

Directions in Education Policy

Recognition and Support for Students
with FASD, Their Families and Their
Communities

Presenter: Elizabeth Bredberg, PhD

IHE Consensus Development Conference on

**Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
(FASD) – Across the Lifespan**

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“Where Do These Ideas Come From?”

- Doctoral level training and subsequent experience in special education research, but no RCTs or comparable work *yet* that directly addresses FASD in the classroom
- Seven years as educational consultant on a multi-disciplinary FASD diagnostic team in Vancouver



- Discussion with families and professionals
- Readings:
 - Streissguth, Astley and Clarren, Ryan and Ferguson (2006) “On Yet Under the Radar”
 - And now, May, Gossage, et al., 2009
- Education policy analysis as RD of a non-profit education research organisation



- The fact that you know something about this person, that they have FASD or that their mother had abused a drug or used alcohol and that this affects them is going to make a difference. *And I reject that premise.* I don't think it is going to make a difference; the fact that you know that is not going to change one thing in the child's life unless you get it down to the level again of what happens to the child on a day-to-day basis at home, in the community, in the classroom. How does that child learn? How do we have to teach? How do we have to, you know, adapt what we're doing, change what we're doing to accommodate his learning needs? And that is different for a wide range of people with that diagnosis. I mean, what you do for one is not necessarily going to work for another.



Is Knowledge Transfer Happening, Here?

- How can findings from multidisciplinary diagnoses be integrated into educational programming for students?
- Where does this fit into education policy, healthcare policy?
- How can education and medicine/healthcare hear one another?
- Not only will education practice be informed by diagnosis, but diagnosis may well be enriched by hearing from education.



Current Policy

- Education Policy (Generic)
- Assumes homogeneity in certain salient aspects of student population
 - Eligibility criteria
 - Standards of conduct, attendance, achievement and application
 - Disciplinary policies—suspension and expulsion



Special Education Policy

- Categorical placements—where are students with FASD placed, and on what basis?
 - LD
 - Mental Handicap
 - Emotional/Behavioural
 - Medical disability
- Access to meaningful assessment



Special Education Policy

- Where does IQ fit in?
 - For placement
 - For programming
- IEP/IPP
- Can programming be based on functional needs?
Who assesses (and prioritizes) these?
- Capacity issues—professional development
 - Are education professionals (and paraprofessionals) adequately prepared to support students with FASD?



Explicit FASD Policy

- At provincial ministerial level, across Canada, very little directly addresses FASD
 - Exceptions—establishment of Provincial Outreach Program in BC, interministerial initiatives in western provinces
- District initiatives that directly target populations with FASD within district special education policy



FASD-Specific Ministerial Policy: Possible Issues

- Interministerial collaboration requires communicative capacity and interaction both horizontally (across ministries and areas of expertise) and vertically (primary through tertiary levels of care).
- ...and possibly, diagonally—opening the possibility of communication between tertiary and primary providers across disciplines.



- An effective provincial ministry of education FASD resource program must:
 - act as a bridge between provincial level policy, and district (or division) level policy and practice
 - be able to work collaboratively with staff in other ministries
 - be staffed by persons who are optimally informed about the learning issues posed by FASD and about policies and practices at district(s) level



Explicit FASD Policy at District or Division Level

- Typically involve FASD-specific classrooms, often described as “pilot projects.”
- Issues include:
 - ethics: Is a pilot an actual support or does it verge on experimentation?
 - student eligibility
 - diagnosis-dependent to enable program evaluation
 - other criteria—behaviour? IQ? Age? Early intervention?



More About Accountability

- What percentage of students with FASD in a district are receiving services in a “pilot program?”
- What is offered to the rest of the students who aren’t included?
- Is this a “typical” population?
- Is the program working for the population with FASD or is it just getting difficult students away from the rest of the “normal” student population?



- **WHAT GOALS DO WE SET FOR STUDENTS WITH FASD?**
- **WHAT IS SUCCESS?**
 - For the student?
 - For the education system?



