

The Question Still Remains: What Happens when the Curricular Focus for Students with Severe Disabilities Shifts? A Reply to Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012)

Kevin M. Ayres
The University of Georgia

K. Alisa Lowrey
Louisiana State University Health Science
Center

Karen H. Douglas
Illinois State University

Courtney Sievers
Gwinnett County Public Schools

Abstract: This article responds to rejoinder by Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) of our initial article (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011) describing the importance in making individualized curriculum decisions for students with severe disabilities. We point out our agreements with the rejoinder (reiterating statements from our original article) while also stating overarching disagreements, responding to Courtade et al.'s seven reasons to support a standards based curriculum, and concluding with general ideas on future directions for curriculum planning, research, and implementation. We continue to advocate for developing personalized curricula that meet the needs of individual students.

In our original article (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011), we presented “the position that we, as special educators, should continue to increase real outcomes for students by focusing on students as individuals with specific preferences and needs resulting in a meaningful curricular development for each and every student” (p. 18). Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) offer a rejoinder that posits “a standards-based curriculum provides students with severe disabilities a full educational opportunity and need not preclude instruction that is personally relevant (p. 3).” Courtade et al. offer seven key reasons they believe that a grade level standards based curriculum (SBC) should be promoted. In reply, we will first, briefly outline overarching disagreements. Second, we will comment briefly on Courtade et al.'s seven reasons to focus on a SBC by grouping some of these together to provide a more cogent

discussion. Finally, we will conclude with some general ideas on future directions for curriculum planning, research, and implementation.

Overarching Disagreements

When one performs a comparison of the Courtade et al. rejoinder to our original piece, the overarching differences may not be obvious. Courtade et al. argue that “students with severe disabilities should receive a full educational opportunity” (p. 3), so did we (p. 12–13, 16–18). They propose that “students with severe disabilities should have full access to their schools, communities, and future job opportunities” (p. 4), so did we (p. 16). They propose that “it will be unfortunate if educational programs for students with severe disabilities only focus on grade-aligned state academic content standards” (p. 4), so did we (p. 15–18). The points of disagreement occur, not in these broad statements but in the interpretation of what these statements actually mean in the practice of developing and implementing educational programs for individuals with severe disabilities. The questions posed by Ayres et al. were never about whether functional

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kevin Ayres, Department of Special Education, The University of Georgia, 516 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602-7153. Email: kayres@uga.edu

curriculum should be exclusively chosen over standards-based curriculum. No questions were posed about whether or not students with severe disabilities (SWSD) had a right to access, participate, and progress in the general education curriculum or, whether or not SWSD can and should learn content. The primary question asked was “what happens when the curricular focus for students with severe disabilities shifts?” Four questions were posed in the introduction of the original piece (1) “At what cost do students (with severe disabilities) learn these standards? (2) Will these skills help the students get a job? (3) Choose where to live? (4) Actively participate in the community?” (p. 11). Examining Courtade et al.’s rejoinder, these questions regarding curriculum that focuses on a grade level, standards-based approach remain unanswered.

Much of Courtade et al.’s counter argument is based on the supposition that a SBC is actually meaningful at all (much less to SWSD who frequently have different needs than their typically developing peers). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are certainly a research-based set of standards. They were developed and linked clearly with skills and knowledge that students need to enter the workforce and college. A critical piece that is missing at this point is a careful examination of the role of SBC on the outcomes for SWSD. Are they more likely to go to college? Are they more likely to get jobs after leaving school? Are they more likely to live independently? Are they more likely to participate in their communities in meaningful ways? Research on alternate assessment seems to stop dead and simply evaluating progress on SBC without making cogent links to post-school outcomes. One study was found examining the relationship of skills assessed on alternate assessments measuring SBC. The results of this study showed that achievement of students with significant disabilities on alternate assessments was *not* at all related to longitudinal outcomes (Kleinert et al., 2011). There is not even a clear logic model linking educational programs for SWSD which focus primarily on SBC with improved access to employment or reduction in reliance on outside service providers after high school. Until that linkage is demonstrated, we cannot definitively say that

a SBC should be the primary curriculum for SWSD.

