living Skills Curriculum</i>	\$457.50
10	<i>Everyday Life Skills (with extras)</i>	\$519.93
11	<i>Life Centered Career Education</i>	\$995.00

Note. Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook is out of print.

tional academics, vocational education, daily living, social/relationships, independent living, community access or skills, transportation, financial, self-determination, leisure and recreation, and communication skills (see Table 2). *Functional Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and Secondary students with Special Needs* (Wehman & Kregel, 2004) covered the greatest number of functional curriculum components with 9 of the 11 categories addressed, while *Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook* (Neel & Billingsley, 1989) had the fewest with two skills covered completely and one partially. The social/relationship skills compo-

nent was at least partially addressed by all 10 functional curriculum models. The next most addressed components included vocational education and independent living, in which 9 of the 10 reviewed curriculum models partially or totally addressed each component. Self-determination was addressed in the fewest number of curriculum models (only five models partially or totally included it).

Most of the curricular models examined consisted of a single book, although there were variations in the structure and purposes of these books. The few that offered additional resources beyond the “teacher’s” guide

TABLE 2

Functional Curriculum Models' Components Covered (Most to Least)

Order	Title	# of components
1	<i>Functional Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Age Students with Special Needs</i>	10
2	<i>Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs</i>	9.5
3	<i>Community-Based Curriculum</i>	9
	<i>Functional Independence Skills Handbook</i>	9
	<i>Life Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs</i>	9
6	<i>The Syracuse Community-Referenced Guide</i>	8.5
7	<i>A Functional Curriculum for Teaching Students with Disabilities</i>	7
8	<i>Everyday Life Skills</i>	6
	<i>Adaptive Living Skills Curriculum</i>	6
9	<i>Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook</i>	2.5

TABLE 3

Functional Curriculum Models' Adult Life Subdomains Covered (Most to Least)

Order	Title	# of subdomains
1	<i>Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs</i>	23
2	<i>Functional Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Age Students with Special Needs</i>	17
3	<i>The Syracuse Community-Referenced Guide</i>	15.5
4	<i>Everyday Life Skills</i>	15
5	<i>Community-Based Instruction</i>	14
6	<i>Adaptive Living Skills Curriculum</i>	12
7	<i>Life Skills Activities for Students with Special Needs</i>	11.5
8	<i>A Functional Curriculum for Teaching Students with Disabilities</i>	9.5
9	<i>Functional Independence Skills Handbook</i>	6
10	<i>Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook</i>	.5

or edition included assessment materials (i.e., *Functional Independence Skills Handbook*, Killion, 2003), CDs, or other workbooks (i.e., *Everyday Life Skills*, American Guidance Service, 2001). Few of the 10 curriculum models analyzed addressed any research conducted on the model or its implementation in classrooms. Some curriculum models did provide research to support the inclusion of specific curriculum components (i.e., *The Syracuse Community-Referenced Guide*, Ford et al., 1989 and *Community-Based Curriculum*, Falvey, 1989), yet these tended to read more like textbooks. They had less emphasis on enabling teachers to implement the curriculum in the classroom and more of providing research to support the components or concepts included in their model. Furthermore, no curriculum model reviewed addressed any professional development opportunities for teachers in terms of teaching the particular model. Note: LCCE discusses professional development.

Few of the analyzed functional curriculum models addressed the ideas and teaching strategies found in the research on “best practices” (Mariage & Patriarca, 2002). For example, few gave explicit information regarding the philosophy towards implementing the curriculum. The majority of the models were structured around principles of direct instruction, as opposed to constructivist approaches (Swanson, 2001). Furthermore, few of the models involved technology, and most only implicitly addressed issues related to sequencing the ma-

terials, repetition of skills and concepts, segmentation, and controlling for difficulty of demands of tasks.

None of the curriculum models reviewed covered all of Cronin and Patton’s (1993) six domains of adulthood, aside from Cronin and Patton’s *Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs* which covered 23 of the 23 total subdomains. This particular curriculum model was structured around the domains and subdomains of adulthood and provided resources for materials for each of the subdomains. Although the remaining models covered many of the six domains, the subdomains were addressed to varying degrees (see Table 3). The adulthood domains of home and family, leisure pursuits, and personal/responsibility and relationship were covered across most of the remaining nine models. The curriculum model that addressed the fewest subdomains was Neel and Billingsley’s (1989) *Impact: A Functional Curriculum Handbook* (.5 of 23).

In analyzing the functional curriculum models with respect to the material analysis (Hammill & Bartel, 1990), the results showed that none of the models had an “appropriate” form for teachers. While the models consisted of different forms, none were assessed to be completely appropriate for teaching functional curriculum to secondary students with mild mental impairment. Some models placed too great a demand on teachers acquiring or creating their own materials (i.e., *Functional*

Life Skills Instruction for All Students with Special Needs; Cronin & Patton, 1993), others did not have enough application in the curriculum, and others were directed too much at teachers (i.e., references and citations) as opposed to activities or lessons for students (e.g., *The Syracuse Community-Reference Guide*; Ford et al., 1989).

Other issues emerging from the material analysis were readability levels, student support materials, and teacher support. To begin with, none of the curriculum models actually addressed the readability level of materials (Hammill & Bartel, 1990). While the curriculum models themselves were mostly directed to teachers, so readability level was not an issue, the few material pieces within the curriculum that were geared towards students were assessed to be at a reading level too high for the average student with mild mental impairment. In addition, not all curriculum models had support materials or additional components, leaving teachers having to create or find various components such as assessments or worksheets. The curriculum models also did not address teacher training or support for teachers during implementation as the “teacher’s guide” or “teacher’s edition” was the curriculum model itself. In general, the models did not consist of separate student and teacher editions, but rather there was only a teacher’s book (or guide or edition), with one exception, *Everyday Life Skills* (American Guidance Service, 2001).

