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Reconciling Ecological Educational Planning With Access to the Common Core: Putting the Cart Before the Horse?: A Response to Hunt and McDonnell

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There is a well-worn joke retold with multiple variations, most of which involve either rival universities or college majors looked at with disdain. It starts off with something like "What did the political science graduate say to the engineering graduate?" and finishes with "Welcome to Starbucks. What can I get started for you?" The suggestion, clearly, is that what one learns in school—what one studies—will influence the sorts of jobs available to them and where they fall in the social hierarchy. Hunt, McDonnell, and Crocket (2012) highlight the current curriculum debate occurring in the area of severe disabilities and suggest that that a middle ground exists between these competing views: one emphasizing the general curriculum (e.g., Common Core) for all students and the other one stressing an ecological approach focused on current and future student needs. Their effort at reconciling these vying points is, in part, a way to provide educators with a framework to navigate the demands of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the needs of a students not captured by typical educational standards. The field needs an open, in-depth, and scientific discussion on this matter; any less would be unjust. In this brief commentary, I hope to draw attention to some of the ideas proposed by Hunt et al., first at the individual level and then at the broader level of the field at large. Regarding the tired joke above, there are some systemic issues beyond what students study in school (and how effectively it is taught) that have not fully entered the debate; as in the joke, these issues relate, at least partially, to employment. I plan to elaborate on this later in the discussion.

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At the Student Level, What Should Drive Curriculum Decisions?

Hunt et al. assert "an ecological curricular framework and state's core curricula will work best together when they are used to achieve clearly defined life goals based on the needs and preferences of individual students" (p. 141). This position takes a very person-centered, individualized focus on how curriculum should be structured for individuals with significant disabilities. The authors outline six steps for blending ecological and common core approaches to curriculum development. The first of these steps recommends identifying quality of life goals. I do not think anyone in the field would disagree that quality of life trumps everything else.

In spite of this likely agreement, two challenges arise. First, quality of life is a fuzzy, qualitative affair that we cannot easily operationalize and quantify in a manner agreeable to everyone. In an article about predicting quality of life outcomes for individuals with disabilities, Heal, Khoju, and Rusch (1997) noted that different concepts of quality of life stress different variables or domains with some as few as 3 and others as many as 15. Therefore, no matter how one approaches quality of life, disagreement at least on some measures of it will. Second, we need to also operationalize exactly what "works best together" means. If we looked into a toolbox, we could easily describe what tools work best in a given situation for a desired outcome. If we cannot really define the outcome (quality of life), we cannot know what works best. In this case, we need to know what the blend of these curricular approaches is supposed to work best at—that is, what are the outcomes we want to see: increased independence, integration into the community, secure employment? Regardless, Hunt et al. maintain a laudable focus on quality of life when identifying state standards to teach and quality of life is something about which I hope we never lose focus.

The authors go on to suggest that educators should "identify the critical functions of each selected [general education] standard in terms of enriching students' lives" (p. 142), and this is a very meaningful and important step but again returns to how we judge enrichment of student's lives. What are the standards for that? Because they are not universal, there must continue to be individualized, person-centered, and family-centered planning. Can we apply a meaningful metric to this? Can we judge this in terms of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)? Probably not, but we need to recognize the mandate to measure progress. I want to return to the AYP issue later but, first, I want to turn to individualization, along the lines that Hunt et al. suggest.

Traditionally, if an ambitious high school student indicated that he or she wanted to attend law school, the advisor might recommend that the student enroll in Latin as a foreign language because of the supposition that it would assist the student with the SAT, but also eventually with law. This is an individualized opportunity and choice afforded to most high school students. Similarly, in college, a student intending to apply to medical school is normally advised to take a lot of biology and anatomy coursework. Individual or personal goals and self-determination drive the curriculum choices. Should we not afford individuals with severe disabilities the same degree of individualization and self-determination?