A second overarching disagreement occurs around the assertion that including a quote from a parent was stigmatizing to “both students with severe disabilities and their parents” (p. 15). This statement was made by a parent. The juxtaposition of instructional time spent on an irrelevant grade level standard while instructional time was needed on other individualized, family-prioritized goals is clearly articulated by this parent. This quote serves more to negatively mark the educational decision makers in this child’s life rather than the child himself. Ayres et al. provided this quote as the “quintessential point that begs discussion by the entire field of severe disabilities” (p. 12). Parents are much clearer in their discussion of services than we could ever assume to be. Authentic voices of stakeholders receiving services hold meaning for the field at large. While censure from parents on our practice in the field of special education may not always be pleasant, it is always something we should listen to. Feminist research has routinely employed qualitative and mixed methods methodologies to insure the voices of marginalized populations—including individuals with disabilities—are heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Giangreco & Taylor, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Through their work on disability and stigma, Green and colleagues (2003, 2005) have revealed harsh emotions, experiences, and perspectives of individuals and their families who have much to say about the educational system and stigmatization encountered. We echo the recommendation of Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba (2009) that the voices of individuals with severe disabilities and their families be systematically examined by the field. Positive and negative experiences with SBC should be examined to increase our understanding of how to improve the services we recommend and deliver. We stand by our inclusion of a parent’s voiced frustration with the current educational choices made for her child.

The Seven Reasons

Courtade et al. provide seven reasons to continue to pursue SBC. (1) SWSD have the right to a full educational opportunity. (2) A SBC is

relevant to SWSD. (3) We do not yet know the potential of SWSD. (4) Functional skills are not a prerequisite to academic learning. (5) Standards-based curriculum is not a replacement for functional curriculum. (6) Individualized curriculum is limited when that is the only curriculum. (7) Students are creating the changing expectations with their own achievements. It is imperative to point out several straw man fallacies in Courtade's response that are used to try to minimize and mischaracterize our position. These straw man fallacies will be highlighted as we examine their seven reasons for promoting a general education focus for SWSD.

Reason 1: Students with severe disabilities have the right to a full educational opportunity. By law, every student does have this right. The ambiguity comes in defining educational opportunity (Courtade et al.'s term which does not necessarily parallel the term access that is also often used in this context). We proposed that a full educational opportunity as defined by IDEIA included individualized curricula based on a student's prioritized needs (p. 12). Can a full educational opportunity for students eligible to receive special education services and supports include individualization? It must if we are to honor the provisions in both NCLB and IDEIA.

Are we, as educators, interested in everyone learning the exact same material? Working towards a "common core" suggests this, if the common core is all a student is allowed to address. The common core does not include skills and knowledge that are taken for granted by typically developing students: those skills that will lead to independent living, jobs, and social integration into the community. SWSD need more than the common core. IDEA provides the right for eligible students to have individualized supports, services, and yes—individualized curricular goals and objectives. That is not debatable. Not only do these students have a right to educational opportunity, they have a right to have successful, productive lives within the community. The discussion in our original piece was never presented as one *OR* the other but rather, how to achieve the correct balance (p. 16–18). Don't the student's and family's priorities have some bearing on what goals/objectives receive the most curricular focus? Students

with severe disabilities have a right to *full* educational opportunity. We, as researchers and practitioners in this field, must find ways to turn that right into a reality. Courtade et al. suggest we would deny this right to SWSD. This straw man attack is misleading at best. To elaborate on the points made above, we are not seeking to deny rights, rather we are encouraging policy makers and others to think about the issue with greater flexibility and greater individualization. Having a right to access, participate, and make progress in the general education curriculum does not mean one does not have a right to access, participate, and make progress in individualized educational priorities. A right to do something does not mean one is obligated to do that alone. We have a right to vote, bear arms, and speak freely but we choose within those rights the best course of action for each of us. When parents' and students' individual needs and priorities are removed from the equation, the discussion is less about rights and more about acquiescence to the one, sole curriculum. Perhaps it is time for students, parents, and teachers to again have greater say in what the curriculum would look like for an individual student.

