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CommunicationPoints

How did we get here? *A brief review of past educational trends*

Educating students with significant cognitive disabilities (SCD) has been an evolving process. Over the years, several approaches have been tried and gains have been made. Though all the approaches had their strengths and weaknesses, some were better than others. As we move toward access to the general curriculum for *ALL* students, this is a good time to take a moment to think about some points/steps along the way and to consider where we are going.

The 1970s brought students with intellectual disabilities to public schools for the first time. The Developmental Model was the prominent method for delivering instruction. Educators evaluated where a student was "developmentally" and designed instruction at that level, often ignoring age or grade appropriateness. Instruction delivered as part of the developmental model also concentrated on prerequisite skills. Students had to learn one skill in a pre-determined sequence before being allowed to move on to the next skill.

The 1980s brought about change and a movement toward a functional- based curriculum. The developmental model of the 1970s was rejected, and instead, classroom instruction time was spent on skills that educators believed would move a student toward independent adult living. The emphasis was on daily living skills such as purchasing, housekeeping, and self-care skills.

As teaching models moved in the direction of inclusion in the 1990s, instructional priorities continued to be refined. While keeping the life skills focus, educators added new concepts such as social inclusion, self-determination, and more assistive technology.

At the turn of the century, the focus shifted once again. In the early 2000s, there was a shift toward more curricular access. Teachers provided more instruction in basic academic content in addition to daily living, social, and self-determination instruction. Additionally, assessment regulations began to require the inclusion of students with SCD in the state accountability systems for the first time. Teachers began to experience pressure to demonstrate that their students were making progress in academic content areas.

After examining the history of instruction for this population of students, one thing becomes evident: historically, teachers *ADDED* to their instruction without giving-up anything. Teachers are trying to do it all – daily living, social skills, self-determination, *AND* academic instruction linked to the CCSS. Teachers are often overwhelmed when they try to fit everything into their day.

There is good news. Teachers are not - and should not - be expected to do it all. Prioritizing what is taught and how it is taught is critical. In order for teachers, and ultimately students, to be successful, needed skills must be carefully

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embedded in curriculum that is aligned to the CCSS. There is no one "right" way of doing things. However, there are a series of questions that can be asked to help determine what content and skills should be prioritized.

First, teachers need to ask, "**Do students of the same age do this?**" Typically developing second grade students spend their day learning to read, not learning how to do laundry. The curriculum of students with SCD needs to mirror that of general education students as much as possible.

Second, teachers need to consider, "**Is this skill REALLY necessary for independent life?**" Being able to cook meals, wash clothes, and clean your own house certainly contributes to adult independence; however, there are many students without disabilities who leave school without having these skills. Getting a high school diploma is not contingent on making your bed; instead, it is contingent upon reading, writing, math, and other academic skills. Students who leave school with well-developed academic skills are more likely to be successful as adults. This holds true for students with and without disabilities.

Finally: **"Is there a point in teaching students with SCD academic content they may never use?"** It is important to remember that education is a process. Typically developing students often wonder how they will ever use algebra or geometry in their adult lives and maybe many of them *won't* use much of what they have learned. However, the learning process itself results in benefits, most notably critical thinking and problem solving. Remember, the least dangerous assumption is founded on the idea that exposing students to learning is not harmful; however keeping them from it is.

We need to move forward with teaching academics to students with significant cognitive disabilities, using what we know works – systematic and direct instruction. We also need to add constructivist and inquiry-based approaches as well. Students must move along the continuum toward higher level and complex thinking and problem solving in order to be successful adults in this age of technology and digital information. We also need to ensure that individuals have a way to communicate so we can draw them into the academic environment, where they will be part of a learning community with peers and with natural supports. We know that embedding life skills such as communication and problem solving into natural routines is an effective practice, and students are more likely to retain and generalize the skills when taught as part of a natural routine.

We are not advocating throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. What we do advocate for is a re-examination of what works and why we do some of the things we do, with the goal of moving toward greater access to the general curriculum for *ALL* students.

As time passes, it would be wonderful if the 2010s were known not only as the era of the CCSS, but as the era when *ALL* students – whether they have a disability or not – achieved the academic and life skills necessary to be college, career, and community ready.

