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ABSTRACT

A program of continuing education was developed for institutionalized mentally retarded persons based on the premise that the clients would determine the direction and content of their education. The program involves a curriculum of academic subjects, electives, a student government, and a generic education program. There is a strong emphasis on human rights, independence, and personal choice. Although the process is slow, there is progress toward clients making the very difficult decision to attend continuing education in community settings. Initial program evaluation suggests that clients have become more aware of options, have experienced increased opportunities to make decisions in relation to these options, and have learned to live with the consequences of their decisions. (Author/CL)

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A MODEL FOR ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION
PROGRAMS FOR RETARDED CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT

In addition to vocational training services, adult residents of a public facility have a right to continuing education. A program of continuing education was developed, based on the premise that the clients would determine the direction and content of their education.

The program involves a curriculum of academic subjects, electives, a student government, and a generic education program. There is a strong emphasis on human rights and independence. Although the process is slow, there is progress toward clients making the very difficult decision to attend continuing education in community settings.

The concept of independence has become central in designing and evaluating programs for educating mentally retarded persons. As part of preparing individuals for independence there is a need to address the process of how we educate people in decision-making and self-determination. This paper discusses a continuing education program model used in a state school for the mentally retarded. The continuing education program teaches the cognitive skills which support clients in their ability to make, and act upon, decisions.

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The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines self as "the essential person distinct from all other persons in identity" (1). Direction is defined as, "the course or line along which something moves, lies or points" (p. 208). The definition of determination is "the act of coming to a decision; the decision or conclusion needed" (p. 202).

In reviewing these definitions the principle of decision-making is seen as closely related to the way in which a person develops self-determination. The continuing education curriculum is thus intended to develop skills in decision-making, which would lead to the self-determination of the client.

Since the mid-sixties the behaviorist model has been

dominant in delivery of services for mentally retarded people (2). This model emphasizes task specific training, e.g., task analysis, using classical and operant conditioning, as a means to increase functioning ability in defined settings. For work programs, task analysis of a job and the step by step conditioning based on that analysis have had much success. This model excludes, to an extent, an approach to teaching the reasoning and decision-making skills that are important in the processes of self-direction and self-determination.

Bandura(1974), discussing "Behavior Theory and Models of Man", indicates that a person's ability to self-direct is not solely based on external consequences but also depends on cognitive variables such as values, attitudes and beliefs.

In the implementation of the behavioral technology, there needs to be a supplementary model to utilize as a way to provide clients with a vehicle to learn the principles of decision-making. We defined an approach to educating clients, so that they could learn the necessary cognitive skills to make decisions. The people identified for services were those who were between the ages of 22 and 65, who had received minimal formal education or training, but who are now in vocational or employment settings. The challenge is to design a program that enables these individuals to learn the cognitive skills they had not received.

The continuing education program design is based on two models. The first is articulated, for example, by Garwood (1983), as an Organismic viewpoint. The assertion is that "individuals are instrumental in bringing about their own development since they actively reach out to make contact with the environment, [and] in so doing, generate new experiences that are subsequently used to restructure earlier simpler behaviors"(p. 57). The second approach is a Psychoeducational viewpoint. Baldwin(1985) describes it as a process of assessing skill deficits needed to obtain a goal, then developing a course of instruction that will, through skill acquisition, increase the competence of the individual.

The psychoeducational model uses a typical educational approach, in that it has designed goals that all clients work toward as a group. Instead of focusing on developing the program to address just the specific individual needs of the clients, the curriculum addresses the needs of the group, while incorporating individual objectives. The emphasis is on providing the basic skills so that the client will be able to be self-directing.

Integration of organismic, psychoeducational, and culturally normative viewpoints help define the structure of the program. For adults, there are continuing education programs given by local schools, colleges, and universities.

Our continuing education program's purpose is to provide night school classes for those people who choose to participate. Its initial courses addressed communication and cognitive categorization (concept formation). These classes are English 101, and 210, and Math 101, 110, and 210. Each course has a defined goal for the year. This goal is based on group defined needs, not on any one individual's special needs.

The continuing education program provides a mechanism for clients to learn the skills they need to have to make personal choices. These skills include:

1. awareness of choice (options);
2. utilizing the process of choice;
3. basic judgement;
4. ramifications of the choice;
5. accountability for the decision (learn from past choices both right and wrong).

The more options available, and the greater the awareness of these options, the more people can make decisions.

PROGRAM CURRICULUM

The design of the continuing education curriculum consists of four main components: core courses in Mathematics and Language, a provision for Electives, a Student Government, and a process for involvement in generic continuing education.