Reasons 2, 5, & 6: Relevant, irreplaceable, and unlimited. In Reason 2, Courtade et al. suggest that SBC is relevant to SWSD by defining relevance as "the opportunity to learn general curriculum content" as "a right of every child who attends school" (p. 6). IDEIA (2004) demands that students be provided access to general education "in order to (i) meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all students" (118, Stat.2651). This access to general education includes access to the SBC. This was never in debate. SBC goes a long way to improving the breadth and depth of curriculum when aligned with long-term expectations. Tempering this however must be the goals and priorities of the student and his or her family and the actual individualized assessment necessary to identify those long term expectations. The Courtade et al. definition of relevance is, in fact, at the very crux of our disagreement about SBC. As stated in our original work, our position is that relevant curricula are "meaningful, individualized curricula directly tied to

increasing independence in identified current and future environments” (p. 12). “The achievement of general education standards *may be* the most appropriate target for some students with severe disabilities, however, one cannot know that for certain without assessing each student’s individualized needs in order to create a meaningful curriculum that addresses those needs not only in the present, but also in the long-term” (p. 14). A student’s curriculum is only personally relevant if it is related to long term goals and outcomes that the student and their family expect or want them to achieve (Shelden & Hutchins, 2008). As explained in our earlier work, we would recommend that individualized assessment include person centered planning to identify long and short term goals and careful ecological inventories of current and future environments and identification of present level of performance relative to those demands. Educational programming begins there. This is a dynamic process that evolves as the student masters content, changes interests, or moves to new geographic locations. By identifying clear, long term goals and establishing reasonable benchmarks inclusive of *all* needed content, the student and IEP team can track student progress and reallocate resources and time to ensure mastery.

Additionally, Courtade et al. use the emergence of postsecondary programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities as evidence for relevance. Courtade et al. assert “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” (p. 8). We wholeheartedly applaud the creation of these postsecondary programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, we see the continuing development of these programs as clearly relevant to our position maintaining that an individualized, meaningful curriculum is critical for students to achieve longitudinal outcomes. Zafft, Hart, and Zimbrich (2004) reported a positive correlation between participating in postsecondary education and gaining competitive or independent employment. Hughson, Moodie, and Uditsky (2006) found 70% of the participating students with intellectual disabili-

ties or developmental delay who graduated from inclusive postsecondary education achieved full- or part-time employment. Other benefits have been noted as well. Page and Chadsey-Rusch (1995) analyzed the experiences of four students with and without disabilities attending community college and found all four reported a positive impact on their interpersonal relationships through their activities and enrollment in the community college. All early data demonstrates that postsecondary programs increase the likelihood of securing paid employment. However, some skills are necessary outside of academic preparation to be successful in the postsecondary environment. Think College, the dissemination site of the National Coordinating Center, highlights the key differences between high school services and college services. For personal care, including getting to class, lunch, etc., they state “the college is not responsible for providing these services. It is up to you to find help” (<http://www.thinkcollege.net/for-students/understanding-college/high-schoolcollege-differences>). Additionally, they recommend learning self-advocacy and self-determination skills in addition to spending time in inclusive settings as does Getzel and Wehman (2005), Test (2004), and Wehmeyer and Palmer, (2003). Additionally, in their discussion of preparation and employment of youths with severe disabilities, Rusch and Braddock (2004) recommend “that high schools assume the leadership role in guaranteeing that all youths are competitively employed or enrolled in postsecondary education on or before their 18th year” (p. 241). One concern noted by Johnson (2004) in his commentary on Rusch and Braddock’s recommendation was that “an unfortunate result of this increased attention on academic courses in many school districts nationwide has been a reduction in career and technical education and work-experience programs available for youths with disabilities” (p. 245). If students need experiences in paid employment, preparation for self-help skills required in postsecondary environments, and lessons in self-determination by the age of 18, when does this become an educational priority? Using a curriculum design that is individualized, beginning skills in these areas can be embedded very early on. Using curriculum designed

solely using academic standards, they cannot be infused as easily nor do they become a priority.

