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Prioritizing Instructional Needs of Learners with Severe Handicapping Conditions [1]

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Abstract

Traditional instructional processes have focused on assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. While these basic steps remain contemporary, there are gaps in the sequence which may adversely affect educational outcomes. Lack of congruence between instructional process steps, selection of nonpriority goals and objectives, unbalanced curricular content, lack of parent involvement in educational planning, and frequent absence of critical analysis methodology for the selection of Individual Education Plan goals and objectives represent central problem issues resulting from such instructional process gaps. This article focuses on a practical prioritization process as a method to bridge the gap between assessment and planning. This prioritization process is based upon a set of criteria which are agreed to by planning teams which include educators, related service personnel, and families. This process increases the probability that contextually relevant plans will be developed to assist persons with severe handicapping conditions to maximally participate in a variety of least restrictive, integrated environments.

Prioritizing Instructional Needs of Learners with Severe Handicapping Conditions

Special educators have adopted a generally accepted and widely employed generic planning process which includes assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. In order for this generic process to be optimally effective it must be directed toward an identified purpose and must be guided by underlying philosophical tenets . The potential purposes and philosophy may vary depending upon the characteristics of the learner, the context within which services are provided, and the characteristics of those providing the service. Each step in the process must logically be linked with the others and continuously referenced to the identified purpose and philosophy, with the realization that either of these two components may be modified over time. While most special educators practice these process steps, they often do so in rather disjointed ways whereby the identified purpose may be unknown, philosophical tenets may be unclear or inconsistent, and instructional process steps may be characterized by their lack of congruence with each other. Such disjointed, yet typically well intentioned efforts may result in educational programs which do not reflect contextually relevant learner priorities, lack longitudinal scope, direction, or balance between curricular domains, and do not adequately account for input from learners' families.

The purpose of this article is to outline a prioritization process to assist special educators, parents, therapists, and other team members to effectively bridge the significant gap which currently exists between assessment and planning . Prioritization becomes an

increasingly important process step when addressing the population of persons with severe handicaps because their needs are so numerous, intense and varied , while they exhibit learning characteristics which make teaching them an ongoing challenge (Brown, Nisbet, Ford, Sweet, Shiraga, York, & Loomis, 1983). The prioritization process assists teams in whittling down the vast array of potential training needs to a manageable number which reflects the highest priorities for a particular individual within the context of his/her environments. This approach is not meant to be used as a strict formula which magically will yield the correct answers. Rather it is a process which assists people in making important human decisions which will have an impact on another person, in this case a person with a severe handicap. This decision-making role is crucial to a sensitive, individualized educational process (Evans & Meyer 1985).

While this article relates to learners with severe and profound handicapping conditions, like the basic instructional process, this linking step also embodies generic qualities which can be applied to different populations, different fields, and different problems. It reflects a variation on a creative problem-solving process described by Osborn (1963) and Parnes (1967). This creative problem-solving process relies upon the generation of ideas in an atmosphere which defers judgment regarding the value of potential ideas until they are analyzed based upon selected criteria. These criteria must be congruent with attaining the identified purpose. By stretching our imaginations we may find that an idea which appeared to be a good one may in fact not be, while another idea which seemed ludicrous may in reality end up being an excellent, usable idea.

Major Instructional Process Steps Linking Assessment and Planning

Purpose and Philosophy

One of the most common shortcomings of educational programs is their lack of direction and philosophy. Those providing a service must have a clear idea of where they are headed. You will be unlikely to reach your destination if that destination has not been identified. When we lack this clear destination in special education programs we may notice a phenomenon which I shall call "Curricular Groping". Curricular groping is characterized by random changes in curricular content which are basically unrelated to any systematic analysis criteria. Imagine a blindfolded educational team searching for their unknown destination. With arms outstretched they wade through curricula aimlessly. Something tells them that they have not reached their destination, and in fact may not even be headed in the right direction, so they wander off in a different direction. Year after year the groping continues and the frustration of team members mounts as they tire of being lost in a maze, lose track of time, and are unable to find an exit. Then it happens; they run into a wall which concludes their journey. That wall is the chronological age of 21, the time when public school education ends. Our blindfolds are removed and for the school personnel the game is over. Unfortunately for people with severe handicapping conditions and their families the game continues, only without the safeguards of Public Law 94-142.