In developing the core subjects, a review of existing client objectives showed several distinct ability levels. These were helpful in defining three courses in Mathematics and two in Language. For each course, a set of lesson plans was developed which addresses both specific objectives and general concepts within the subject area. To ensure appropriate developmental sequencing, several references were used, for example, diagnostic tests and the Behavioral Characteristics Progression (3).

The mathematics curriculum sets out to teach practical skills in numeration and money handling through the formation of basic number concepts and through experiential learning. The curriculum is structured in three levels: Fundamental Number Concepts, Numeration and Practical Application, and Budgeting and Banking. A client may enter at any one of the levels, depending in part on his/her performance in the Behavioral Characteristics Progression. Although each level

of the curriculum offers clients training in the use of money, the philosophy of the curriculum is developmental and conceptual, e.g., practical changemaking depends on understanding of addition concepts.

The language curriculum sets out to develop students' abilities in graphic reception and graphic expression, i.e., reading and writing. The curriculum is organized on two levels: Functional Reading and Writing, and Reading and Writing. The curriculum enables each client to recognize his/her name in print, and to make a consistent signature. A great degree of achievement is conceivable in the curriculum's higher level course, for example, reading and writing narratives.

A particular concern in the curriculum development process was the teaching of concepts as opposed to specific tasks. It was assumed at the outset, as a basic tenet of the program, that clients were capable of generalizing the skills taught in the classroom to other settings. This was facilitated through instructional materials and activities which were functional in important daily settings. For example, concepts of sets are taught on the job, at home, at leisure, and in the classroom, by counting cups, people, dollars, etc.

In addition to basic mathematics and language skills, clients have the opportunity to explore other subjects as

electives. Elective courses can be on any subject, such as geography, voting, constitutional rights, housing, etc. The Student Government is the means by which clients determine that they want one or another subject to be offered, whether as a workshop or as an extended course. Through the Student Government all electives are to be decided, along with the planning of program changes, field trips, and access to generic continuing education services.

Some clients developed an interest in attending continuing education programming in the local area. Teachers supported this, as show later, through coordination, counseling, and followup.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Continuing Education program is one part of a large agency and so must function within a given structure of policy and procedure. A full account of the agency is beyond the scope of this paper.

The internal organization of the program included initially one teacher and two student interns. As the program developed staff included a Director, i.e., head teacher, and two teachers, along with interns, and at various times, volunteers.

Both program management and classroom teaching were based on a team process. Each teacher had specific administrative, instructional and backup responsibilities. The Director, however, was accountable to the agency's department head.

Because most of the clients were employed full time, the program was designed for evenings. The schedule was allocated to allow for core courses, Student Government, and electives. Initially three classes were taught each night. As the program evolved and expanded, several courses were offered simultaneously. Eventually the program was offered at two different locations due to the number of clients involved.

Space is available in several buildings located near the middle of the population distribution of the clients. All supports related to the space are handled by the agency. The space is accessible to wheelchairs.

In addition to direct instructional services, the program provides consultative services. Consultations are in five major areas: client assessment, program development, staff training, outreach, and program evaluation.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Clients had many options for activities on any given night. When scheduling classes the Director had to take into account activities that might conflict with continuing education, such as dances or shopping excursions. Since the continuing education program was voluntary, it was incumbent upon the teachers to present activities of high interest to the clients. This was possible, in part, through client involvement in creating the program. The decisions that clients made daily should be reflected in several measures of attendance.

When the continuing education program started, the teachers had to spend time discussing the program with prospective clients. A portion of the interns' time was regularly allocated to meeting with clients to discuss their interests and needs in education, outside of the classroom time. A network was designed to promote attendance through phone calls and personal contacts on the days that classes occurred. Figures One, Two and Three show attendance trends through seventeen months of the program's existence. A client contact is defined as each occasion that a person attended class.

CONT. ED. CONTACTS

Figure 1.
NO. RES.