Courtade et al. go on to say in Reason 5 that SBC is not a replacement for functional curriculum. Again, this was never in debate. We argued repeatedly for a meaningful, individualized curriculum that included personally relevant grade-level standards combined with personally relevant functional skills directly tied to increasing independence in current and future environments (p. 16–17). However, we did suggest “a student has only a finite amount of time in school to learn the critical skills they will need to achieve the criterion of ultimate functioning” (p. 15). If a student’s entire day is spent exclusively addressing grade-level standards, where is the time to focus on skills related to employment, community access, etc.? Certainly, as we pointed out, those skills can and should be embedded but this takes thorough planning and preparation by the system. Currently, statewide assessments are focused solely on grade level standards achievement. Our assertion was that “addressing general education standards just because they are general education standards does not end in meaningful achievement towards adult outcomes for most students with severe disabilities” (p. 15–16). SBC does place an incredible demand on systems serving individuals with severe disabilities. Because statewide assessments measure progress only in SBC and teachers are held accountable for this progress, the system creates an educational priority that seems to say the only important goals are those measured on statewide assessments. Thus, teachers’ instructional time follows suit (Kampfer, Horvath, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2001; Kleinert, Haigh, Kearns, & Kennedy, 2000). Furthermore, SBC cannot always be linked to relevant, meaningful outcomes. Policy makers must decide if trading instructional time for SBC that may/may not be relevant to a student’s adult outcomes is important. Courtade et al. seem to suggest that we would recommend teaching age irrelevant skills to young children like “teaching young children to vacuum” (p. 12). This was never suggested in our paper. It is another straw man argument. We suggested that teaching age appropriate skills in context tied to longitudinal outcomes was

the only way to make education functional and meaningful (p. 16). Further, we found curious their suggestion that we might endorse teaching things like naming coins (which is common fare in kindergarten) but has limited utility in the real world where the value of the coins and combining them to purchase things is much more important. In contrast, another point on which we would agree with them is on the misuse of training on irrelevant things like community sight vocabulary that is so often taught out of context and has no functional importance. Astoundingly, their assertions about teaching these splinter skills that are not meaningful to the student are no different than our assertions about teaching planets, stem plots, or algebraic equations. We insist that not only is the context in which the material is taught important, but more important is the relevance to the student, the links to their life and future. If the student needs to learn stem plots for their future job, it has meaning for that student and should be taught in the context of how it will be used in that job. Similarly, if the student needs to learn to vacuum and it is a socially valid skill, perhaps time should be spent learning to vacuum something that really needs vacuuming (general classroom chore, bedroom, etc.). We fully support teaching skills that have been determined through individualized assessments as appropriate for the individual student and his or her future.

Finally, in Reason 6, Courtade et al. further assert that individualized curriculum is limited when it is the only curriculum. If a student’s curriculum is designed following the procedures we outlined on p. 17 of our original work, an individualized curriculum would include relevant general education standards (from all to a selected amount), as well as prioritized objectives that include his/her most pressing needs. Individualized curriculum developed in this manner is not limited at all but rather tailor made to maximize a student’s opportunity to access, participate, and progress in the larger general curriculum. This type of curriculum is unlimited in the depth and breadth of what can be taught.