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Troubleshooting WebEx: Helpful hints

The NCSC grant uses WebEx as its online platform for delivering webinar content. Some of you may be experiencing technical difficulties, both with downloading and viewing the webinar itself and/or with sound quality on the chat. As a reminder, there are several actions you can take to make the experience more meaningful to you.

First of all, the use of headsets is highly encouraged. Headsets help cut down the background noise and focus your voice. Headsets are inexpensive and may be purchased for about $20.00 at many "big box" stores. If you do not have a headset, it is critical that you keep yourself on mute when you are not speaking. Being muted will eliminate extraneous noises, such as feedback, teachers talking in the background, announcements, and ringing bells.

When using the phone to participate in the chat, there are several issues to consider. If you are using the phone but viewing the chat on your computer, you ***must*** mute the speakers on your computer. Failure to mute your computer's speakers will create an echo and feedback. If you are just using the phone, please remember to mute when not talking.

Before joining the chat, take a moment to verify that your software is up-to-date. Don't wait until the last moment to sign-in; your trainer will not be able to troubleshoot technical issues with you while greeting the participants. It is also unlikely that he/she is actively checking email. Remember to call the WebEx help center for technical support.

- System Requirements: https://support.webex.com/MyAccountWeb/systemRequirement.do?root=Tools&parent=System
- Test Meeting: https://www.webex.com/test-meeting.html
- Online Support: https://support.webex.com/MyAccountWeb/supporthome.do
- Contact number: 1.866.229.3239

Keeping tabs on tablets

On our Teleconferences and in past newsletters, some apps were mentioned as particularly useful for particular purposes. The iPad is by no means the only "tablet" device on the market. Perhaps you received a tablet as a gift over the holidays, or maybe your school has just purchased some tablets that are not iPads. As you explore these devices, please let us know when you come across apps that are particularly helpful to students with significant cognitive disabilities - especially communication apps. Any information on new technology is greatly appreciated!

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Communication Corner/Voices from the Field

The communication tips for this month were submitted by Karen M. Nelson, Lead Support Therapist-Significant Disabilities. She is a member of the Louisiana CoP.

The contents of "Voices from the Field" represent the view of the author and are not endorsed by the staff at the National Center and State Collaborative, the Office of Special Education Programs, or the state supporting the CoP member.

Give them an idea, and they will succeed!

Do you ever wonder why a teacher doesn't use the voice output switch they have for their student(s)? Maybe it's because the teacher doesn't know how! It's not that the teacher can't program the switch; that's the easy part. It's often because the teacher doesn't know a strategy or how to have the student use the device effectively. Instead of just providing the assistive technology device to the classroom teacher and expecting that he or she use it, remember to provide some strategies, too!

In our parish in Louisiana, we recently were able to provide every classroom for students with significant disabilities and students with Autism two voice output switches. Each class received a Big Mac and either a Big or Little Step-by-Step ® (Abelnet, Inc). There are always a few teachers who are hesitant to use any type of AT; I knew something had to change to win them over! Previously when a teacher had an AT user in their class, they were always trained on the device programming. But, what seemed to be missing was the "How does my student use this effectively during instruction?" When delivering the switches, I not only showed them the programming aspect, but also left them with several strategies:

Scripting:

Have the children greet you **every** morning; consistency is the key! Program the device to say:

a. *Good morning.*
b. *I'm ok (This is a generic response, so be prepared if you know the student "isn't ok).*
c. *How are you?*

Now you have a scripted lesson. It's short, quick, and easy. It keeps the communication on- going and with more than a one word response. Don't expect the student to automatically know how or why he is using the switch. Provide prompts as needed.

- Teacher: *Good morning.*
- Student: *Good morning.*
- Teacher: *How are you?*
- Student: *I'm ok.*
- Student: *How are you?*

Reading a Book

- Use the Big Mac to read the repetitive story line
- Use the Step-by-Step to read all the other pages.