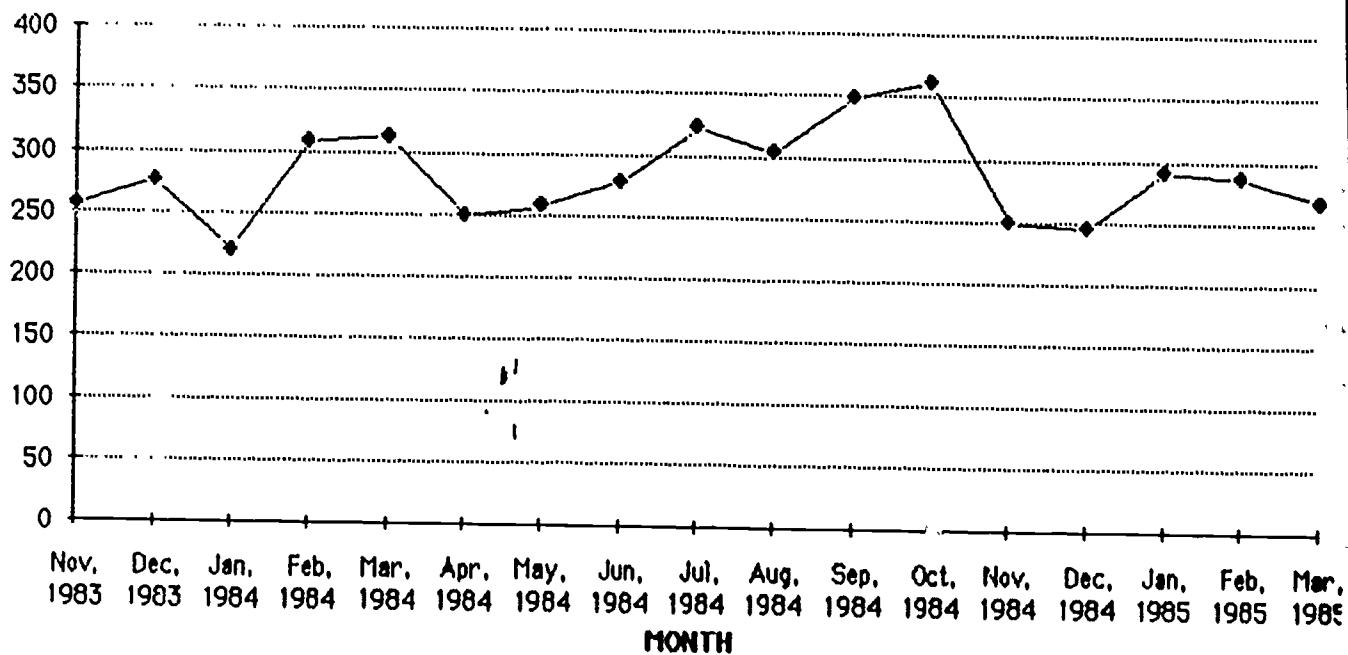


Figure 2.

