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From Different to Differentiated: Using "Ecological Framework" to Support Personally Relevant Access to General Curriculum for Students With Significant Intellectual Disabilities

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Language used in the field of special education is important; it can serve to influence both curriculum and placement decisions for students with intellectual disability. Historically, "Functional Curriculum" was used to describe curriculum adaptations necessary for students to access their environment (school and community). However, the term has evolved to mean a separate set of curriculum standards primarily addressing daily life skills for individuals with significant disabilities. An unintended consequence of this term has been to suggest a "different" rather than "differentiated" curriculum for students and, by doing so, suggest the need for separate settings in which to deliver this differently focused curriculum. A recent paper by Hunt, McDonnell, and Crockett (2012) suggests the use of an ecological framework to guide stakeholders to maintain a clear focus on individual student needs as they provide access to general curriculum for this population of students. The authors suggest the term, "Personally Relevant," as a reference to curriculum adaptations made within the ecological framework to both access grade-appropriate curriculum and receive individualized support. This change—from Functional to Personally Relevant—promotes inclusive practices by signalling common curriculum that is differentiated, not different, for students with significant intellectual disability.

DESCRIPTORS: general curriculum access, inclusion, severe disability, intellectual disability, language, terminology

Since the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), emphasis on access and progress in the general education curriculum for students with disabilities has been discussed in terms of its implications and possible unintended negative consequences for those students with significant intellectual disabilities (McLaughlin, 2010; Thurlow, 2000, 2002). In these discussions, authors have reflected on the need to maintain the individualized nature of special education, concerned that an emphasis on alignment to content standards could promote individualized education programs (IEPs) written without attention to the student's unique needs. Historically, programs for students with significant intellectual disability followed the "criterion of ultimate functioning" or the need to explicitly teach skills of daily living to ultimately live an independent, engaged life in the community (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976). The intention was to move away from developmental models in use at the time and respect individuals with significant intellectual disability through their lifespan with goals and activities that support independent functioning within home, school, and work communities. However, as materials and IEP guidance documents (i.e., "catalogs of lifeskills," such as reading directional signs or counting change) were marketed to support instruction focused on student "ultimate functioning" that specifically focused set of skills became known as "Functional Curriculum." An unintended consequence of instruction aligned to "Functional Curriculum" was the development of a static set of community living skills and activities, where lessons could be repeated regardless of the student's grade level. For example, students could work with a list of preselected "survival words" from elementary through high school, with some words not as relevant to the student's independence as intended (e.g., teaching recognition of typical road signs for a student who will not obtain a driver's license). Furthermore, Functional Curriculum had been referenced in school leadership program textbooks as the appropriate course of study for students with significant intellectual disability to

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follow (Bayat, 2012; Glatthorn, Boschee, & Whitehead, 2006; Neel & Billingsley, 1989; Wehman & Kregel, 2004). Previous concerns surrounding a solely functional curriculum approach also noted that this separate curriculum was often equated with a need to deliver such instruction in a separate setting (Field, LeRoy, & Rivera, 1994). In essence, Functional Curriculum became a label for a parallel, predetermined set of specific skills and activities for students not following the same course of study as their peers in general education classes. Although the term Functional Curriculum was intended to guide instruction that promoted independent living, it unintentionally became the "something or somewhere else" to which students with significant disabilities were assigned. This separate path was clearly not aligned to the spirit or letter of IDEA: that all students have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

In an effort to guide practice that provides both access to and opportunities for student progress toward learning goals aligned to the general education curriculum, a growing body of research has focused on *how* to support such progress and away from *whether or not* to maintain a solely functional curriculum approach. This emergent research does in fact show *how* students with significant intellectual disabilities can meaningfully access and show measurable progress toward general curriculum standards (Browder et al., 2012; Collins, Evans, Creech-Galloway, Karl, & Miller, 2007; Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & DiBiase, 2012; Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2012). Common to the strategies that support access and progress in general curriculum is the intentional connection made between the skills and concepts taught and their relevance in students' lives (e.g., following class routines and asking questions when help is needed, recognizing and organizing information to solve a problem, drawing similarities between a literary character's preferences and one's own personal preferences, following a guided inquiry process to explore the natural world). In this way, recent research has drawn attention away from the question of *whether or not* to teach to general curriculum standards toward a focus on *how to teach* to general curriculum standards while maintaining individualized support for students with significant intellectual disability.