Given the tenor of their argument, I think Hunt et al. would likely agree as they emphasize individualization and the personal relevance of knowledge. However, when discussing quality of life, they "propose that the definition of quality of life outcomes be broadened to include the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are good in and of themselves" (p. 141). This would seem to mean that at least some knowledge do not have a greater purpose beyond simply knowing. This may pose problems. Although they suggest several ways knowledge can create opportunities because of the things knowledge may facilitate, like helping a student to understand the world around them (e.g. politics) or enhance their community role, on the whole the premise that knowledge for knowledge's sake is positive overlooks so much of what we are trying to do as a field in education (broadly) trying to situate learning in meaningful ways so that students can actually use this knowledge. The goal should not be to develop students into repositories of random facts more suited to competing on trivia night at the local bar than using that information for contributing to society through work and other endeavors. Time spent in gaining knowledge that cannot be applied is time wasted. Over a century ago, Whitehead (1929) urged educators to avoid "inert knowledge"—that is, knowledge that is unlinked to real life issues.

Knowledge for knowledge's sake runs counter to other points that Hunt et al. raise. In their third and sixth steps (identify "critical functions" and teach within meaningful activities, respectively), they point out that teachers need to focus on teaching students skills in the contexts that are meaningful to the students. They challenge educators to identify the fundamental ideas of the standards and how they can contribute to the student's quality of life. The burden for educators is trying to modify or stretch some aspects of the general curriculum so that it passes for meaningful. What empirical (or logical) reason can be offered for taxing teacher's time with an exercise that can involve abstracting general curriculum standards to meaningless lengths? Hunt et al. point out a critical need for researchers to more closely examine how students "use academic knowledge and skills outside of school" (p. 146), and it would seem that this should be fundamental practice for all researchers in terms of social validity. In summary, trying to find a balance is important to improving student outcomes, but we still need to spend time identifying what precise outcomes we seek to achieve and make sure what we are teaching will produce those outcomes.

How Should the Field Frame the Discussion About Curriculum?

Not to be overly dramatic but the insistence that schools (and students) make AYP was really a watershed moment for students with severe disabilities. Probably not since PL 94-142 has legislative action made such a strong statement, indicating that the education of students with severe disabilities is important. By holding schools accountable for the progress of this population, administrators are now required to closely examine the quality of the teachers and the structure of their programs. Regardless of where one falls on the curriculum issue, I think we can agree that holding schools accountable for the progress of students with severe disabilities is important. The challenge again becomes how we define outcomes for which schools should be accountable and by what metric we will judge progress. A common set of standards (i.e., Common Core) on the surfaces eases this burden because it provides clear scope and sequence of benchmarks. This still does not mean that we should require conformity with a standard just because it is easier. Referring back to the law, some in the field argue that students with severe disabilities have a legal right to accessing (i.e., opportunities to learn) these standards and that educators have the instructional methodology and technology to teach them (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012). These points are indisputable.

However, two points appear open for debate. First, should we teach something simply because we know how to teach it? And, second, do the current interpretations of the law regarding access to the general curriculum adequately account for the diverse needs of students with severe disabilities (i.e., should we teach something because the law says we should)? To the first question, I would imagine most within the field would agree that

we should not teach something simply because we know how to teach it. When early curricula involved nonfunctional tasks like putting pegs in holes, teachers became masters at teaching that. Clearly, we do not want to teach that because we know how. We need to stop justifying what we teach by the fact that we know how to teach it. We need a deeper, more important reason for what we teach; students deserve that.

To the second question, should we teach something because the law says we should? On the surface, yes, but we need to question why the law says we should. Some might claim that it is a civil rights issue (Courtade et al., 2012) and that makes good sense. All students have a right to that curriculum, but that curriculum may not be right for all students. In the education field at large, there is still argument over whether the decision of so many states to adopt the Common Core Curriculum is based at all on evidence in terms of increasing academic outcomes for student in the United States. Tienken (2011) went so far as to point out the irony that, in an era of evidence-based practice and data-based decision making, adoption of the Common Core was an act of "data-less decision making."