Our purpose in this context is to design a curricular plan (IEP) that will assist in preparing a person with a severe handicapping condition for his/her maximal, meaningful participation in a variety of integrated, home, school, community, and vocational settings

(Brown, Ford, Nisbet, Sweet, Donnellan, & Gruenewald, 1983; Brown, Nietupski, & Hamre-Nietupski, 1976). This goal is pursued with the realization that in some cases maximal, meaningful participation may include partial participation and/or may require individualized adaptations (Baumgart, Brown, Pumpian, Nisbet, Ford, Sweet, Messina, & Schroeder, 1982).

While the nature and scope of this paper does not warrant an indepth philosophical statement regarding the education of persons with severe handicaps, it is worth stating the value of an applied philosophy. Unfortunately, many practitioners view philosophy as distant and academic. In reality, having and continually modifying one's own philosophy can be an extremely helpful tool, especially when difficult decisions must be made. The philosophical beliefs of team members, including the family, will be reflected in the prioritization analysis criteria which are described later in this article. While identifying your purpose is like determining your destination, philosophy to an educator is like a compass and sextant to a sailor - they help keep you on course despite the fact that your destination may not be visible from your current vantage point.

Assessment Must be Congruent with the Identified Purpose and Philosophy

At the beginning of the school year special education teachers all over the country administer a variety of tests and assessments as part of the IEP preplanning process. Unfortunately, these assessments frequently have little to do with the identified purpose of the educational mission (if it has been determined). If we use the purpose which was previously

stated as our example, to design a curricular plan (IEP) that will assist in preparing a person with a severe handicapping condition for his/her maximal, meaningful participation in a variety of integrated, home, school, community, and vocational settings , then the use of a checklist based on normal developmental sequences would be incongruent with the stated purpose. Although developmental data is especially valuable at refined instructional planning levels, an outcome oriented environmental analysis approach to assessing the learner's current frequented and potential future frequented life-space environments and activities is more congruent with the stated purpose (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, Certo, & Gruenewald, 1979). For whatever reason many special educators seem hesitant to alter their assessment approaches because they believe they are doing what is expected of them and it has been accepted in the past. We spend time engaging in professional behaviors which are familiar and comfortable for ourselves while at times overlooking clear inconsistencies between our philosophy and our applied practices. In order to plan an effective curriculum the assessment must be congruent with the purpose of our educational mission.

Generate Potential Curricula

Once an assessment approach has been selected which matches the purpose and philosophy the team can generate potential curricular needs. Using our example, curricular content would be generated using the ecological/environmental analysis model referred to earlier (Brown et al, 1979). In this model major life-space domains such as domestic, community, and vocational are analyzed by identifying the person's specific frequented environments. These environments are then broken down further into subenvironments. For example, subenvironments at Joe's Restaurant might be the parking lot, entrance/exit area, dining room, bathroom, cashier's

area, and the lobby. The subenvironments of the Sharpe's house include the kitchen, living room, porch, yard, bedrooms, and bathroom. These subenvironments will vary from place to place. The subenvironments found at a rural farm house will vary somewhat from those in an urban apartment building.

Once the frequented subenvironments have been identified, the team members attempt to determine the activities which take place in those subenvironments. These activities are those which if engaged in will allow the person to maximally participate, at least partially and/or with adaptations. Groups of skills which are clustered together constitute activities. For example, matching is a skill, which if grouped with other skills may be part of a variety of activities such as obtaining money from an automatic bank teller machine (matching the card to the representation near the insertion point), folding clean laundry (matching socks that are the same color and style), or getting dressed (matching two shoes that are the same). Other examples of skills include sorting, classifying, counting, head control, grasping, and pointing. Only when these skills are clustered with other skills in the form of an activity do they become potentially useful for the learner. Typically clusters of behaviors which constitute activities are composed of skills from more than one traditional curricular domain such as motor, communication, daily living skills, or socialization. The real world is not separated into these distinct curricular domains; rather it reflects a synthesis of those domains. While skill acquisition is important, it is of questionable value unless the learner can apply skills to real life activities. Examples of activities are engaging in age-appropriate toy play or games, making a purchase, preparing a meal, showering, or taking a coffee break at work. All of these activities require skill clustering and synthesis.

At this point in the process it is important to defer judgment regarding the suggestions that are offered. Including any activity, whether it appears to have value or not, is important at this point in the process. All suggestions should be considered as potential priorities. By deferring judgment we may encourage some creative ideas and also send a message within the team that there is an openess to a variety of ideas.