A recent article by Hunt et al. (2012) provides an ecological curricular framework to guide IEP teams as they balance individual needs of students with significant intellectual disabilities with opportunities to both access and make meaningful progress toward general education curriculum standards (i.e., Common Core State Standards). Using this framework, students with significant intellectual disability are truly "students" first, with a clear set of curriculum expectations no different from their same age peers without disabilities. Expectations are individualized for access to the general education curriculum based on each student's strengths and needs. The framework articulates a process of working with families and students to identify needed supports, adaptations, and modifications that "personalize" access to the curriculum, thus providing specially designed instruction that maintains the "big ideas," skills, and processes that are considered important for all students.

In an era of high stakes accountability, it has become increasingly important to develop clearly defined curriculum expectations for this population of students. Often teachers, administrators, and researchers have struggled to identify and manage a curriculum that represents both the academic rigor all students deserve to learn, as well as maintain the link to meaningful instruction for a population with tremendous diversity. To represent this unambiguous focus on curriculum that is differentiated by making intentional, personally relevant connections to the lives of students with significant intellectual disabilities, we suggest the term *personally relevant. Personally relevant* curriculum modifications shaped by the ecological framework connect students to their current school-based community by considering skills, settings, and relationships that support students' full participation in the school community. Similar to person-centered planning processes that individuals and families with significant disabilities follow to support community engagement upon transition from school, *personally relevant* curriculum modifications consider how access to and progress within the general curriculum creates natural opportunities for broader school and life experiences. For example, as students learn the principles of solving math problems on area and volume, they may also be working alongside peers to determine the best shape and size of a school garden; a high school class may read an adapted version of Hamlet, then share the stage with a drama class to present selected scenes to their school and community audience; after a unit on plate tectonics, students may engage in a fund raiser for victims of an earthquake in another part of the world; and a middle school student may share an adapted version of *Call of the Wild* with his parents, allowing them time to discuss topics like taking care of animals or knowing the difference between needs and wants. In each example, instruction remains focused on grade-appropriate general education curriculum, but with modifications that are *personally relevant*: modifications that intentionally connected the skills and concepts to the student's broader school and community experience. Thus, we suggest that the term *personally relevant* acknowledges individuals as "students first" (i.e., a fifth grader or a high school freshman), but, in that context, a student who needs modifications that the students themselves, parents, and teachers have identified as relevant to his/her life. In contrast to the term Functional Curriculum, this change suggests a differentiated, not

different, curriculum for students with significant disabilities. Although the argument may be made that this is simply a change in labels, we propose that the term reflects a level of differentiation that promotes access to make meaningful progress in the general education curriculum rather than a separate curriculum.

Language plays an important role in perceptions of individuals with disabilities in our culture. Acknowledging the power of language to support, rather than impede, positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities, in 2010 President Obama signed Rosa's law (Pub. L. 111-256), to replace the term "mental retardation" with "intellectual disability" in all federal legislation. In addition, Special Olympics and Best Buddy Organizations have used public service announcements, as well as social media platforms, to "spread the word to end the word" in an effort to directly address the misuse of the word "retarded" in our popular culture (thearc.org; https://www.facebook.com/EndtheWord). Additionally, language used in the "field" can influence the way local education agencies characterize programs and services for students with significant intellectual disabilities. For example, both students and programs were once identified with outdated labels such as "Trainable Mentally Retarded." In some districts, such labels have since been replaced with terms that focus curriculum needed by individuals with significant intellectual disabilities, such as "Lifeskills" or "Specialized Academic Curriculum." Although school districts will continue to use a variety of program names as IEP teams discuss special education placements along a continuum of support, this suggestion is made in the spirit of focusing those discussions on the level of differentiation needed to access and progress in a common curriculum rather than the need for a different curriculum. The use of the term *personally relevant* within the IEP process may focus planning teams to begin with the general curriculum and plan access based on individualized needs identified through a person-centered ecological framework. As noted before, for quite some time curriculum has been developed, even within the IEP process, as personal needs versus general curriculum access. As general and special educators in many states move forward with aligning instruction for all students to the Common Core State Standards, this change in language is suggested to replace "functional curriculum" as a more accurate reference to the demanding work that students with significant disabilities and their teachers do on a daily basis to balance the expectations of general education curriculum standards and individualized goals.

Historically, a change in terms in the field of special education has signalled a step away from labels that separate toward language that both acknowledges common bonds and supports diversity (e.g., "people first" language). In that spirit, we encourage use of the term *personally relevant* to describe those modifications determined by using an ecological framework for students with significant intellectual disability. With this change, we may signal a step toward a *differentiated, not different, curriculum* to ensure that students with significant intellectual disability be more fully and naturally included in their present school and future community settings.

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