In Ayres, Lowery, Douglas, and Sievers (2011), we argued that curriculum decisions really need an empirical basis focused on outcomes. We need to support any change in curriculum with evidence that it will lead to something better. In saying this, though, one could easily look at the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) data and suggest that almost anything could be better for students with severe disabilities than what we do now if you just look at outcomes.

Thankfully, Bouck (2012) took a less cavalier approach and examined data from NLTS-2 to evaluate whether or not a relation exists between the curriculum focus students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities received in school and postschool outcomes. Bouck reported that there were no significant differences between students who received a functional skills-based curriculum or an academic-focused curriculum relative to outcomes like independent living or employment. This would seem to beg the question: "Does it even matter what we teach?" Bouck cautions that data from NLTS-2 do allow one to judge the quality of instruction (which one would assume makes a difference) so there may certainly be some influence here. Teaching the wrong things well is of no consolation, so we still need to identify what curricula are most associated with improvements in quality of life. We need to identify, as a field, in consultation with families and individuals with disabilities, what outcomes we should strive to achieve.

Returning to whether or not the content of the curriculum really matters: If society is not set up to allow people the opportunity to live independently or work competitively (or supported), then what we teach is almost irrelevant. According to an analysis of NLTS-2 by Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, and Levine (2005), less than a quarter of young adults identified as having a cognitive disability are employed 2 years post-high school. Were these students unemployed because educators failed to teach them what they needed? Perhaps, but in a survey of youth with severe disabilities, Carter et al. (2010) noted that lack of transportation and other supports were the primary factors why many of their respondents did not even seek work. If the supports and opportunity are not there, regardless of how hard we try to teach, the outcome will be the same (and quite discouraging) until employment and independent community living catch up with our collective ideal. One part of achieving this is making sure that those architects of the system recognize the problem: There are members of our community fully capable of working and living independently, but the system or societal attitudes prevent them from doing so.

While this may be characterized as a pessimistic view (that all of our work on instruction and curriculum is futile), the situation is worth further examination; as Hunt et al. suggest, there is a need for longitudinal data, which follows students through school and afterwards. It is unclear, however, if a national data set will allow us to solve the problem. Rather, we may need more localized data where the systems and opportunities for ideal types of outcomes are in place. It would seem only within that context would we begin to be able to fairly judge what curriculum (implemented with sound instructional practices with high degrees of fidelity) leads to positive postschool outcomes. Recognizing that this sort of experiment is more of a pipe dream than a pending reality, researchers are left to struggle with how to best address the issue. The Institute of Educational Sciences has invested incredible sums of money into identifying evidence-based practices, but it seems that what the field may need is an evidence-based curriculum. That is, a curriculum that is shown to lead to higher rates of employment, independent living, and community integration for student with severe cognitive impairments.

Returning to the cliched joke with which the commentary opened, regardless of what one thinks in terms of where the emphasis in the curriculum should be and what should drive the decision making, the sad fact is that, for people with severe disabilities, the same opportunities are not available to them as are available to the political science major or the engineering major. If students fail to achieve the criterion of ultimate functioning (Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976), it may not be the fault of educators bickering over what to teach but rather the fact there are societal barriers standing in the way.

Despite this, Hunt et al. put forth a plan that may help guide teachers in the new challenge of "identifying academic content that is both aligned with grade-level content standards and that has a clear impact on the students' immediate and future quality of life" (p. 147). Their plan appears to meet the demands of NCLB while at the same time trying to ensure that student

preferences are taken into account and that quality of life (regardless of how it is measured) is enhanced. To begin reconciling ecological approaches and common core approaches may be a pragmatic step that will help ease the conscience of teachers while meeting legislative mandates, but hopefully, it is only a stop-gap measure until evidence establishes the most critical aspects of educational programming for achieving quality of life outcomes. While we have collectively developed a strong and still evolving science around how to teach students with severe disabilities, we have yet to document and understand the relation between what we teach and the outcomes the students (and their families) expect for them to achieve. If we fail to make these connections moving forward, we have left the horse behind the cart. And if we fail to create opportunities within communities by developing systems of support and inclusion, it will not make any difference where the horse is in relation to the cart.

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