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The Least Dangerous Assumption

A Challenge to Create a New Paradigm

by Cheryl Jorgensen, Ph.D.

Imagine you are about to meet for the first time a young woman who will be coming to your high school this year. Before you do, the following was shared with you about her.

Kim is a 16-year-old student who has a label of severe mental retardation. The usual battery of intelligence tests and adaptive behavioral evaluations have assigned her an IQ score of 40 and a developmental age of 36 months. She has seizures and sensory impairments. Her motor movements are jerky and uncoordinated, making it difficult for her to get around in small areas, write legibly, or use a computer. She is sensitive to certain environmental stimuli such as bright lights, loud noises, and rough textures in her clothing. She has no conventional way of communicating. She uses facial expressions and random vocalizations to express emotions. When she is frustrated by a task or situation, she runs away or sometimes hits herself or others. She does not appear to be able to read.

How does this information affect her parents' and educators' decisions about Kim's educational program and adult life? Should you assume that these test results, labels, and observations are accurate representations of her current abilities and future learning potential? Do you advocate for her educational program to reflect content learning from the general education curriculum or is it based on teaching functional life skills? Should she be educated alongside students with significant disabilities only or included in a general education class? In order to answer these questions, you first need to understand the prevailing paradigm, or belief, that governs the way that most people think about intelligence and intelligence testing, the label of mental retardation, and the vision that we have for students with this label. In this article, I want to propose and add my voice to the work of other parents and educators who believe that only by creating a new paradigm, or shared belief, of high expectations based on the principle of the least dangerous assumption can anyone, parent or professional, make decisions about students' educational programs that will lead to a quality life in school and throughout their adult lives.

In 1984, Anne Donnellan, a respected researcher in special education, wrote that "the criterion of 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 concluded "we

abilities. Career options are geared to lower-skilled jobs or sheltered workshops rather than to jobs in integrated workplaces that require higher-order thinking or literacy skills.

A Proposition

As Kuhn said, it is only when we question a prevailing paradigm that we can be open to changing not only our beliefs, but our actions. I propose that believing in the paradigm of mental retardation leads to low expectations for students with significant disabilities. These low expectations result in segregated educational programs, or programs that do not focus on literacy or content learning, and narrow visions for the future. Thus, changing our paradigm about intelligence and mental retardation is central to promoting students' learning, inclusion, achievement, and quality of life now and in the future.

Flaws in the Construct of Mental Retardation

An important step in challenging the prevailing paradigm is understanding the flaws in the idea and assessment of both intelligence and mental retardation. Stephen Jay Gould (1981), an evolutionary biologist, criticized some of the earliest attempts at testing intelligence as being fraught with • • • bad science, politics, and racism that resulted in the mistaken conclusion that people of northern European descent were more intelligent than non-Caucasians. Howard Gardner (1984), an educational researcher, has criticized intelligence testing because the kinds of intelligence measured by traditional I.Q. tests (verbal and language skills and math and problem-solving skills) represent just one part of a complicated, multi-dimensional framework. Based on this logic, let's agree that measuring intelligence is difficult, if not impossible. That means measuring the lack of intelligence is also difficult, if not impossible. If we believe these things, then we ought to view the label of mental retardation with great skepticism.

When we think about people with significant or multiple disabilities, in particular, this skepticism is justified. These are precisely the people who have difficulty communicating, whose bodies move erratically, and who have not been taught the language or skills intelligence and adaptive behavior tests measure. How would you score on an intelligence test if you could not talk, write, or type accurately? If you were not exposed to or taught receptive or expressive language skills? How well would you do taking the test if the sensory environment of the testing situation was stressful or noisy?

Another reason for questioning the prevailing beliefs about intelligence and mental retardation is a body of emerging research that shows that with high expectations, good instruction, and the support of assistive and communication technology, a growing number of people labeled mentally retarded acquire literacy skills and demonstrate intelligence beyond what would have been predicted by their test results (Biklen & Cardinal, 1997; Broderick & Casa-Hendrickson, 2001; Erickson, Koppenhaver, & Yoder, 2002; Erickson, Koppenhaver, Yoder, & Nance, 1997; Koppenhaver et al, 2001; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999).

- Staff members respect students' privacy by discussing the students' personal care, medical needs, and other sensitive issues out of earshot from others, and only with those people who genuinely need the information.

Five Reasons Why Our Least Dangerous Assumption Should Be to Presume Competence

There are at least five reasons why I believe our least dangerous assumption is to presume competence.

1. Human intelligence is a multi-faceted construct rather than a uni-dimensional characteristic and measuring it with a test is invalid and leads to mistaken conclusions about a person's capacity to learn.
2. Assessments of students' I.Q. are seriously flawed when they have difficulty communicating and movement challenges.
3. Research shows that a growing number of children and adults labeled retarded show they are more capable when they have a means to communicate and are provided with high quality instruction.
4. To presume incompetence could result in harm to our students if we are wrong.
5. Even if we are wrong about students' capacities to learn general education curriculum content, the consequences to the student of that incorrect presumption are not as dangerous as the alternative.

Deciding on Your Least Dangerous Assumption

Those of us involved in the educational lives of students— parents, teachers, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, policy makers, and researchers – must decide what our least dangerous assumption will be and whether we can live with the possibility of being wrong. If we are not sure, we might ask ourselves:

- How would I want to be treated if someday I was unable to communicate or demonstrate my competence?
- How would I want others to treat my child if he or she were in the same situation?
- What do adults with disabilities tell us about their educational experiences and how they want to be treated?
- What does research tell us?
- What does history tell us?

Parents and educators of students with disabilities care about and want to do the very best for those students. Using least dangerous assumption as a guide is a powerful tool for keeping alive a vision of a valuable life and quality communities.

Scenario Two:

Assumptions

We are not sure about what she knows or might be able to learn in the future...we don't have conclusive data to guide our decision-making. But this time, we operate from a different set of assumptions. We treat her as if she is smart, because we distrust the validity of her test results in light of her communication and movement difficulties.

Educational Setting

First, we use a variety of methods to teach her to read. Second, we talk to her the same way we do other 16 year old students who have no disabilities. Third, we enroll her in general academic classes where we implement her reading program and support her with adapted materials and instructional supports. We take advantage of natural opportunities to teach her the functional skills that are essential for membership, full participation, and learning.

Communication Support

We talk with her about current events. We make sure her communication system includes words and concepts that are appropriate for someone who thinks about current events, love, relationships, and her future.

Friendships and Dreams

We encourage her to participate in activities that her classmates are involved in and provide communication tools and support for her to be successful. We encourage her to make friendships and assume she is capable of, and interested in, having friends. As she approaches the end of her school career, we prepare for a variety of options including postsecondary education as a graduation option. In addition, we plan for her to move into an apartment, own her own home, work at a real job, or travel.

**Which do you think is The Least Dangerous Assumption?
Once you choose, turn the page.**

1. Cheryl cautions readers to question traditional definitions whenever the words "mental retardation" or "intelligence" are used.

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