It isn't necessary to have one switch per child. You can have the children take turns using the

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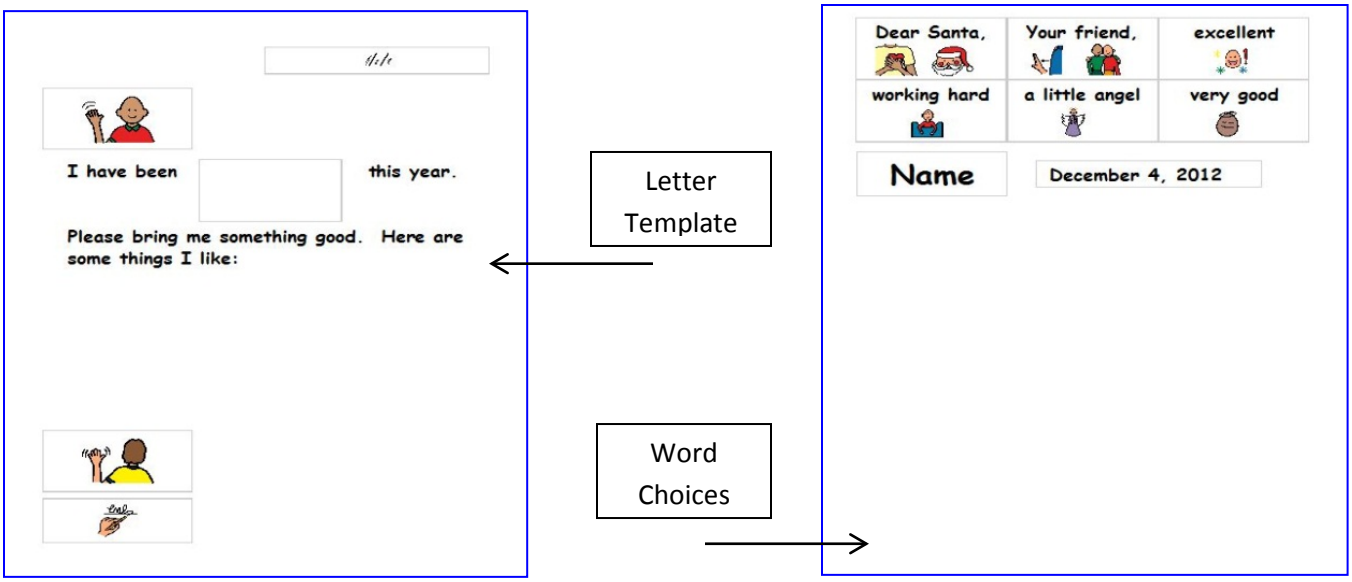
switch, let the children select "who's next to read." Reading a book provides language-rich communication opportunities. Don't forget, you can always use other individual icons/symbols or activity specific overlays for your core or supplemental vocabulary.

Written Language

In Michelle Kilcrease's (LA CoP) Southeast Middle School class, the teacher, paraprofessionals, and I all work together as a team. For this lesson the, students used the Big Mac switch as they participated in a school wide activity: writing letters to Santa. The letters would then be delivered to Macy's Department Store for their "Letters to Santa" campaign. For each letter received, Macy's would donate $1.00 to the Make a Wish Foundation.

All of the students were non-verbal, non-ambulatory, and had a wide range of physical, visual and cognitive abilities. Even though students had varying skills, each student was able to participate in the same writing activity being implemented throughout the school - writing a letter to Santa - using adapted materials. The teacher used all the same adapted for all of the students; however, each student was shown icons/symbols in different arrays of 2-4 icons based on their individual needs. This allowed the students to select the "word" they wanted to "write." Through the use of partner assisted scanning, the students made their selection(s) by using the voice output switch to say "that's the one" as the teacher or paraprofessional pointed to each symbol. The symbols were representative of the date, greeting, words for the body of the letter, the closing, and their names.

Keep in mind, many students required physical prompts and some are unable to recognize their name! This activity really demonstrated how students with significant disabilities can write for a purpose and use functional communication as they participate in a meaningful activity.



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The completed letter:

Greeting: Hi Santa, Dear Santa, etc.

Date

Body: Students were given symbol choices representative of things they might like to ask Santa for, as well as a symbol that said "a surprise."

Closing: Your friend, Your pal, Love, etc.

Signature: The student selected his/her name from the other student's names.

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