

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

# M.Ed. in Severe Disabilities Comprehensive Exam

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## EXAMPLE 1

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1.

- a. Severe disabilities are disabilities that affect a person's cognitive function, adaptive skills, and functional living skills. Severe disabilities may also affect a person's physical abilities as well as sensory response. Students with severe disabilities may have a disability that affects some or all of these areas. Instruction may need to be modified and adaptations may need to be put in place in order for a person having severe disabilities to be a high functioning, contributing, member of society.
  
- b. Due to Asela's profound level of mental retardation she may learn at a slower rate, have trouble with memorization, and have a difficult time generalizing information she learns in one setting and using it in another. She may also have a trouble focusing for long periods of time on any one activity. Asela may also have a difficult time communicating due to her profound level of mental retardation. If there is no communication system in place, Asela may have some difficulty in the area of behavior due to the inability to communicate her needs and wants. Asela may also be confused about the different languages spoken in the home, school, and community. This could also lead to frustration which also leads to acting out. Asela is able to get from place to place independently and due to her excellent fine motor skills she will be able to independently complete self-help and life skills such as toileting, eating, drinking, and dressing. She may need very direct instruction and a lot of practice with these skills, but she will be physically able to perform them.

Because her family has such strong ties to the community, Asela, has excellent social skills. If she has been involved in the community and taken part in community activities since a young age, she has had years of social gatherings and modeling of acceptable social behaviors to learn from and shape her own growing social skills.

- c. As she should be, Asela was “appropriately educated.” At 20 years old, she is a contributing member of the community as well as in society as a whole. She went through years of schooling in which lessons and curriculum were modified to meet her needs, but still got the same age appropriate end result and goals of each unit of study. She has a circle of friends that she met in her inclusion setting that she is able to relate to and communicate with. She shared a social life with these friends not only at school, but in after school and weekend activities. She may be graduating at age 21 or she may have graduated with her class and be employed at a paying job. Asela has excellent self-help skills. She is able to toilet, eat, choose outfits and dress, prepare small meals for herself, order food and pay for her order at a restaurant, as well as many other skills that she has practiced in multiple authentic settings and became efficient at over the years.

Asela has her own ties to the community that grew from her parents ties. She takes part in community activities and is well known in the community. She feels a sense of belonging and her own strong ties to the Peruvian community. She is able to communicate to community member in a way that was developed though a team, but made sense for Asela and her need to communicate in multiple languages.

Asela also has a plan in place for living arrangements. She may choose to live with her family, but if that is not what Asela wants, she may choose to live in an apartment with friends or some assistance from community resources. Asela will have full control of which people are coming in and out of her home to assist her. She will have the right to hire and fire people working for her.

Asela has a complete life. It is filled with friends, loved ones, social gatherings, and a sense of belonging. Asela is happy and has not missed out on any life experiences that any other 20 year old has had the opportunity to encounter.

2. A meaningful assessment for a student with severe disabilities would include many different components. I would work with a team made up with parents/guardians, other relatives closest to the child, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and physical therapist to get a full understanding of the child. Personally, I would start by interviewing people closest to the child. This could be parents, guardians, older brothers or sisters, or family members closely involved in the students life. I would want to know what the student likes, what they don't like, what are preferred activities for the student, what are the things the student is able to do now and goals that people closest to the student have for the student's future. I would want to have a sense of who this student is as a person before I begin planning for them. Research based practice says that plans should be student-centered and driven by the needs and wants of the student. It will be impossible to do this without knowing a little about the student.

From people closest to the student, I would also want to get some medical/health history about the student. I would never want to put the student in a position where they feel uncomfortable or in pain. It would be important to know if the student has scoliosis, cerebral palsy, or eats through the use of a feeding tube when planning activities, timing, location, and positions for the student.

With the help of a physical therapist I would evaluate the student's motor skills and mobility. I would need to observe the child and see what positions are most comfortable and advantageous to each particular activity happening throughout the day. Sometimes, students have a better range of motion or are able to grasp better when standing in a stander rather than sitting. The student may be able to be more hands on in a science experiment while standing in a stander. Another example of the importance of positioning is if the student has limited use of their hands. Maybe, lying on a wedge during circle time would promote involvement with their feet.