NO. DIFFERENT CLIENTS

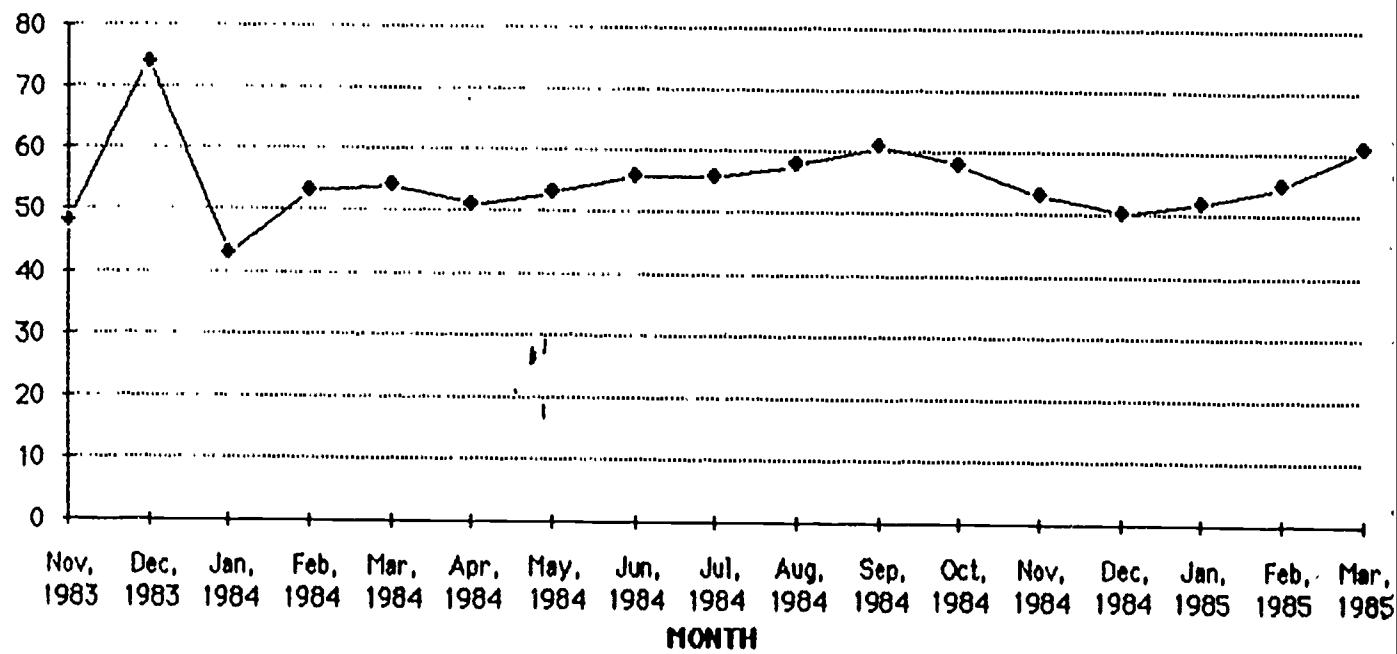
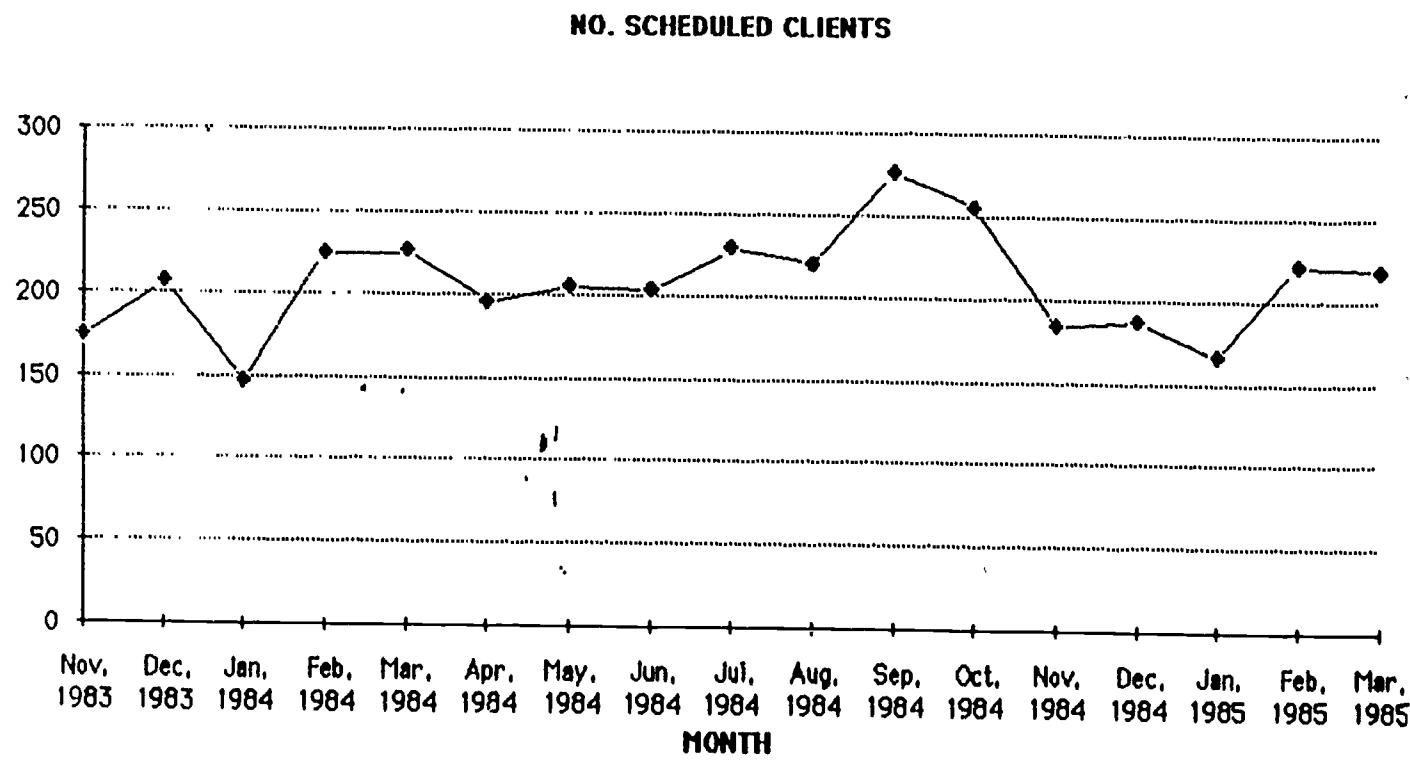


Figure 3.



A key factor in the program's progress, in terms of attendance, was the relevance of the courses offered, which was a direct result of client input into the curriculum. The program environment actively sought to promote awareness of civil and human rights. This led not only to courses that were meaningful in terms of skills learned, but also to an atmosphere of comfort. Clients were treated with respect. Teachers actively listened and responded to suggestions and concerns. The experience of comfort in an educational setting was in many cases new to clients, who had known years of failure and frustration in traditional program contexts. The consistent levels of attendance shown in the figures suggest that clients were comfortable in their decision to attend the program. The significant decreases in all measures in the period of September 1984 to October 1984 correlate with the first change in staffing, when the program supervisor moved to a new job.

