

Sarah Brandt, EdD, is an associate at The Institute at The Children’s Center for Communication/Beverly School for the Deaf, in Beverly, Mass. She has experience as a classroom teacher of the deaf, media specialist, and curriculum coordinator. Her current work at The Institute focuses on connecting research and practice to advance outcomes for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing individuals with developmental and communication challenges.

Rachel Benjamin, MEd, is a curriculum coordinator at The Children’s Center for Communication/Beverly School for the Deaf, in Beverly, Mass. She supports teachers in creating and modifying curricula to meet the needs of every student. She has experience as a paraprofessional, special education teacher, home support provider, and employment specialist.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at sarahbrandt@cccbsd.org.

Transformation: Reframing Academic and Functional Learning

By Sarah Brandt and Rachel Benjamin

On a late October afternoon, students in Ms. A’s class finalized their individual campaigns to run for class president. The students, ages 19-21, were in a transition classroom and—like all the students at The Children’s Center for Communication/Beverly School for the Deaf (CCCBSD)—were learning about the United States and its presidential election process. CCCBSD follows a theme-based learning model, providing a quarterly theme around which teachers base cross-curricular instruction. The themes are intentionally broad to encourage teachers to create instructional units that integrate academic and functional learning in response to the unique needs of each student.

For this unit on the United States, learners in Ms. A’s class did online research on various presidents and created a list of adjectives that made each an effective leader. On the surface, this may look like a standard social studies lesson. However, Ms. A also integrated academic and functional learning through digital literacy, online safety, and English language arts skills. Further, the lesson targeted personal

Photos courtesy of CCCBSD



Left: In the school kitchen, Brett blends academic and functional learning while building his independence and confidence. Many academic tasks can be integrated with a functional activity in the kitchen.

development by encouraging students to connect their perception of their own strengths to the leadership qualities of the presidents. Throughout the instructional unit, Individualized Education Program (IEP) objectives targeted student-specific skills such as commenting, relaying information, and following multi-step directions.

At the opposite end of the building, Ms. C's students, ages 5 and 6, explored the United States theme from a very different angle. These students took a virtual trip around the United States, focusing on transportation, housing, food, entertainment, and the Deaf community. As with Ms. A's class, at first glance the instruction may have resembled a typical social studies unit. However, the areas of focus were selected for their relevance and relatability; each provided opportunities for language expansion and discussion of personal experiences and preferences. IEP objectives such as American Sign Language development, object identification, and emerging reading skills were easily embedded to create rich, meaningful learning opportunities. Despite the difference in their ages, students in both classes engaged in transformative theme-based learning opportunities that embedded academic and functional learning appropriate to their individual needs.

Ms. A and Ms. C successfully illustrated transformative practices by implementing innovative teaching strategies to drive lasting change in student learning. While all education

should aspire to be transformative, as educators we sometimes get stuck in regular patterns. To transform our teaching, we need to reconsider our mindset, beliefs, and orientation. The authors engaged in this process regarding the dichotomy between academic and functional learning with the goal of improving instruction in our classrooms.

Academic and Functional Learning: Two Parts of an Educational Whole

The IEP forms the foundation of each student's special education, identifying strengths and needs across academic achievement and functional performance (Harmon et al., 2020). As described in federal policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), *academic achievement* includes classroom-based areas such as reading, math, science, social studies, and history, while *functional performance* is those skills or activities that are not considered academic, including activities involved in everyday living. While these definitions ensure that functional skills—which were for many years not included in student programming—are not overlooked on the IEP, they also create a dichotomy that filters down to everyday practice in the classroom as well as assessment, curriculum, and teacher preparation coursework.

In traditional models, younger students, like those in Ms. C's classroom, would engage in academic learning, mastering



Far left: Academic and functional learning can be effectively integrated into community-based settings. In the greenhouse, Reina focuses on science, measurement, and communication with non-signing individuals.

Left: A “simple” trip to the store is a powerful way to blend academic and functional learning. Here, Sevrina focuses on mobility and communication in the community, choice making, budgeting, and literacy.

need to be addressed earlier.” We recognized that areas such as daily living (e.g., cooking and kitchen safety), community participation (e.g., community access and transportation), and personal development (e.g., social pragmatics and employment skills) were traditionally taught as part of functional programs, including our own. We began to rethink this approach and consider how these critical skills could be integrated with traditional academics. This initiated a

transformational trickle down as change was effected for all our students, including those as young as preschool.

