

Strategies for Functional Community-Based Instruction and Inclusion for Children with Mental Retardation

Joni Beck • Janet Broers • Elonda Hogue • Jacque Shipstead • Earle Knowlton

Many teachers of elementary-aged students with mental retardation are attempting to provide learning experiences in the community to prepare them for a better quality of life as adults. At the same time, they are attempting to support growing relationships between these students and their nondisabled peers through general education integration. Yet, these two important areas can conflict with each other (Ford & Black, 1989). Increasing integrated time with peers while also teaching functional skills in the community can present conflicts of time and instructional priorities, or it can present a golden opportunity for collaborative planning between general and special education teachers as well as for inclusive education.

Federal policies with respect to special education are implemented by states that render themselves accountable to the U.S. Department of Education in return for fiscal and technical support. School districts replicate this pattern, complying with state mandates that typically parallel federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476).

Local policies attuned to state mandates and field-based trends are usually



Experiences in the community are essential for students with mental retardation because they allow students to learn skills they will need as adults.

developed and then used as evidence of compliance. However, it is ultimately teachers and instructional leaders who must implement these policies in their school buildings and demonstrate compliance at the service delivery level rather than the policy level. In our case, we were responsible for creating practical ways to meet the challenge of two seemingly paradoxical trends: func-

tional community-based curricula for children with mental retardation and inclusion for all children with disabilities in general education. The essential question we faced was: How do we teach functional skills in community settings while at the same time providing maximum inclusive experiences for our students?

The remainder of this article describes the ways in which we addressed this question. Our approach includes a simple method for identifying functional curricula (Burns & Shipstead, 1989), collaborative instructional planning and teaching (Shipstead, 1992), community-based instruction for students with mental retardation and their general education peers (Beck, 1991), and instructional leadership that emphasizes inclusion and functional curricula for all students (Broers, 1992; Broers, Bukaty, Hogue, & Shipstead, 1993).

Will I Need It When I'm 21?

Although we are aware of a variety of perspectives in defining functional curriculum, we tried to keep it simple; we developed an operational question in reference to the student for each skill we



contemplated teaching: Will I need it when I'm 21 (Burns & Shipstead, 1989)? All of our curricular decisions hinge on the answer to this question. Young children with mental retardation cannot answer this question for themselves yet, so families and teachers must answer it for them, continuously looking ahead to the future for each child.

Ensuring that functional outcomes remain part of a student's individualized education program (IEP) is of utmost importance. In the past, curriculum in self-contained classrooms for students with mental retardation primarily involved adapting and modifying grade level skills. Based on Brolin's (1992) framework, Burns and Shipstead (1989) developed and implemented a life skills program oriented to adult outcomes for children in inclusive settings starting at 5 years of age. For example, in the general education setting there are some naturally occurring life skills that relate to skills needed by adults. For example, coming to the circle on time in kindergarten might relate to getting to work on time as an adult. With a commitment for all children to become successful adults, professionals can collaborate and plan functional lessons that integrate curricular content in areas such as math and social studies as well.

Functional Curricula in General Education

The cooperative teaching planner (Figure 1) reflects 1 of 6 weeks of lessons combining first-grade social studies and math skills that are taught in a functional format for children in both general and special education. The teachers, a first-grade teacher and a teacher of students with mental retardation, use a predesigned resource area as the main setting for the lessons, although some lessons occur in the first grade classroom. Through one series of lessons, the children operated a store at school. During different time periods, the expertise and cooperation of the learning disabilities teacher and the speech therapist were used to reinforce skills needed to run the store. First grade social studies concentrated on economics and

involved concepts of needs, wants, supply, and demand. The Brolin (1992) model provided a concise reminder of the life skills outcomes on which the lessons were focused.

One of the several things we learned is that team teaching is fun. It is enjoyable to collaborate with another adult in lesson planning and to share responsibilities and resources. Staff relations are enhanced by working together and sharing information and talents. In addition, the repetition and functional aspects of the lesson design that are so much a part of the special education curriculum also are instructionally and socially sound for general education peers of the appropriate age. Recently, Algozzine and Audette (1992) advocated a more functional perspective on curriculum and instruction for general education students based on this idea. Thousand and Villa (1991) also suggested that curricula and methods traditionally geared to the needs of youngsters with disabilities "have the potential of greatly enhancing the preparedness of other students for the complex adult life of the future" (p. 557). The peer coaching employed in the lessons is also beneficial for all students. The students learn a lot about each other, discovering that they are more alike than different.