Selection of Analysis Criteria

Once curricular content has been generated, your team will face a logistical problem which is a major rationale for employing a prioritization process, namely that the learner presents more deficit areas than can be reasonably attended to in an annual plan. Therefore, prioritization may be viewed as a tool to assist the team in deciding which of the learner's many needs represent the highest priorities. The criteria which are selected should be defined and agreed upon by team members. Figure 1 reflects potential analysis criteria which may be used to prioritize the instructional needs of learners with severe handicapping conditions. These criteria are rather general and are listed as examples, not as a comprehensive listing . Criteria should be modified by teams to reflect their philosophical basis. This process provides a useful forum for team discussion and clarification.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Using the Prioritization Grid

For organizational purposes the analysis criteria have been arranged in the format of a grid as shown in Figure 1. The vertical spaces along the column on the left side of the grid are available to list several activities which require intervention. This can be determined based upon a discrepancy analysis which compares current level of functioning with the level desired to access and maximally participate in future environments. It is suggested that a separate grid be filled out for each major life-space domain (e.g. domestic, community, vocational). Use your judgment in determining the quantity of activities to be analyzed - make the tool manageable for your team.

Scoring

Compare listed activities to the analysis criteria. Boxes formed by the grid may be filled in a variety of ways, such as by using a plus/minus scoring system, a numerical weighting (0,1,2,3), or a combination. For example, criteria such as Functional, Relates to Health and Safety, and Chronologically Age-Appropriate lend themselves to a discrete plus/minus system. Other criteria such as Frequency of Use, Interest of the Learner, and Parental Priority lend themselves to numerical weighting to indicate a level within a range.

Ranking

Rank each listed activity in numerical order in the space provided on the grid. As stated earlier, this process is not meant to be used as a strict formula. The activity with the highest score may not always be the highest priority. While the prioritization process provides a systematic way to analyze activities, the selection decisions are still meant to be made by people.

It is important to mention the nature of the prioritization grid as a tool. As with any tool, it must fit the job to be done and must be used adeptly in order to be useful. An implement which does not assist in doing a job better is not an appropriate tool. Sometimes adjustments must be made in the way that we use the tool in order for it to be most helpful. Fit the tool so that it is useful in helping you do your job better.

Cross Prioritization

Once each environmental domain has been assessed it is important to consider potential priorities in more traditional cognitive areas such as reading, writing, general expressive and receptive language, and math skills. Within the context of the philosophy presented in this article, these cognitive curricular components would be taught via functional activities.

Cross prioritization would entail listing a maximum of the top five priorities for each of the categories depicted in Figure 2. By viewing all of the potential priorities together, patterns may be noticed such as the recurrence of a certain activity in multiple domains. Once all of the potential priorities have been reviewed, it is up to the team to reach a consensus in selecting and ranking the overall priorities. It is recommended that the major input for selection of priorities be based primarily with the family. Parents who have experienced this type of guided decision-making process have stated that it has assisted them in focussing in on what they view as priorities for their children.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Selection

When selecting ranked priorities the writer suggests considering curricular balance as well as a shifting of curricular emphasis depending upon the chronological age of the learner. Curricular balance should be considered in an attempt to avoid developing a curricular program which emphasizes one domain to the exclusion of others. Shifting of curricular emphasis refers to differentially weighting curricula depending upon the age of the learner. It is generally recommended that an emphasis be placed on teaching learners cognitively oriented functional activities early in their academic careers . This emphasis would be faded over time regardless of the learner's acquisition of those skills. The rationale behind this fading is that if the learner acquired the cognitively oriented skills, those skills should be applied to environmentally referenced activities. If after longitudinal efforts to teach cognitive skills, the learner does not acquire them despite direct, systematic instruction, then the emphasis should be faded and directed toward more environmentally referenced activities. The level of curricular fading will vary depending upon the learner. This approach to early emphasis on cognitive acquisition and application is designed to avoid students being denied opportunities to be taught certain types of curricula based upon a label such as severe mental retardation. A balanced/shifting approach provides desireable opportunities for the acquisition of generalized strategies and skills.