Reasons 3, 4, & 7: Potential, prerequisites, and expectations. First, let us address Courtade et al.’s Reason 4: Functional skills are not a prerequisite to academic skills. Another straw

man attack: we never suggested they were. Nor would we suggest that a truly inclusive general education setting has prerequisites for inclusion into that setting. Prerequisites (or the concept of prerequisites) were not mentioned in our original work. Rather, we suggest that students need instruction in those things that are identified as a prioritized need (p. 17). Courtade et al. highlight that all people are essentially interdependent (rather than independent). They provide an example of individuals without disabilities requiring help with personal care (p. 11). We agree; people are interdependent. Interdependence requires concessions and tradeoffs, even compromises. One of those tradeoffs in society is financial. It would be nice if we all had people to prepare meals for us and clean up after us. While partners, roommates, spouses, etc. do this for one another, the mutual tradeoff in duties often contributes to the continuation or the decline of the relationship. Unless one has someone in their lives with whom to barter over these tasks, there is usually a financial tradeoff. Paying for a housekeeper, a cook and someone to take care of maintenance in a home is expensive. If one is unable (physically or skill wise) to take care of these tasks they must have someone help them and in many cases, that someone must be paid. Given the pervasive unemployment of the population of people with severe disabilities and the current decline in assistance for social services, who will perform these tasks for them?

In Reason 3, Courtade et al. assert that we do not yet know the potential of students with severe disabilities. We agree whole-heartedly. And, while we do not know each individual's maximum potential, we must strive to maintain high expectations. Once those expectations are met, the student and team must move on to continue supporting the student to grow and learn. We must make learning meaningful at every level. If that is a physics lesson that is of high interest and related to a short or long term outcome, that lesson is meaningful. If it is a history topic that may not be of high interest but may provide an authentic opportunity of learning and practicing social skills and building friendships, then that history experience is meaningful. If learning about the scientific method generalizes to solving everyday problems, that is meaningful.

We highlighted much of the work done by Courtade, Spooner, Browder and Jimenez in our original work because they have been doing pioneering work examining the potential of students with severe disabilities and pushing the boundaries of what is known relative to learning complex academic content. However, we cannot charge headlong into a curriculum without truly understanding the relevance and day-to-day application or we may miss important opportunities and squander valuable time. To put a label on potential is to limit achievement. We would hope that we truly never learn the ultimate potential of any student involved in the educational system: disabled or nondisabled. Isn't that the very concept of becoming lifelong learners? Our expectations as educators should always accelerate with the progress of our students. The entire field of special education is formed around this concept of student achievement. The field was not formed because students couldn't learn but rather because they could learn so much when given appropriate supports and services. This ties in directly with Reason 7 presented by Courtade et al. Students are now and have always been changing expectations with their own achievements. From the early days of Victor of Aveyron to the current day Temple Grandin, individuals with disabilities have always been the ones to demonstrate how much they can do. We owe it to these individuals not to waste their time with any instruction that does not directly help them reach their personal goals and objectives. Letter naming for the sake of addressing literacy may be just as useless as a peg board for the sake of addressing vocational training. Curriculum must be tied to personally relevant outcomes that improve immediate and longitudinal quality of life. Students with and without disabilities constantly surprise educators by exceeding expectations. We are the ones who impose the limits by creating systems that force teachers to focus on one thing or the other for the sake of the system rather than the sake of the students.

Recommendations and Conclusions

We conclude our reply with some general ideas on future directions for curriculum planning, research, and implementation.

Creating a curriculum that includes relevant SBC and individualized priorities involves several considerations that we deem important. First, we recognize that SBC is beneficial to teachers. SBC provides teachers a clean delineation of what needs to be taught for the student to progress through school with their typical peers. However, SBC does not have clear links with post-school outcomes. Teachers must work to make these connections by developing strong, dynamic ecological inventories and formative assessments of student progress to make sure their programming moves students towards long range outcomes. Researchers must work to demonstrate these links to the field at large. If SBC is the primary curriculum, it logically should be taught in the general education setting alongside typically developing peers so that students with disabilities can take advantage of all opportunities (academic and social) that would be presented in this context. Innovative practices using the principles of Universal Design for Learning should be implemented (Weh-meyer, 2006). Individualized functional skills established as a priority for the student must be embedded in that general education context. Finally, student achievement on all target skills must be measured for progress, maintenance, and generalization.

