
To encourage dialogue among professionals, this occasional feature is a forum for the opinions, ideas, and work of a variety of constituents concerned about learning disabilities. For criteria and submission guidelines, please visit www.cldinternational.org and select Publications.

COMMENTARY

“THE TIME HAS COME,” THE WALRUS SAID, “TO SPEAK OF MANY THINGS!”

Nancy Weidner Larson
Minnesota Department of Education.

As a special educator, I find myself in an ever-increasing “Mad Hatter-March Hare” sort of existence. I wonder if you too are having trouble just trying to keep up? This is true on many special education fronts: in curriculum, in classroom settings, and in the sheer complexity of our professional conversations. In particular, how did “rigorous and high” curriculum standards become the desired goal for all students? Whatever happened to “reasonable” standards, goals and expectations that used to be acceptable back here in the trenches, where most of us reside?

When I think of “rigorous,” I immediately envision Arctic explorer Anne Bancroft trekking through snow and ice, dragging a dogsled by a shoulder harness, or Lance Armstrong making that final uphill push in the French Alps. Must all of us strive to achieve universal rigorous levels? It would appear that few of us are either motivated enough or talented enough to be able to achieve “high or rigorous” standards. For my part, I think it may be enough to achieve “reasonable” goals. Frustrated parents, students, and teachers may agree.

A Tweedle Dum, Tweedle Dee “rigor” issue in my current world is the widely accepted notion that special or general education interventions and curricula must be “scientifically research based,” or variants thereof such as “scientifically based,” “peer reviewed,” “peer juried” and “data driven” (No Child Left Behind Act). Much of what we know from special education research, just like in other disciplines, is narrowly construed and focused on relative minutia; for example, time on task, reading fluency, or short-term memory. As a consequence, we find ourselves in a place similar to those embracing the new frontier in brain research: We are on the cusp of an explosion of information about research-based practice, but right now we don’t have many “research-based” practices on which to hang our hats. Those few practices we know for sure are effective can be named on the fingers of one hand: direct instruction works; strategy instruction works; children who are safe, alert and fed do better than those who are not; children who are instructed in small, intensive settings have a better chance of improving their skills; and students who achieve at levels one and one-half standard deviations below their peers can make progress but do not catch up (yes, there are a few more fingers). Still, mostly we know how to apply research findings when it comes to teaching basic reading skills to young students. In more complex areas such as math application and reading comprehension, we do not yet have the body of “scientific” evidence needed to make “research based” practice more than a hope for the future.

I must have been taking a Cheshire cat nap when confusion arose about the value of special education settings. The thought goes something like this: Children with disabilities are better off in general education classrooms because special education classrooms are somehow inferior or produce minimal results (the opposite of “rigorous”). As may be obvious, students in more restrictive settings typically have more serious learning and behavioral issues

and, therefore, may make less progress. Go figure! Students with learning disabilities often do better and are more comfortable in special education settings. Could there be other factors in the equation? Could distractibility be a factor for some? Could a reluctance to display learning problems in front of a whole class be a factor for others? What happened to the concept of tailoring the program to the “individual”?

Still, the apparent dream is that students with learning disabilities, despite being identified as not doing well (actually failing) in general education, must be placed in general education so they will do better. Why? Didn't these students just come from general education where they were performing poorly? Is this not a circular fallacy? Students with learning disabilities don't do well in this setting, so they must remain in that setting and they will do better? The corollary to this mandate is that the best model for all special education is inclusive classrooms, where special education teachers potentially function as extremely well-educated (“highly qualified”?) and expensive paraprofessionals. Also, full implementation of this model requires one special education teacher for each general education teacher for every hour of the school day at all grade levels. Imagine the expense.

The world of general education as it interfaces with the world of special education is becoming so complex that most teachers are on overload. We have previously learned that occupying space in a general education classroom is not the same as participating in general education, that subsidized employment at McDonald's is not the same as competitive employment, and that it is important to remember that we all have our strengths and our weaknesses.

It is time to resolve the convoluted thinking that mandates the “same” high (“rigorous”) grade-level standards for all. One of the things that we know for sure in special education is that one size does not fit all, and that the same standards for everyone, rigorous or not, will not result in the same outcomes. Teaching children with disabilities is a complicated task and requires more instantaneous responses more often than most adults can handle. Let's get over our strange visions of “sameness” and embrace “reasonable” as our bar. Life doesn't have to be that harsh, or should I say, “rigorous”!

Requests for reprints should be addressed to: Nancy W. Larson, Minnesota Department of Education, 1500 Highway 36 West, Roseville. MN 55113; Nancy.Larson@state.mn.us