

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

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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