We would also evaluate how the student gets around from one place to another using a mobility assessment. Again, we could observe the student and see how they get themselves from point A to point B. The results of this assessment would be beneficial to a classroom teacher. They would be able to set up their classroom accordingly. If a student uses a walker, the room needs to be accessible with wide paths for the student to move around. If the student uses a wheelchair, the classroom may need to be set up with areas that are accessible to the chair and also keep in mind how the student controls the chair. The teacher could assign a student to help push the chair if the student is not able to independently move it.

With the help of a speech therapist, we would evaluate the student's communication system. We need to know how the student communicates needs, wants, preferences, answers questions, and expresses themselves. A student who is unable to communicate is not getting the most they can out of life. They have limited power over their life, not in control of it. Observation would be a great tool for this assessment as well. Watching the student during a part of their day would give a lot of information regarding how they communicate. If there is no communication system in place, this would be one of the first areas to start planning for.

With the help of an occupational therapist (OT), I would next evaluate fine motor and sensory responses. An assessment given by an OT would give information on what the student is able to do independently in the self-help skills area. A student who has good fine motor skills may only need direct training and practice in toileting, feeding, dressing, etc. A student with poor fine motor skills would need not only therapy to strengthen these skills, but may also need adaptations in order to independently perform these tasks. An evaluation of the student's sensory responses would be important information to have because some students have sensory issues that get in the way of academic and social functioning if they are not understood and modified to meet the student's need. If a student is very sensitive to loud noises, you would not want to send him to a pep rally in the gym without earplugs or headphones.

A cognitive/academic assessment may also be a meaningful evaluation of the student's current academic level. I personally don't feel standardized assessments truly give a good picture of students having severe disabilities due to the way they are scored. After

getting a certain number wrong, the student fails to earn any more points when they could have 10 answers correct at the end of the test. It could be used as a basis but then other alternate assessments should be used to get a better, bigger picture of the student. A teacher made assessment developed in the students current communication system would be most beneficial and would get a truer picture of the student.

Through the use of all these assessments and evaluations, the team should have a good overview of the student and be able to begin development of the student's educational plan.

3. There are many concepts or principles that are essential foundations for designing an effective educational program for students with severe disabilities in the general education setting. One important principle is age-appropriateness of material. Students should be learning the same material as their peers. They may need to learn it in a different way with modifications, through their individual communication system, or different work expectations, but the end result and outcome of the unit goals should be the same as the rest of the class. For example, a high school student should not be reading Barney while the rest of the class is reading a core novel by Shakespeare. There are many modifications that can and should be made to involve the student in Shakespeare with the rest of the class.

The student should be learning functional ways to use taught curriculum. Students with severe disabilities often have trouble generalizing information. The information should be taught multiple ways in a variety of settings and should have a greater purpose.

Instead of having a student do meaningless division problems out of a math book, have them be in charge of dividing up pizza or cake for the classroom party. The concept of division is being taught but in a way that is functional and relevant to the student's life. It is also important for students to have authentic practice doing everyday life skills. These skills can be done in a real life situation or in a simulated situation. Money is a very difficult concept for all students. However, it is important that a student having disabilities is able to make purchases in the community with independence. Again, while the rest of the class is working on math problem from a book, have the student count lunch money, collect money for a fundraiser, or create a shopping list with a budget for a class celebration. Then practice these skills with in the school community, at a store, or at a restaurant until the student is able to pay for items and sort money independently.

Another important principle is self determination. Students need to be able to make choices, problem solve, give their opinion, and contribute to their future plans. It is extremely important that students are given this opportunity and shown how to do this. Sometimes when adults (TA's for instance) think they are helping the child, they are really hurting them by not giving them any say in their own day, life, and education. Students need help learning skills that some of us take for granted, but there comes a point when the adult needs to step back and allow the child to do what they can on their own. If a child is taught the steps to eating with constant verbal prompting they may only know to eat (scoop food, bring up to mouth, put in mouth, chew) at the prompt of an adult. They do not realize that they can do this on their own.



