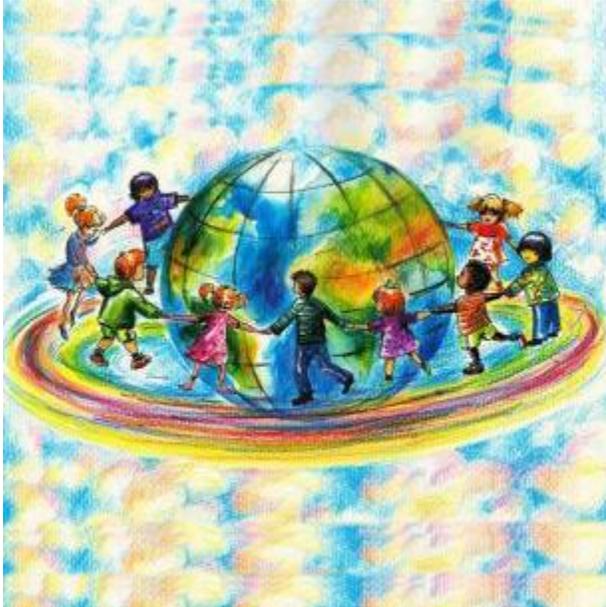


ACCESS TO GRADE LEVEL CURRICULUM SHAPES CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

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What does it mean to be relevant? Does everyone have an equal opportunity to BE relevant? They say that what you don't know won't hurt you. But I'm not so sure they are right. For individuals with Williams syndrome and other learning differences, what they don't know has a huge impact on their ability to understand the world around them, and, consequently, their ability to engage in relevant social conversations and experiences with their peers.

For instance, in about 3rd to 4th grade... typical students in class are reading "Sarah, Plain & Tall". They are learning about Sarah's letters to family members back home and to future family members she doesn't yet know. They are learning about her trip across the country on a train, her sense of fear and loneliness, and her sense of wonder and adventure. Everyone in the class is relating to her emotions and experiences. They are creating a mental movie of what's happening and they are learning to put themselves in her shoes. They are drawing conclusions and making predictions about what happens next. If a child with learning differences is included in this classroom and reading the same book they are able to actively engage in these same conversations and experiences. They are also able to engage in the extended learning and discussion that happens on the playground, at the lunch table, and during think, pair, share time in the classroom.

Generally, children with disabilities are taught at their instructional level. This might make sense in terms of their ability to develop skills; but it often makes no sense in terms of relevance. Over the years, educators have gotten together and decided what every child ought to know at the various grades in school. If children with learning differences aren't taught at grade level, they are denied access to that same set of knowledge, and essentially rendered irrelevant with their peers because they don't have the same frame of reference.

If a child with learning differences is included in the classroom where students are reading "Sarah, Plain & Tall", but provided a different book at their instructional level, they are immediately at a disadvantage with their peers. They might have the opportunity to listen to what is happening while they are in the room, but without access to the whole curriculum, they are cheated out of that rich experience the other children are having. They don't have the opportunity to create the same mental movie and share in Sarah's experiences. Therefore, when the rest of the class is talking about the story at recess or lunch, the child with challenges has no way to engage in that conversation. Lack of access has denied them the ability, not just to participate in the conversation, but also to engage in the same sense of wonder. Worst of all, they are perceived as incompetent or "just not cool" by their peers because of this lack of knowledge... and this makes them irrelevant to their social group.

PrAACtical AAC recently published a blog post with this poster:



PrAACtical AAC

Perception (relevancy) drives EVERYTHING.

Think about a time when someone you know with Williams syndrome did or said something extraordinary. For that split second, five minutes, or whatever moment in time; how did you perceive them? Were you thinking about what they couldn't do? OR were you thinking about what they could do? AND... From that moment forward, did your perception of them as a whole change?

It's not about NEVER teaching a child at their instructional level. Teaching at the instructional level is very important for building skillsets. But, when educators deny access to a broader curriculum because of their perception of a child's ability, they create a curriculum casualty. Pretend that your instructional level in reading is grade two, and will, in all likelihood always be at grade 2. If you were only ever provided books at that level; you will have never experienced Lord of the Flies, Charlotte's Web, or Willie Wonka's Amazing Chocolate Factory. Just to name a few... Based on your reading level, it may also have been assumed that you were not able to participate in science and social studies classes past the 2nd grade because you just wouldn't "get it". Therefore, you would have missed out on discussions

about American history, civil rights (very important for someone with a disability), anatomy, volcanoes, weather patterns, cells, etc. Without those experiences what prior knowledge would you actually have to draw from, in order to solve problems and make decisions in your life? How would you participate in day-to-day conversation in a relevant fashion? When you add the knowledge gaps in reading, science, and social studies together; the gaps become a chasm.

Rather than seeking out an individual's strengths and using them to help a student access age-appropriate curriculum and experiences, educators may be recognizing their weaknesses and allowing them to dictate a student's experience. Individuals with disabilities then might lack the experiences and prior knowledge they need to communicate appropriately with their peers, fulfill their role as a student, and participate in their world. For a student with Williams syndrome, who is social by nature but has trouble relating to peers, this can be especially harmful.

To be relevant is to be a part of what's happening in the world around you. People with disabilities live in the same world as people without disabilities, so they NEED to be relevant. They go to the same stores, they eat at the same restaurants, but if they are not engaged in the same conversations; they don't have the ability to truly be citizens of their world.

You may have seen the recent NBC Dateline program that discussed what happens when people with autism "age-out" of the system and how they might be ill equipped for the world in which they are now living. These are the mechanics that underlie the concept of being relevant. It's nice that they are recognizing this for folks with autism...It is true for nearly all students with all types of challenges, and particularly for those with Williams syndrome due to their extremely social nature.

Parents of individuals with WS must help educators understand that it is important to completely equip your children to live in their world. Educators need to expose children to as much knowledge and as many experiences as possible NO MATTER their IQ score. They must give them knowledge that goes beyond their instructional level. Parents, YOU must insist that your children are challenged to think, problem solve, guess, draw conclusions, correlations and analyze situations. These skills, together with a broad range of knowledge, will better equip your child to be relevant, and that will make them a true "Citizen of their World".

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