GENERIC CONTINUING EDUCATION

To gain access to generic continuing education, four phases of activity were involved. First, it was necessary to research the resources available. Second, counseling of prospective clients occurred. Third, the support service logistics were planned. Fourth, with enrollment, a plan of ongoing support for the client was developed and carried out.

In conducting the research both the interests of the clients and the local course offerings were reviewed. Client interests ranged from creative needlework to getting a G.E.D. to learning about auto mechanics. To a limited extent client interests were guided by the available options. In some cases client interests were not represented by the generic programs.

Research of local programs showed that two levels were offered, one by the high schools and one by the colleges. The high school programs were geared toward learning practical skills, such as cooking and auto repair, while the college programs tended toward academic subjects, such as computer programming. Within a 25 mile radius of the agency's population center six programs were located that provided courses of interest to clients.

Through the student government, several people expressed interest in trying a generic program. The course catalogs

were individually reviewed with the clients. With some individuals, extensive discussions were held before a decision was made, whether or not to enroll. Eventually two clients decided to enroll in different programs.

It was necessary for the continuing education director to coordinate with the generic provider, specifically to meet with the course instructors. This coordination served as a screening process. It was felt that the attitude of the instructor was an important factor in the success of the client. In a few cases instructors were interviewed who expressed reservations about the capacity of the prospective client. Instructor attitude toward the client was taken into account in developing the followup support plan.

Since for each client it was suggested that full support be given, that is, a staff escort for each class, a staffing commitment had to be made for an extended period of eight to ten weeks. Similarly, transportation for the period had to be arranged. Public transportation was not available. The agency could provide a vehicle. Backups were put into place for both transportation and staffing. Consistency of followthrough was seen as critical, because of the students' risk taking. Any disruptions of the plan could lead to a diminishing of self-confidence and of trust established between clients and the continuing education staff.

Each client had a support network set up for him/her,

consisting of the continuing education staff, agency administrative staff, residential program staff, the student government, and the staff who accompanied him/her to the generic program. Since classes were typically one time per week, lapses of interest were encountered periodically. These were minimized, indeed averted, through constant positive feedback by others. This underscored for the client that he/she had made a good decision and could be successful in an educational program offered to the general public.

For one man who completed auto mechanics courses, the decision to do so represented a change in the way he had made decisions in the past. Although his friends seemed to think that participating in community education classes was a risk, he departed from their opinions and chose to attend. In addition, following through on his decision was something he usually didn't do in the past. The fact that he successfully completed two courses might have helped to establish a better self image and provided him with a great deal of positive feedback and support from staff. It might have been the catalyst that helped him to make more decisions regarding his education: the decision to take part in science classes; to take part in bicycle maintenance classes; to study for a learner's permit and get it; to participate in another auto mechanics course held at a vocational school; and to gain employment in a competitive setting.

In addition to the positive effect his decision had on his self-confidence it also served to stir the curiosity of his peers and to show them that to risk making a decision could result in a positive experience. Some of his peers are now investigating the possibility of attending community education.

DISCUSSION

While gaining access to generic continuing education was staff intensive, given the few clients who had been involved, and the amount of coordination needed, the message to other clients was one of success. This reinforced the fundamental optimism of the continuing education program. Teachers were willing to allow clients to make important curriculum decisions. These decisions invariably led to increased understanding and to improved skills, in part because client motivation was high and in part because the subjects taught and the concepts learned had an immediate impact in the students' lives. The attendance trends reflect decisions to be involved in continuing education.

The key components of the program were its positive, can do, attitude toward learning, its promotion of independence, its reliance on participation of clients in the formulation of curriculum, and its orientation toward involving clients in the same educational programs attended by the general public.

When the interactional process in education is positive, supportive, and informed, clients will benefit. The message given to clients in the Continuing Education program was clearly encouraging. Clients' abilities to evince self-

direction and to make decisions were increased. Clients became more aware of options; they had increased opportunities to make decisions in relation to these options; and they had to live with the consequences of their decisions. This factor of accountability was powerful in the feedback it gave. Clients learned that they could be successful as a result of their own choices.

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NOTES

1. Merriam Webster Dictionary, (Springfield, MA: 1974), p. 627.
2. Baldwin, S. Models Of Service Delivery. Mental Retardation, February 1985, p. 9.
3. Behavioral Characteristics Progression (VORT, 1973).

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