Rationale for Community-Based Integrated Instruction (CBII)

Experiences in community settings generate opportunities for all students to draw on their skills and use problem-solving strategies with guidance as needed from the teacher. The general education curriculum divides information into subject areas, but in the real world, students must combine skills and knowledge and use them in functional ways. Occasions for spontaneous problem-solving arise in real-life situations, as opposed to simulated situations in a classroom. Community-based lessons allow teachers to work on a variety of

objectives at varying levels and make learning interesting for all students (Ford & Davern, 1989).

Community-based instruction is an important part of the curriculum. Experiences in the community are imperative for students with mental retardation because they provide the opportunity to learn the skills these students will need as adults. The principle of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972) provides the philosophical basis for community-based instruction, stressing environments and circumstances that are as culturally normal as possible to enhance behaviors that are as culturally normal as possible (Schutz, Williams, Salce-Iverson, & Duncan, 1984). Teaching the skills needed for daily living in the community operationalizes the concept of normalization (Martin, 1988). If students with mental retardation are not given opportunities to practice skills in the environments in which the skills are to be used, the chances that those skills will generalize from simulated learning in the classroom to the real-world environment are minimal (Falvey, 1989).

Implementing CBII

The purpose of the CBII program is to combine integration and community-based instruction to accomplish the following three goals:

1. To provide learning opportunities in the community for students with mental retardation with nondisabled peers as models.
2. To provide opportunities for the application of skills in the community for all students at their individual levels of ability.
3. To develop a teaching partnership between special and general education teachers, with general education teachers teaching students integrated into their classrooms and the special education teachers teaching students in community settings.

Collaboration between general and special education teachers to set objectives for community-based instruction results in their focusing on the curricu-



Objectives for the students with mental retardation were developed on the basis of Brolin's (1992) Life Centered Career Education (LCCE) model. An examination of the functional skills outlined by Brolin reveals a number of areas that also are taught in the elementary general education curriculum for nondisabled students; examples are time, money, seasons (appropriate clothing), and health (body care). When general education and special education teachers collaborate to plan age-appropriate lessons, these functional skills can be incorporated into lessons and units. This functional curriculum model focuses on skills needed to be independent adults. Objectives for students' IEPs were based on these functional skills. These same skills were the focus of objectives carried out in community settings. Another concept was also embraced in planning for CBII: The most effective programs for students with disabilities are characterized by integration of general and special education, classroom and community-based instruction, and use of functional curriculum (Boyer-Stephens & Kearns, 1988).

Objectives for general education students were developed prior to each trip by the general and special education teachers. A grocery store and a fast-food restaurant within walking distance of the school were the most frequently used sites. Instruction at the grocery store was followed by lunch or snack preparation by all students involved using the items that were purchased. The special education teacher supervised these activities in her classroom.

Most community-based instruction takes approximately 30 to 40 minutes, and follow-up activities can extend another half hour. If general education students miss assignments while participating in CBII, the special education teacher arranges assistance for them in completing their work either before or after trips. Paraprofessionals remain with students who are not participating in CBII that day, working on preplanned activities. Another special education teacher in the building is designated as the teacher in charge

while the teacher participating in CBII is out of the building.

Our collaborative program included two CBII activities that were all-day, large-group activities involving up to 18 students. These were trips to a zoo and a farm. Objectives were less community skill specific for each student and focused more on socialization skill opportunities and activities. Prior to these trips, general education students visited the special education classroom and, together with the students with mental retardation, participated in readiness activities related to the themes of the community-based instruction. This provided the students with an opportunity to become acquainted with each other and the staff prior to the all-day trips.

