

# National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

## THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

*This Month's Topic:*

### Dignity, Function, & Choice: Ethical and Practical Considerations on Best Practices for Educating Learners with Developmental Delays

By J.A. Hyfler

#### Abstract

In this opinion piece, written by J.A. Flyer, the author offers considerations when educating individuals with developmental disabilities. Some of them we hold self-evident, but there has yet to be standardization, or guiding literature, of what should be normative when educating these learners. As such, the author is taking brief time to explore three concepts that need to be kept in mind when planning and executing a learners' education. The main concepts and questions explored are: Is the dignity of the learner intact at all times? Is the therapy or curriculum functional? And does the therapy or curriculum leave ample opportunities for the learner to make a choice? The author offers guidelines and examples of how to maintain these three core considerations that should be explored when looking at an exceptional learners' education.

There are many considerations to keep in mind when educating individuals with developmental disabilities. Some of them we hold self-evident, but there has yet to be standardization, or guiding literature, of what should be normative when educating these learners. As such, the author is taking brief time to explore three concepts that need to be kept in mind when planning and executing a learners' education. Is the dignity of the learner intact at all times? Is the therapy or curriculum functional? And does the therapy or curriculum leave ample opportunities for the learner to make a choice?

Dignity is something that one may find hard to believe would fall to the wayside when educating learners with developmental delays, but it does happen. At times through neglect, and sometimes by accident. For our purposes, let's look at a more accidental oversight of learners' dignity.

The main criterion for evaluating dignity during instruction is this: Are the demands we are placing on the exceptional learner the same that we would place on a typical learner? If the demands need modification, that's fine; as a supplemental rule, we never create curriculums for special populations, we merely take the current curriculum and modify it. An even better measurement is relating the curriculum to oneself or loved one -- would I ask this of myself or my child? Arguments in favor of the fact that, at times, we need to ask unusual

things to get the learner where they need to be, but this concern is child specific, and is thus irrelevant for our purposes here.

One example of this question of dignity I have come across is the notion that you can run 100 mass trials for a single academic target with a strong motivator. The science of behavior proves this notion. However, how many times should we ask the child the same thing repetitively before it becomes undignified? That just because the learner is operating highly off of stimuli, we ought to take advantage this? At times yes, but not in-so-far as having the child repeat the same thing 100 times in a row. If that is what's necessary for a goal to be reached, we need to reevaluate the methods of teaching, not drilling and killing. In my opinion upwards of 20 trials of the same thing, done consecutively, is call for pause and reevaluation. Again, back to the above mentioned criterion, would you ask a typically developing learner to repeat the same math problem 100 times in a row? If you would, you shouldn't. It is ineffective and slightly offensive and may lead to resentment. And worse yet, it does not respect the learner's needs.

For our purposes, function refers to two ideas: A) Is what we are teaching meant to serve a larger academic goal?; B) Is the skill/knowledge being taught going to serve a real-world, applicable purpose? One disclaimer on function -- I am aware that there are many different ways to teach one thing, and having novel ways of teaching is a great thing. However, as special educators, we need to focus in precisely on what skills are going to serve this student later in their academic and personal life. If a child is has the capacity to learn addition, they will learn addition eventually if it is taught. But if this same learner is probably not going to need addition, and needs more help learning daily living skills, then time is better spent teaching these functional skills.

For the first concept, using the same addition example as above, if we are teaching addition through adding coins, is there a possibility that this student is going to actually go out and use money? If they are not going to, but still will functionally benefit from having addition skills, then teaching through adding coins is not the best way to spend you or your learner's time. If the end goal is to have a learner be able to package forks, knives, and spoons, then a TEEACH task involving adding the proper amount of forks, knives, and spoons into packaging is more appropriate way of teaching addition.

For the first concept still, if there is the end result that a student will be able to independently tie their shoes, then breaking down the process, and beginning by tying a square knot is a functional way to learn. This inductive way of teaching skills is anecdotally and empirically proven to be effective.