Applying a transformative mindset to the dichotomy between academic and functional learning meant letting go of previously held beliefs. For example, academic literacy does not always have to mean reading a book or writing a paragraph. It can effectively happen through having students explore a magazine, a menu, a social media platform, or a ride-sharing app. In fact, authentic experiences can drive generalizability of IEP goals, streamline lesson planning, and improve instruction in the classroom. Additionally, blending academic and functional learning supports the development of goals and activities that encompass a wider range of Bloom’s cognitive domains: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Bloom et al., 1956; Krathwohl, 2002). This can be beneficial for teachers seeking to transform their practices starting at the foundation: the IEP.

skills in reading and mathematics, while older students, like those in Ms. A’s classroom, would focus on functional activities such as cooking and self-care. However, our experiences show that isolating academic and functional learning does not benefit our deaf and hard of hearing students, including those with disabilities.

Attempting to categorize learning activities as exclusively academic or functional can be limiting. As educators, we seek to set objectives, design activities, and teach lessons that are, at their core, both practical and useful, and thereby functional as well as academic. It can be beneficial to shift the mindset and consider how traditional academics can be functional, and how traditional functional activities can be academic. This opens the door to employing transformative practices that empower creativity, deep learning, and more effective teaching. Blending academic and functional learning can transform educational practice and lead to lasting change.

From Transition to Preschool: Transformational Trickle Down

Are we preparing all students for adult life? Is our instruction effective and aligned to state standards? At CCCBSD, these were the questions our working group asked as we began our reexamination of classroom practices. While we had a solid foundation from which to build, we quickly realized we could implement innovative and transformative practices by redefining how we thought about and actively integrated academic and functional learning.

Initially, our working group sought to consider the effectiveness of our programming for students ages 14-22 years old who were beginning their transition into adult life. However, our discussions continually returned to comments such as, “This is important for everyone,” and “These skills

Reframing a Program: Five Tips

Through reflection on this multi-year transition in mindset, we identified five tips to help educators seeking to transform their practice by blending academic and functional learning:

1. **Think long-term.** Thinking long-term means more than setting an annual IEP goal or preparing for the next instructional unit. Rather, educators step back and consider how a goal or lesson fits with the vision outlined in the IEP for each deaf and hard of hearing student. Is the student preparing to enter college? To seek employment? To engage in a community group setting? The IEP team—including the family and student—

should discuss these questions to ensure academic and functional learning are blended and that IEP goals and instructional planning are tied to life goals.

2. **Plan strategically.** Deaf and hard of hearing students often enter our classes with gaps in academic skills and splintered knowledge (Pagliaro & Kritzer, 2012). As they grow, these gaps and splinters may become more impactful, and educators sometimes wonder, “How can I get through all this?” Blending academic and functional learning allows educators to step back and plan strategically. The students’ existing skills and long-term vision for their success determine the greatest teaching priorities. For deaf and hard of hearing students, particularly those with disabilities, this means planning strategically. What is truly significant? Strong academic skills devoid of the ability to use those skills with others will not prepare a student effectively. Rather, educators can select academic skills strategically to transform their instruction. Not all gaps may need to be filled.
3. **Apply a 21st century perspective.** It is critical that educators prepare their deaf and hard of hearing students for the world in which they live. Are students more likely to read a newspaper or access news online? Is it more important for students to memorize their multiplication tables or to know how to use a calculator app on their phone? Teachers can apply a 21st century perspective by setting IEP goals and planning activities that are

appropriate for a student’s long-term goals. Additionally, teachers should provide these activities in a format reflective of the world in which they live and the future into which they will grow. This may mean, for example, that instead of spending undue time on coin and bill identification, Ms. C’s students use imaginative play to begin to learn about debit cards and safe digital options for payments.

