

## Consider The Potato

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Today's riddle: "How is a learner with a severe disability like a potato?" Answer: "One is a person, the other is a potato."

No, the riddle is not funny, nor is it supposed to be. Yet we sometimes act as if people and potatoes have something in common. Indeed, one of the most tragic events imaginable is to suffer an accident and to be left "a vegetable." Not that long ago, we used to refer to individuals with seriously limited mental function as being "low grade," much as we classify produce. (Today, we may say "low functioning," which is not much of an improvement.)

Language aside, the mere thought of considering a student and a potato side-by-side probably strikes most people as absurd. However, some instructional goals are written as though no difference existed. Joyce Ford, a parent from Idaho—a state whose license plate reads, "Famous Potatoes"—suggests applying a criterion to instructional goals. Joyce refers to this as "the Potato Test." Simply stated, if an instructional goal is one that a potato could do then the goal fails the potato test.

Consider, for example, the following goal: "Benjamin will go to music with his regular education class." Since a potato could achieve this, the goal fails the potato test, and the goal needs to be rewritten to reflect what Benjamin will do in music. Similarly, the goal, "Latisha will sit quietly for 29 minutes," does not pass the potato test, because it addresses the absence of performance. It would be more useful to construct the goal around Latisha's engaging in a specific activity, such as playing with toys and/or socializing with a classmate.

In addition to using it as a yardstick for instructional goals, what other applications to effective programming might we find in the potato? Think about students who have physical disabilities and who require special positioning during the day in equipment such as side-lyers, corner chairs, and prone standers. Special

positioning, while necessary is not sufficient. Children should be positioned in equipment as a means towards an instructional end, such as washing dishes, bringing hands together to play with a toy, or communicating with a friend. Merely being in a side-lyer, for instance, is something a potato could do and, hence, should be discouraged.

Consider the next development of plans for reducing challenging behaviors. Targets such as "not hitting" and "not screaming," by themselves, could be met by a potato, and, therefore, are not adequate for plans for students. Learners need behavioral support plans that address, in part, the alternative, or desirable, behaviors they will learn and use in place of the original behavior.

In all of the examples provided, potatoes and students differ by the very fact that students are active, interacting members of the environment and must be treated as such. Potatoes, in contrast, are passive. You can talk to a potato, sing to it, and place it in an H-harness. But you cannot expect behavior back from a potato. We must, however, expect and demand something back from our students. Instructional goals, therapeutic positions, behavioral plans; none of them can be passive if our expectations for learners are appropriately high.

Besides the language we use and the instruction we provide, there is another important dimension to the potato discussion. Learners with severe disabilities, unlike potatoes, have feelings. They share the same range of emotions—joy, anger, frustration, sadness, fear, and so forth—as do all people. And many have experienced the pain and hurt that come with not being fully accepted and of being talked at or around as if they did not exist.

Because many students have not been taught how to communicate, we sometimes assume that they either have nothing to say or do not understand or feel what is being said around them. But they do. And because we assume that they cannot tell the difference between being in a classroom by themselves and being a full part of the school, we maintain and justify separate classes. But our assumptions often are wrong. They fit for the potato but not for our students.