The concept of function involving applicability is a very important. We need to know a few things before we modify curriculum for the learner. For instance, upon graduation, will the learner live at home, or in a group home? How much support in daily living will the student likely receive. If they will have ample support for moving around town, and not as much help in their home, then learning how to fold a shirt is more important than learning how to read a map. If they are going to work bagging groceries and not as a cashier at a grocery store, then learning that eggs go on the top in a grocery bag is more important than how to give change. Both are important skills, but which one becomes more of a priority in terms of how the skills will be functionally utilized? Furthermore, embedding academic curriculum into life skills curriculum is a great way to teach collateral skills – the reverse is true as well.

When thinking about function, it is helpful to classify priorities into an A, B, or C table. A being your most important, B important but secondary, and C least important. It is useful to hit all categories, but A should be the main focus when adapting curriculum, B should be touched upon and dealt with through embedding the material into the curriculum, and C embedded into the curriculum, but measured as collateral.

Choice occurs frequently and naturally in our world. However, when we educate learners of all abilities, we often inadvertently limit choice. Before going into detail, let us consider a few rules of thumb. As a rule of thumb, when running discrete trial training (DTT) opportunities to make a decision that directly involves the learners direct education should be offered once for every two to three tasks the learner is asked to perform.

As a rule of thumb, choice should never involve termination of the learning cycle unless the latency between one task and another is longer than 30 minutes. As a rule of thumb, choices should never be offered during episodes of maladaptive behavior (tantrums, property damage, *etc.*). This is not a choice when suboptimal behavior is occurring, it is a bribe. As will be discussed, choice is not only the decision of what to work towards, but also in what the learner wants to work on or with. Choice is especially important because it allows the learner to take a part in directing their own education, and can leave a sense of empowerment and pride.

One type of choice is the choice of what to work for – what is the learner motivated by. This can come in many forms, but two specific, frequent occurrences of this are when a learner is working towards earning something, such as dessert at lunch, or a token in a token economy. The second form is a preference assessment. For the preference assessment, we look at whether or not what we are offering as a motivator is effective and/or still what the learner is *actually* motivated by. As is noted above when running a DTT program, preference assessments should be conducted every two to three trials.

A second type of choice is basic. When the opportunity arises or allows, we should ask what the learner would like to work on and how they want to learn. Do they want to begin with reading or with mathematics? For example, if they choose reading, do they want to read a current events passage or a short story? And then, when they are finished, do they want to give an oral presentation, write a reflection, have a discussion, *etc.* Keep in mind, however, that while this practice is good, it can create an opportunity to avoid certain types of non-preferred learning or tasks. As an educator, you should know your learner well enough to be able to know when this issue may arise.

One of the most important aspects of choice lies in the fact that we, as educators or paraprofessionals or other service providers, control and prompt the majority of these learners' days. There are sometimes very few opportunities for these learners to take charge in their day because we want them to have appropriate social interactions or learn the material. This is all well and good, but children need opportunities for independent activities if we expect them to meet milestones. If we are always having these contrived scenarios wherein the learner is being taught, then we are truly doing a disservice to the future potential of that child.

Additionally, when considering choice with certain populations, the educator may need to act as facilitator of choices. An open ended opportunity to make a decision may not be in the best interest of the learner. Giving options of two or three possibilities may be more appropriate for certain learners. This option is especially enticing for non-verbal learners. For learners who are non-verbal and may have motor issues, eye pointing is an effective strategy. The point of listing some of these strategies being, is drive home the point that we need to give learners opportunities to make decisions.

All in all, if you are a veteran teacher or a just beginning your service, you should keep these three things in mind.; A) That our learners with developmental disabilities are still children and deserve the same dignity as any other learner; B) That what we are teaching should serve real world function; C) Our learners need to be able to make choices to take charge in their education. A veteran teacher may have so much experience, that they sometimes forget these things, and a new service teacher may not have thought of them. No blame should be felt, but it is often good to have a refresher, or a place to begin, when educating some of our most exceptional learners.

## About the Author

J.A. Hyfler is an ABA therapist at a private, pediatric clinic providing services to young learners with developmental disabilities. He has worked with over 100 learners with exceptionalities over the past half a decade in school, clinical, vocational, and home settings. He is currently a graduate student at Loyola University Chicago's School of Education, focusing in Special Education. He writes for a special education blog at <http://specialinterventions.blogspot.com>. He can be reached at [jhyfler@gmail.com](mailto:jhyfler@gmail.com) for comments or insights.