Discussion

While each functional curriculum model had its strengths and weaknesses, none was all encompassing and could be portrayed as a solid, complete functional curriculum model for secondary students with mild mental impairment, when excluding Brolin’s *Life Centered Career Education* (2004) from evaluation and consideration. No one model addressed all curricular areas as defined by Patton, Cronin, and Jarrrels (1997). Furthermore, the varying formats were challenging. Some read more like college textbooks than curriculum models, making implementation difficult in a classroom (i.e., *Community Based Curriculum*, Falvey, 1989; *The Syracuse Community-Referenced Guide*, Ford et al., 1989). Others models were

essentially a book of worksheets to give to students (i.e., *Life Skills Activities for Students with Special Needs*, Mannix, 1995), while some were reference books that told teachers about materials, books, and videos that could be used to “create” their own functional curriculum by compiling materials from the identified multiple sources (i.e., *Life Skills Instruction for all Students with Special Needs*, Cronin & Patton, 1993).

The analysis also revealed vast differences in functional curriculum component coverage, ease of implementation, accessibility of materials with students, and cost. For an educator looking to implement a functional curriculum model, any of these issues could be a hindrance in implementing a currently commercially available curriculum model. Practitioners must weigh competing demands, such as comprehensiveness versus expense, time to devote to teaching a functional curriculum with time needed for depth of the different components, and a scripted curriculum versus one that involves supplements and teacher-constructed materials. In essence, each curriculum model comes with trade-offs, whether those are cost or coverage, and teachers, in conjunction with other educators, must make decisions regarding the needs of their students and the resources of their program and/or district.

Thus, what appears missing from the collection of functional curriculum models reviewed for secondary students with mild mental impairment is a comprehensive curriculum model that addresses all curriculum components (Patton, Cronin, & Jarrrels, 1997), involves community instruction as well as technology, is affordable, appeals to and supports students and teachers (i.e., engages students yet has easy implementation), and considers best practices. The ideas and beliefs of the functional curriculum, much abandoned for this population of students with mild mental impairment over recent years, deserves to be revisited and new models and materials created that represent a more comprehensive approach, addressing the needs of teachers and students (Bouck, 2004). These new functional curriculum models need to turn towards technology, utilizing practices, methods, and lessons that involve CD-ROMs and web-based instructional environments to cap-

ture the attention and excitement of both students and teachers.

The field needs to move towards providing a balanced, comprehensive, coherent functional curriculum for this population of students at the secondary level (Bouck, 2008). A balanced, yet flexible, functional curriculum model would include utilization of different theories of learning and different pedagogical approaches (i.e., skills, cognitive apprenticeship, modeling, social mediation direct instruction, etc.). It would balance the various components of a functional curriculum (e.g., functional academics, community access, daily living skills, financial, transportation, leisure and recreation, communication, self-determination, social skills, vocational education, independent living skills; Patton, Cronin, & Jairrels, 1997). Furthermore, it would balance direct skills instruction with a cognitive apprenticeship, students as consumers with students as producers, and individualization with community.

A balanced approach to functional curriculum would resemble a balanced literacy approach; however, instead of moving on a continuum from kindergarten through 12th grade and shifting emphasis from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; McCartney, 2004; National Center to Improve the Tools of Education, 1996), the shift in emphasis would occur with “learning to function” (i.e., performance) to “functioning to learn” (i.e., cognitive apprenticeship) (see Figure 1) (Bouck, 2008). The ascertainment of functional life skills needed for successful post-school outcomes would become a learning process across students’ school careers with the goal of arming students with the skills and experiences necessary to be successful in life, much like what schools currently do for students going onto traditional post-secondary education.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. For one, it represents one researcher’s analysis of commercially available functional curriculum models geared towards secondary students with mild mental impairment. Thus, curriculum models may be missing that are not widely circulated or the researcher’s perceptions may

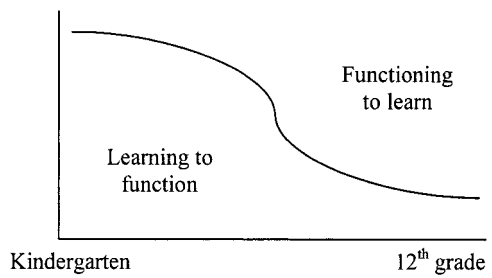


Figure 1. A balanced functional curriculum model.

be biased. In addition, this study does not attempt to elicit the opinions and perspectives of teachers, students, and parents as to the different functional curriculum models, but relies solely on the analysis of the written curriculum materials provided. This project also did not explore older, less known curriculum models such as *Problem Solving Activities for Teaching Daily Living Skills* (Luccas, Lenox, & Amey, 1982) or curricula geared to delivery by parents or in the home, such as *Steps to Independence* (Baker & Brightman, 2004).

Future research should consider the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents in regards to functional curriculum models. Researchers should find ways to capture and express the opinions of these key stakeholders in regards to the most essential components of a functional curriculum model and delivery modes. Future research should also seek to create new functional curriculum models, drawing upon technology, which has the potential of creating curricula that captures students’ attention and presenting them with meaningful learning experiences in the community, school, home, and places of employment. Research on functional curricula for secondary students with mild mental impairment should extend beyond just a review and analysis of functional curriculum models and recommendations for the creation of new and alternative approaches. It should include the examination of curricular impact on students’ outcomes, such as employment, independent living, access to the community, and social relationships.

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