These are all concepts that are essential foundations for devising an successful educational program for students with significant disabilities.

4. a. In order to select and design a communication system for Davi I would first consult with all team members that are a part of Davi's education and as well as close members of his life outside of school. We would discuss his current strengths and needs and decide what type of communication is socially and cognitively appropriate for Davi at this point. We would also discuss goals for Davi's future communication skills.

At this time, it sounds as if Davi would benefit from a object-based augmentative communication system. He already identifies some common objects related to preferred activities so this would be a starting point to add to. Also, objects would be the same object in either language so they would work both at home, at school, and in the community. Because of Davi's "autistic-like" characteristics it would be important to assess his sensory needs to be sure that objects chosen do not have negative sensory effects on Davi.

- b. In order to determine content that should be included in his augmentative communication system I would spend a day with Davi. I would go through the day taking notes on any object already in place with or without intention as well as any times when Davi seems confused or upset about what is happening next. Transition is an important time for objects to be in place. Students need to know their schedule in order to be more independent. I would also talk to Davi's parents to see what objects they might find useful for transitions and activities in the home and community.

Together we would make a prioritized list and start with the top working our way down as Davi becomes more familiar and knowledgeable about this system.

c. The instructional procedure I would use to teach Davi to use this system would be to keep using the objects that he already has in place, but use them directly before and during a transition. I would be sure to use them consistently every time this particular transition happens. I would introduce only 1 or 2 new objects into his routine at a time. As he becomes proficient in these objects, I would slowly add in another one. I would be sure to be consistently using all objects that I have introduced thus far. I would also be sure everyone involved in Davi's life is aware of these objects and know how to use them. I would have the same symbol represent the same thing both at home and at school in order for regularity. I would also set up a schedule with these objects so that Davi has more control over his day because he would know what was coming next at all times. Objects would also be used in order for Davi to make choices for preferred activities. Davi would get to choose his activity for choice time through use of the objects.

d. After 2 years, Davi should be very familiar with all objects that have been introduced to him so far. He should be able to use them not only in his schedule and during transitions, but he should start using them for some expressive communication. He will get to make more choices throughout the day both at home, school, and the community. He should have an array of symbols that represent people, places, and things that are most present in his life.

5. a. Including students with severe disabilities in the general curriculum is not only the right thing to do; it's the only ethical, fair thing to do. Students with disabilities have the same rights as students who don't. They should have and research shows benefit from having the same experiences as their same aged peers. It is beneficial for not only the student with the disability to see social, functional, and academic modeling, but it is just as important for other students to learn about acceptance and tolerance for people that are not like themselves. The general curriculum can be modified in a way that meets the goals of all students.



b. In order to have a successful inclusion setting all teachers involved need to be on the same page. They need to have the same goal in mind, which should be educating all students. Also, the IEP for the student having disabilities needs to be based around the general curriculum. Goals should have been created as a team with the student in mind and the teachers should be working together to find a way to modify the material to meet those goals. Planning time needs to be accessible for any teachers working together in an inclusion setting. The special educator will be able to make appropriate modifications after knowing exactly what the purpose and outcome of the lesson will be. Having students work together in groups even during modified lessons promotes a sense of community among the entire class. The student with disabilities should not feel singled out or separate from the rest of the class. Also, promoting socialization and sharing among all students in class creates a feeling of acceptance and self-worth for all students. This way relationships can be formed among all students.

c. When I taught students with severe disabilities I think I was very effective at including them into the general education curriculum. I was in a self-contained room at an elementary school in Providence. I had students in 3 different grade levels and on all levels of cognition and functioning. Each student had their own plan based around their particular grades curriculum and I modified many lessons in my classroom that was aligned with the general education rooms. I integrated my students as often as possible into regular education rooms. Often this started with science class. I found this class to be the easiest to modify and the students were most interested in this subject. Little by little they would spend more and more time with regular education peers. My students became a part of the classroom community. I would see interactions in the hallway and at lunch. I could tell my students felt a sense of belonging. They were able to communicate with their peers, shared things they had in common, and have a true sense of friendship. Sometimes, it seemed like an endless amount of work modifying 3 grades worth of curriculum but seeing the results and watching these bonds grow between the students year after year made it all worth it in the end.

