intelligent lives | OPENING DOORS

Presuming Competence as the Least Dangerous Assumption

Naieer Shaheed, right, listens to U.S. History teacher Samuel Texeira during a class at Dr. William W. Henderson High School in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

Imagine you are about to meet a new student with a label of intellectual disability who next year will be coming to your high school. Recent assessments have determined that her I.Q. is 40 and she has a developmental age of 36 months. She has seizures and sensory processing difficulties. She has no conventional way to communicate. When she is frustrated by a task or situation, she runs away or sometimes hits herself or others. She does not appear able to read and there is no reliable evidence to suggest otherwise.

How should this information affect this student's educational program and future decisions about her life after high school? Should her team use these test results, labels, and observations to set goals and expectations for this student? Should she be in classes alongside other students with significant disabilities or be fully included in general education classes? To answer these questions, we must first consider the terrible history of education and treatment of people with this profile, recognize the flaws in our assumptions about intelligence and intelligence testing, and develop new beliefs and understanding about the capacity of all students to learn and be included in their schools and communities.

> *"I don't remember when I was tested, but I like saw a sheet of paper in the mail that said I had a 40 IQ. And I like Googled what a 40 IQ is and they like said that somebody who can't really like work at like a job or can't like move from their parents' house probably or things like that."*
>
> —MICAH FIALKA-FELDMAN IN *INTELLIGENT LIVES*

FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS...

Four flawed assumptions influence peoples' views of students with an intellectual disability label and their educational programs.

1. When students are unable to communicate effectively, assumptions about what they currently know and what they might be able to learn are often based on their current communication abilities.
2. Intelligence is something that can be reliably measured; therefore, significantly sub-average intelligence can also be reliably measured.
3. Students who are believed to have significantly sub-average intelligence are unable to learn much of the general education curriculum, and even if they could, why would they need to?
4. Students who are unable to learn much of the general education curriculum will not benefit from being in general education classes and should only be taught "functional life skills."

In recent years, a growing number of researchers, educators, parents, and self-advocates have argued that these educational program options are inappropriate for students with labels of intellectual disability, and that the assumptions underlying such programs are seriously flawed.

...FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

- Students are not provided with a way to communicate about age-appropriate academic or social topics.
- Students are not included in general education classes or they are only included in classes such as music or art, or to gain social benefits.
- Students who are included part-time in a core academic class are working on skills that are far from the grade-level curriculum, or they are learning "functional skills" such as calling on the next student, washing the lab equipment, passing out papers, etc.
- Without access to the full array of general education course opportunities, students do not have the same opportunity to develop interests, passions, talents, skills, and hobbies as students without disabilities.
- Students are given materials that are so different from their classmates that it is difficult for them to work together, get to know one another, and develop relationships.
- Planning for students' futures does not include the possibility of post-secondary education.
- Career options are geared to lower-skilled jobs or sheltered workshops rather than jobs in integrated work places based on students' interests.
- Students are expected to live in congregate settings such as group homes rather than in integrated housing of their choosing with supports.

NEW ASSUMPTIONS...

- Intelligence is not a single, measurable characteristic.
- All people have different talents and skills.
- Students learn best when they feel valued, people hold high expectations for them, they have a way to communicate about both academic and social topics, and they are taught and supported well.
- When students are unable to communicate that they understand and can learn, presume that they have the same potential as everyone else and develop their educational programs based on this assumption.

...MORE OPPORTUNITIES

When these assumptions are made, we are more likely to fully include students with the label of intellectual disability in general education classrooms with supplementary aids and services that support their full participation and learning. As research has consistently shown, inclusive contexts provide more opportunities to:

- learn grade-level content, though it may be modified in terms of depth, breadth, and/or complexity;
- develop interests, talents, skills, passions, and hobbies commensurate with their same-age peers;
- build social networks that increase quality of life and support post-secondary outcomes such as obtaining and keeping a job, going to college, having friends, and being an active part of the community;
- develop and practice functional skills within natural routines and settings, so that students are able to better generalize those skills.

Least Dangerous Assumption

When these new assumptions are proposed, some people may say, "But how can we know these assumptions are more accurate than the old ones?" A principle called the "least dangerous assumption," written by Anne Donnellan in 1984, may hold the key.

The criterion of the least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults.

Furthermore, she added, "We should assume that poor performance is due to instructional inadequacy rather than to student deficits." There are six reasons why our least dangerous assumption should be to presume the competence of all students and to promote their demonstration of that competence through an inclusive general

education program.

First, expectations matter. Rosenthal and Jacobson found that students' academic outcomes increased significantly after a year of being in a classroom where their teachers had been told that their students would blossom, even though there was no empirical evidence to suggest that they would.

Second, traditional assessments of people with disabilities are seriously flawed. They usually measure what people cannot do, rather than what they might be able to do with the right supports. In particular, I.Q. tests that purport to measure general intelligence really measure several individual but interconnected factors, and student scores are strongly influenced by their cultural and educational backgrounds. It simply isn't ethical or good educational practice to use flawed assessment results when they might negatively influence a student's entire educational career and future life options.

Third, research shows that a growing number of students and adults who were labeled as having an intellectual disability have shown they are competent when they have a means to communicate, the opportunity to learn, and the right instructional and technology supports.

Fourth, to presume incompetence and segregate could result in harm to our students if we are wrong.

Fifth, Towles-Reeves, et al. highlight that it is very likely that students with significant cognitive disabilities who enter kindergarten without an effective communication system will leave secondary school without one. Yet, 20 years of research about Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) determined that in almost 100% of the studies, strategic teaching of a communication system resulted in improved communication for students with labels of significant cognitive disabilities (including intellectual disability). Students without strong communication systems are able to improve their abilities to communicate; however, if we do not presume they have this capability, we are not likely to continue teaching and expanding communication.

Finally, even if we are wrong about students' capacities to learn general education curriculum content, the consequences to students of that incorrect presumption are not as dangerous as the alternative. We should ask ourselves if it would be more harmful to include students in general education classes and have poorer-than-expected results, or to segregate students and deny them the many real benefits of such placement.

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