4. **Focus on the S’s: social pragmatics, safety, self-advocacy, and sexuality and health.** Many deaf and hard of hearing students face challenges in developing pragmatic skills, which can impact social communication, interactions, and relationships (Szarkowski et al., 2020). As a part of their social-pragmatic development, students need appropriate safety and self-advocacy skills. For example, consider a student in Ms. A’s class who, with his team, set a long-term goal of interviewing for and gaining employment at a local restaurant. This would guide important teaching objectives and learning activities as the student focused on communication skills to interact effectively with supervisors and customers, literacy skills to understand the menu and take orders, and math skills to charge customers for their meals. It would also involve teaching skills in self-advocacy. For example, if another employee were to use abusive language or act in a sexually inappropriate way, the student would need self-advocacy and safety skills to seek support. Across their lifespan, all deaf and hard of hearing students—including

Right: Reframed learning can truly take place anywhere. In the classroom, Becca and her peers make bread dough, targeting reading a recipe and measurement for cooking. When it is time to bake the bread, they focus on working collaboratively and safety in the kitchen.

Far right: While in the community, Connor applies his literacy skills and practices independent mobility. He has a deep interest in travel, which is fostered by his involvement in planning this community outing.





Left: Yariel participated in a Turkey Trot event that provided a meaningful way to target social-pragmatic skills (e.g., winning/losing, supporting others), health and wellness, and math (e.g., elapsed time, rank order).

those with disabilities—will navigate relationships, identity, body, and sexuality issues; they will have a need for self-advocacy across many contexts. Teaching needs to start early. Even students as young as those in Ms. C’s class can focus on language and social pragmatics related to the concept of consent.

5. **Embed exploration opportunities.** Moving learning from the classroom into the community can be effective in addressing a multitude of IEP goals simultaneously. For example, traditional academic goals, such as math computation or making predictions while reading, can be integrated into a student’s active involvement in the planning, decision making, and execution of a community outing. As part of the instructional unit on the United States, Ms. A’s students may decide they want to learn more about their local government. In doing so, they could send a professional e-mail to the mayor’s office, furthering their skills in composition, social pragmatics, and digital literacy. Then they could plan a visit to the town hall by taking public transportation, fostering skills in time management, budgeting and spending, and community access. Moving some traditional academic activities into the context of authentic experiences is an effective way to transform instruction. Learning in context can also highlight gaps in students’ incidental knowledge (Hauser et al., 2010), allowing educators to strategically plan how to address those needs.

Perhaps some adults look back at their own education and wish they had learned less about the traditional academic skill of understanding parallelograms and more about the functional skill of filing taxes. Our process at CCCBSD was certainly not linear, and we are still pursuing transformation in our teaching and learning. However, reframing our

understanding of academic and functional learning has improved our teaching by providing students with strategically designed instruction within authentic contexts. By shifting our mindset and integrating academic and functional learning, we are transforming our practices and creating meaningful learning for our deaf and hard of hearing students, including those with disabilities.

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AT-A-GLANCE

Reframing Academic and Functional Learning

	TRADITIONAL APPROACH	REFRAMED APPROACH
Think long-term	Students are engaged in academic-only activities until at least age 14. Consideration of functional learning does not begin until transition.	Academics at all ages are provided in the context of authentic, functional activities that are connected to a long-term vision.
Plan strategically	An IEP goal is written for identifying time and understanding on an analog clock. The goal is repeated over several years.	An IEP goal is written for identifying and understanding time using a variety of strategies: digital/analog clocks, text-to-speech (when appropriate), and use of smart devices.
Apply a 21st century perspective	Students are required to put personal devices (e.g., cell phones) away when it is time for learning. These are not accessed during the school day.	Safe and appropriate use of personal devices is integrated into students' daily activities. For example, deaf and hard of hearing students bring cell phones on a community outing and practice using their devices to communicate with non-signers.
Focus on the S's: social pragmatics, safety, self-advocacy, and sexuality and health	Deaf and hard of hearing students learn surface-level information about body changes and sexual health, often started later in adolescence. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing with disabilities often are not exposed to these topics at all.	All deaf and hard of hearing students, including those with disabilities, engage in human development education (e.g., sexuality, gender identity, communication and relationships, self-advocacy/consent) that is age- and developmentally appropriate.
Embed exploration opportunities	Exploration opportunities are facilitated by a teacher or transition coordinator starting during transition age (i.e., age 14). The student is in a passive role, and their preferences, input, and goals may not be reflected.	Exploration opportunities (e.g., job placements, community outings) are facilitated by the student, teacher, and transition and/or curriculum coordinator. The student's preferences, input, and goals drive the planning of these opportunities.