- Curriculum—when do students follow an adapted curriculum, when a modified?
- Balance of academic, social and emotional learning



Education in General (in Alberta)

- **VISION:** Education inspires and enables students to achieve success and fulfillment as citizens in a changing world.
- **MISSION:** Every child has access to the educational opportunities needed to develop knowledge, skills and attributes required for an enriched society and a sustainable economy.



Please Note:

- Neither of the above mention “independence.”
- Nor is it listed among student outcomes.



The Student – Terms of Reference

Section 12 of the *School Act* states that a student shall conduct himself or herself so as to reasonably comply with the following code of conduct:

- (a) be diligent in pursuing the student's studies;
- (b) attend school regularly and punctually;



- (c) co-operate fully with everyone authorized by the board to provide education programs and other services;
- (d) comply with the rules of the school;
- (e) account to the student's teachers for the student's conduct;
- (f) respect the rights of others.



Special Education Policy in Alberta

- Special Education Policy in Alberta has been under reconsideration since the initiation of a review of services for high needs students in 2007
- The existing system of coding students for eligibility for services was found to have many inconsistencies and an over-all review was initiated.



Under Consideration

- Shift from categorical funding and associated “medical assessment” model to functional assessment and service provision on basis of strengths and needs.



The Current State of Affairs re FASD

- The Alberta Ministry of Education has published one of the best guides to supporting students with FASD.
- The Cross-Ministerial Initiative lays the groundwork for an important collaborative model for supporting affected individuals and their families. This has implications for developing much needed policies of interdisciplinary collaboration.
- There have been three very strong videocasts for educators made available through the Cross-ministerial initiative.



What Will the Future Hold in Alberta?

- What would the impact of a non-categorical system be for students with FASD?
- Just what is a functional/needs assessment? Who is competent to address needs?
- Will regional and cultural diversity be recognised?
- Will the areas investigated address the brain domains affected by alcohol? If not, will the supports provided be meaningful or useful for the affected student?



Is FASD just a “medical condition?”

- Advocates of functional, or needs-based provision of special education services often seem to regard “categorical” provision of services as “medicalized.”
- Can FASD be treated as something other than a “medical condition?”
- Will the information obtained through multi-disciplinary diagnosis have a place in needs-based programming?
- Should it?



Potential Challenges to Policy

- The existing definition of a student appears to presuppose normative abilities.
- Chronological age is treated as unitary and seems to be presented as the defining element for eligibility for services
 - students with FASD can be functionally many different ages
- problems in predicting and interpreting functional ability and behaviour
- Noncompliance and lack of cooperation are frequent misattributions of students with FASD and are regarded as justification for exclusion.



- Categorical/functional? Both pose challenges.
- Categorical can lend itself to overgeneralization based on label
- Functional requires a thorough understanding of a student's world and community
- Either can become a deficit-oriented model, overlooking areas of strength.



Policy Should Mandate:

- Pre-service and in-service education about FASD provided by educators (not trainers) with current qualifications in both FASD and education to be provided to all education professionals.
- Recognition that age and IQ are misleading as criteria for eligibility for or exclusion from service.



- **Mandate**
 - Recognition that situation-specific learning may require that education often moves outside of the classroom
 - Recognition that educational success may not be defined in academic terms
- **Programming and Placement**
 - Optimally shaped by commitment to build students' strengths.
 - Informed by both multi-disciplinary assessment and community and school assessments



A Hopeful Thought...

The Alberta review of special education has, among its emphases, a commitment to “respecting difference.” This has potential to enable students with FASD to play distinctive contributing roles in their schools and in the broader community, as described in the Provincial Mission Statement.



- **MISSION:** Every child has access to educational opportunities needed to develop knowledge, skills and attributes required for an enriched society and a sustainable economy.



Thanks for listening

Elizabeth Bredberg, PhD

Education Consultant

Bredberg Research and Consulting in Education
(BRACE)

ebredber@telus.net

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