-Comprehensive Exam Rubric for M.Ed. Program in Severe Disabilities

1. Description of Students with Severe/Profound Disabilities		Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exemplary
<b>Definition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is vague and provides information from limited perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is clearly presented</li> <li>Information is provided from a variety of perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is clearly presented and detailed</li> <li>Information is provided from a variety of perspectives</li> <li>Description supported by legislation or research</li> </ul>	
<b>Learning Style Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Few learning style characteristics are described</li> <li>Key aspects of learning style are not found</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is clearly presented</li> <li>Most aspects of learning style are described</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning style characteristics are described in detail.</li> <li>Key components include all of the following:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slower pace of learning</li> <li>Difficulty with abstract concepts</li> <li>Multiple opportunities needed for learning</li> <li>Incorporation of communication and movement considerations if needed</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>Changes into Adulthood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change in program/student includes few aspects important for success in adulthood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change in program/student includes a clear discussion of most key aspects important for success in adulthood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change in program/student includes a clear and detailed discussion of:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involvement in transition planning</li> <li>Discussion of experiences in work, academics, and social areas/recreation</li> <li>Expansion of learning and people</li> <li>Focus increasing on experiences important for success in adulthood</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
2. Meaningful Evaluation		Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exemplary
<b>Components of Meaningful Evaluation for a Student with Severe/Profound Disabilities</b>	Description is vague and provides information from limited perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation is clearly described</li> <li>Many aspects of evaluation are included</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation is clearly described according to the following components                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many purposes of evaluation</li> <li>Many examples are provided that are consistent with stated purpose and describe value of different evaluation procedures for students with severe/profound disabilities</li> <li>Ecological inventory</li> <li>Alternate Assessment</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

-Comprehensive Exam Rubric for M.Ed. Program in Severe Disabilities

3. Effective Educational Programs		Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exemplary
<b>Foundations for Effective Educational Programs for Students with Severe/Profound Disabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is vague and provides information from limited perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description is clearly presented</li> <li>Description presents most key principles of effective educational programs</li> </ul> <p align="center"></p> <p>No specific mention of ecological inventory but infused in other answers</p>	<p>Principles of effective educational programs are clearly presented, justified, and examples provided. Principles include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflects curriculum that is based in general education</li> <li>Instruction is based on individual needs/strengths, guided by student progress, and involves the student in the process</li> <li>Predictable system that matches student's level of understanding and is used on an ongoing basis</li> <li>Environment and behavioral supports match student nature and are implemented pro-actively</li> <li>Incorporates social skill development</li> <li>Families are involved and considered equal partners</li> </ul>	
4. Development of Communication		Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exemplary
<b>Select and Design Communication for Student</b>	Description is vague and provides information from limited perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation is clearly described</li> <li>Many aspects of evaluation are included</li> </ul> <p align="center"></p>	<p>Communication system development is clearly described and includes the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of student's current communication</li> <li>Identification of key partners in communication</li> <li>Team decision-making involving the student, parents, professionals and other key individuals</li> <li>Development of a system that is consistent with student's preference, strengths, and culture</li> <li>Consideration of how the system may grow with the student through time ("next steps")</li> </ul>	
5. Effective Inclusion		Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exemplary
<b>Inclusion</b>	Description is vague and provides information from limited perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation is clearly described</li> <li>Many aspects of evaluation are included</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusion is defined for students with sev. disabilities</li> <li>A rationale for including students with severe disabilities in regular education settings is described fully with respect to many perspectives</li> <li>A rationale for using the general curriculum as a basis for education is described fully</li> <li>Practical strategies are described with examples that demonstrate reasonable, functional, and useful ways to implement inclusion.</li> </ul>	