Simultaneously, such a model supports an increasing emphasis on environmentally referenced curricula over time. For example, programs for elementary age students would have the greatest emphasis on domestic activities which would include daily living, communication, social, and recreation / leisure activities which would be used in home

settings. These programs would also include the beginning of some community-based instruction, as well as in-classroom vocational education in the form of classroom jobs. At the middle school level there would be an increased emphasis on community-based activities and an expansion of vocational experiences to include school-based jobs to be carried out jointly with nonhandicapped peers. High school programs would mark the beginning of community-based vocational education with a continuing emphasis on other domestic and community activities. The post high level, 18 to 21 years of age, the time when nonhandicapped students normally would be leaving the public school system, would be devoted to transition to post school domestic, community, and vocational settings which represent the least restrictive environment.

Selection of curricular priorities based upon the stated analysis criteria, curricular balance, and a shifting of curricular emphasis should lead to the development of a strong instructional program based upon the input of a variety of professionals and parents. A manageable number of the ranked priorities should be restated as annual goals for inclusion in the IEP. A danger of this approach is that a curricular program may be designed which is too narrowly focused. Therefore, the writer recommends viewing these selected priorities to be included in the IEP as a subset representing the highest priorities for an individual within the framework of a more global educational program .

Applications of the Prioritization Process to Other Special Education Needs

As stated early in this article, variations on the creative problem-solving process approach to decision-making can be applied to a variety of problems. For example, a student is in need of

a communication system to augment his speech. The school staff and parents agree that the child should be taught sign language. How was this decision reached ? "I heard about it at a workshop". "Our neighbors have a child with a handicap and she uses sign". "I read about it in a journal". "We teach sign to all our students, it's part of the program". Unfortunately this type of decision-making rarely leads to productive outcomes. Using the prioritization grid, the criteria could be changed to reflect important considerations for selection of an augmentative communication system. These criteria may include but not be limited to motor proficiency required, portability, audience (can nontrained people understand the message), level of abstraction, memory skills required, visual skills required, etc. The "Activities" column in Figure 1 could be changed to include potential communication systems. Then each potential system may be evaluated based upon the set of criteria. Selection may not be limited to a single system. Since nonhandicapped persons communicate using multiple modalities depending upon the context, it would seem appropriate to consider multiple modalities for persons with special needs.

Generic use of the prioritization grid may assist in making decisions about other important issues facing educators of persons with severe handicaps. Potential vocational sites may be compared to criteria such as wages, benefits, transportation, receptivity of workers and employers, interests of the learner, skill level, available support services, and safety considerations. Classroom placements may be compared to criteria such as distance from home, age-appropriateness, heterogeneity of the class grouping, class size, proximity to community-based training sites, and opportunities for affiliations with nonhandicapped peers.

Conclusion

The possibilities for tailoring this approach are limited only by the problems we face and our resourcefulness in applying the basic steps of identifying the problem , generating potential alternatives in an atmosphere of deferred judgement, analysis of alternatives based upon criteria which reflect our philosophy, and selection based upon that analysis in combination with our own personal experiences and knowledge. There is no question that educators of students with severe handicaps are frequently asked to make decisions which will impact not only their students, but also students' families. Such responsibilty must not be taken lightly and must always include those whom it will affect most. It is the writer's hope that the use of a systematic prioritization process within the framework of a larger educational process will lead to the selection of priority goals and objectives, assist in identifying balanced, longitudinal plans, will involve parents in significant ways and will ultimately lead to experiences that will enhance the lives of persons with severe handicapping conditions.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Prioritization Grid used for comparing potential training activities to analysis criteria which reflect a team's values.

Figure 2. Cross-Prioritization Grid used for viewing priorities from several curricular domains simultaneously to assist in overall ranking and selection.

PRIORITIZATION GRID

ANALYSIS CRITERIA

RANK	ACTIVITIES	FUNCTIONAL	REASONABLE GIVEN CHARACTERISTICS	FREQUENTLY USED	CHRONOLOGICALLY AGE-APPROPRIATE	USEFUL IN FUTURE ENVIRONMENTS	IMMEDIACY OF NEED	PROVIDES ENVIRON. CONTROL	MAKES CARE EASIER	RELATES TO HEALTH & SAFETY	INTEREST OF LEARNER	PARENTAL PRIORITY	TOTALS

CROSS-PRIORITIZATION GRID

ACTIVITY RANK	ENVIRONMENTAL			COGNITIVE	
	DOMESTIC	COMMUNITY	VOCATIONAL	COMMUNICATION	MATH
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

OVERALL RANKED PRIORITIES

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

6) _____

7) _____

8) _____

9) _____

10) _____

Source: Giangreco (1985)