Second, while we still contend that the amount of time a student has in school is finite, not all of this time is clearly instructional. With approximately 22,680 hours spent in school between the ages of 3 and 21 (a mathematical error was made in our original article), we have no sense of how well this time is maximized for student benefit. It may be the case that incorporation of a SBC is not in fact diminishing the amount of time spent on individually relevant functional skill instruction but rather acting to fill out the rest of the day or bumping other activities from the day (which could also be harmful if this removed the opportunity to take part in things like art, physical education, music, etc.). An investigation into the use of teacher and staff time regarding this issue would be useful. The most recent study examining instructional time for SWSD was published by Snart and Hillyard in 1985 (the study was not conducted in U.S. schools). A great deal has changed since then.

A closer look at how instructional time is being used with SWSD would be useful.

Third, classroom teachers need clear, generalizable models linking SBC to real world outcomes for all SBC they may be expected to implement. A middle or high school teacher of SWSD is likely to have students who span all grade levels at that school. Familiarity with the standards can obviously be facilitated by closer collaboration with general education teachers. However, making those links to life outside of school, to things students are likely to encounter on a daily basis is critical for the student to retain the information and skills. Maintenance and generalization is supported through use of skills across environments (Stokes & Baer, 1977). If skills are not used, the likelihood that they will simply be lost is greatly increased because they were non-functional (and had no meaning). If this occurs, any time spent on any curricular target (SBC or Functional) is wasted.

Fourth, as school systems move toward pay for performance models and attempt to identify ways to evaluate teachers of SWSD, we fear that standardized testing and evaluation of progress on a SBC is far too simplistic a path that will emphasize test scores for the sake of test scores without examination of the validity of what is being measured. Measuring and evaluating meaningful outcomes for SWSD has been the assurance of special education for decades. If school systems and the U.S. Department of Education truly want measures of teacher's ability to help students learn meaningful material, they will have to look well past state annual assessments of student progress in SBC and evaluate teachers based on increased student independence, reduction in needed supports, and post-school outcomes. These are not all easy measures to collect, nor is this a simple, standardized way to teach. Emphasis on SBC begins to oversimplify the process when teachers no longer have to look at what is meaningful after graduation and are instead incentivized to look only at the near term mastery of SBC that may have no link with post-school outcomes or even to the next school setting.

Fifth, any curricular decisions should still be made in close consultation with the student and their family/caregivers. Emphasis and balance in the IEP should not be deter-

mined solely by the professionals or should not be driven only by a school's desire to satisfy Annual Yearly Progress by preparing a student to take a standardized assessment. Family members and/or caregivers are best able to inform the school of the student's current and future environments (critical for quality person centered plans and ecological inventories) and they have the best understanding of what skills and supports their child needs to function as independently as possible in the home and community. The student is clearly the most important individual voice identifying their preferences in learning objectives and their own expectations for plans after high school. As stated earlier on p. 5, the voices of families and students should be examined. If individuals with disabilities and their families are involved in the curriculum development process, we are less likely to encounter frustrated (and confused) parents who simply need our professional skills and experience to support their child to reach their educational goals. It is unfortunate that Courtade et al. took offense at a frustrated parent's concern about the curriculum decisions that were being made for her son. This happens to be evidence of the unfortunate side effect of a SBC overtaking some of the fundamental needs with which individuals with severe disabilities and their families need our professional skill and experience to support. We conclude our reply by repositing our original position: an individualized, meaningful curriculum is the most appropriate curriculum to help students attain meaningful adult outcomes that directly increase their quality of life.

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