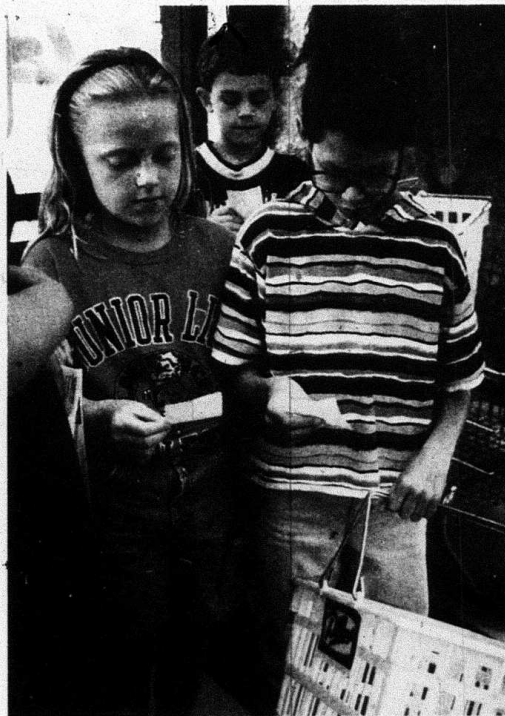
Cost may be a concern for educators interested in developing and implementing a CBII program. Most funds for our CBII program were provided through a fundraising project. Pin-on badges with Valentine themes were sold by students with mental retardation to the school's student body prior to Valentine's Day. With special education funds providing transportation for some community instruction and for some gro-

cery items, we had a sufficient amount to plan and implement our program.

Benefits of CBII

Although we have not formally evaluated CBII, we have observed the following consistent effects of the program:

1. A substantial number of nondisabled students demonstrated motivation to participate in CBII activities, and associating with peers with mental retardation became a preferred activity of choice even more frequently after the program started operating.
2. Nondisabled students were observed interacting positively and more frequently with their peers with mental retardation following a community-based instruction trip.
3. Nondisabled students who were originally unsure about participating expressed interest after hearing about CBII from their classmates.
4. Positive responses were received from parents of students with and without disabilities.
5. General education teachers frequently asked students who had par-



Some objectives for a trip to the grocery store were reading a list, comparing prices, and counting and handling money.



ticipated in CBII to share their experiences with classmates.

- 6. Teachers spontaneously expressed enthusiasm for and interest in continuing CBII during the next school year.
- 7. General education students became more responsive to students with mental retardation and their teachers, interacting in the halls and during lunch and recesses and involving them more in the life of the school.

Instructional Leadership

Administrative support for community-based instruction is a key to success. The principal of the school has a crucial role to play in providing the encouragement and expectation that functional skills will be part of the curriculum for all students. This is achieved with the realization that students with mental retardation will need more time and repetition to acquire and maintain the skills than will most other students. Some ways in which the principal can provide the impetus for the teaching of functional skills are listed here:

- Be a catalyst for inclusion. CBII will not happen unless the principal takes a leadership role.
- Provide staff development activities regarding functional skills and how they are related to the general education curriculum.
- Demonstrate acceptance of students with mental retardation in the school and in classrooms by visiting the classrooms, discussing the progress of students with teachers, and taking time to talk with the students about what they are doing.
- Find ways for teachers to have time to collaborate and plan together. Examples include providing release time by teaching classes, departmentalizing, combining classes periodically, scheduling assemblies on a regular basis, and adding minutes to the school day to provide for early dismissal days.
- Explain the benefits of the program to general education parents as well as special education parents.

- Speak to community groups to promote acceptance of persons with disabilities.
- Personally praise teachers and send notes of appreciation for their efforts.
- Create fun, diversionary activities to offset the hard work and stress associated with the teaching profession. Each year we have Secret Pal Week. Each staff member draws the name of another staff member for whom she or he will be a secret pal for a week. Each pal buys his or her partner trinkets (one per day) that provide hints as to the secret pal's identity. On Friday, the secret pals reveal who they are. Although they may seem silly, such diversions build a sense of being part of a team and set the stage for meaningful professional dialogue and collaboration.

Conclusion

Learning functional skills within community settings helps students with mental retardation increase their odds for achieving maximum independence and a high quality of life. Programs that teach those skills also help general education students who may not be taught at home and students who have learning difficulties but do not qualify for special education services. In fact, all students can benefit from such instruction. Given administrative support and adequate preparation of staff, students, and parents, the inclusion process for students with mental retardation and their general education peers can be extended beyond the school and into the community. Implementation of these programs during the school years provides all students with opportunities to reach their potential as independent adults and to become aware and accepting of individual differences within their school and community.

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Joni Beck (CEC Kansas Federation), *Interrelated Resource Teacher*; **Janet Broers**, *Principal*; **Elonda Hogue**, *First Grade Teacher*; and **Jacque Shipstead** (CEC Chapter #665), *Interrelated Resource Teacher*, Cordley Elementary School, Lawrence, Kansas. **Earle Knowlton** (CEC Chapter #665), *Associate Professor and Coordinator, Mental Retardation Program Area, Department of Special Education, University of Kansas, Lawrence*.

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