

A Multi-Faceted Approach to Successful Transition for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

This report summarizes the multi-faceted, dynamic instructional model implemented to increase positive transition outcomes for high school students with intellectual disabilities. This report is based on the programmatic methods implemented within a secondary-level school in an urban setting. This pedagogical model facilitates the use of self-determination training, functional academics, positive behavioral strategies, and normalization theory to promote community access, employment, and increased social opportunities. The various instructional methods used are dependent upon each other and require a team of educators to work collaboratively toward the common goal of students successfully transitioning from high school to adult living.

A Multi-Faceted, Dynamic Instructional Model to Promote Positive Transition Outcomes for High School Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The following is a review of the instructional model implemented in a high school setting to promote successful student transition from school to adult living. The selected school serves students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The pedagogical model is multi-faceted and has various modalities that are dependent on each other for programmatic success. Strategies such as community-based instruction, self-determination skills, and positive behavioral strategies, along with direct instruction reading, and a focus on functional math are implemented to increase students' success. Student success is measured by positive transition outcomes. (i.e. high school graduation and access into adult settings). Students may transition to a variety of settings to be considered successful, based on their personal goals and the expectations of family members.

Many students with disabilities are now included in general education settings. Many employers now hire people with disabilities as well. Although these positive changes are in effect, more still needs to be done to ensure successful transitions from high school to employment and independent living. Taylor (2004) in conjunction with the National Organization on Disability, performed research across the United States and found the following:

Only 35 percent of people with disabilities reported being employed full or part time, compared to 78 percent of those who do not have disabilities. Three times as many live in poverty with annual household incomes below \$15,000 (26 percent versus 9 percent). People with disabilities remain twice as likely to drop out of high school (21 percent versus 10 percent). They are twice as likely to have

inadequate transportation (31 percent versus 13 percent), and a much higher percentage go without needed health care (18 percent versus 7 percent). People with disabilities are less likely to socialize, eat out, or attend religious services than their non-disabled counterparts. Life satisfaction for people with disabilities also trails, with only 34 percent saying they are very satisfied compared to 61 percent of those without disabilities. (¶ 2)

These findings are indicators that more needs to be done to enable people with intellectual disabilities to enjoy a greater level of community success. Training within the community may be a particularly important learning activity for students with intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities in particular have difficulties generalizing their learning to new settings (Alper & Ryndak, 1992; Cole & Meyer, 1991).

Self-determination strategies as a Component of Successful Transition

The school's mission focuses on increasing self-determination skills through a variety of pedagogical strategies. Wehmeyer (1996) defined self-determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference" (p. 22). Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) listed the following characteristics that encompass self-determination: (a) decision making, (b) problem solving, (c) choice making, (d) self-management, (e) self-awareness, (f) self-advocacy, and (g) goal setting. These characteristics are considered the defining constructs to help students increase employment and independent living after graduation. Self-determination skills are not constructs that are easily taught in a curriculum, void of access to community involvement. Students likely have a greater chance of learning to make adult decisions, if the skills are practiced in a real-world setting. Agran, Hughes, and Wehmeyer (2000) reported that students with disabilities who have enhanced levels of self-determination (decision making, goal setting, and self-advocacy) generally have more access to regular education classes, better post-school employment outcomes, and a greater level of independent living after exiting from high school. All of the self-determination skills (mentioned above) are implemented within the programmatic structure of community-based instruction and academic classrooms.

Students are coached with a constructivist approach to learn to make decisions concerning work preparation, daily routine work tasks, and basic problem-solving within community settings. Self-management is coached to encourage positive attitude, appropriate appearance, and good hygiene. Self-advocacy is an important characteristic for students with intellectual disabilities to gain understanding of their rights within various settings. Goal setting is a difficult skill for many young people and even more so for students with intellectual disabilities. Many of the above mentioned self-determination skills need to be present to select and meet post-graduation goals, such as maintaining employment or maintaining a place to live. Students can easily name goals, such as working at a retail store or living in an apartment, but often lack prior experiences and knowledge to obtain these goals. These skills must be taught in a structured and realistic way to ensure that these goals can eventually become a reality. Students with

intellectual disabilities often need step-by-step, sequential instruction to complete these post-secondary objectives.

Before seeking employment or independent living arrangements, a host of skills must be in place to ensure success. The self-determination and self-advocacy skills mentioned above are supplemented with functional math and functional reading skills. Functional reading is a fundamental element of the educational program. If a student with an intellectual disability can learn to read on a level that enables him or her to decipher simple directions at work, comprehend a bus schedule, or follow directions for cooking, a higher level of self-reliance can be realized. The high priority placed on functional reading arguably makes the reading teachers vital components in students' attainment of higher levels of independent functioning. Learning to read at higher levels opens doors of opportunity for employment, independent community travel, and self-management within the home. Reading is surely the gateway to many opportunities that may be missed without the attainment of this skill. A student who lacks functional reading can only aspire to work in lower wage jobs that do not require functional reading to complete tasks. A student who attains functional reading skills can aspire to higher paying and likely more enjoyable employment. Lacking functional reading skills often stonewalls advancement beyond entry-level, lower paying employment; if the person can find employment. Low literacy rates correlate with difficulty in attaining work. Guy (2005) identified adult literacy education as an important bridge to employment and cessation of welfare services.

Positive Behavioral Strategies as a Component of Successful Transition

Positive attitude, dependability, and consistency are the three most often desired work characteristics sought after by community employers throughout the last seven years participating with the school's community-based instruction program. These skills (Positive attitude, dependability, and consistency) are taught explicitly and reinforced daily to help students successfully maintain employment and natural supports. Positive behavioral strategies are reinforced in all academic and community settings. Teachers and staff work to teach students through role playing, social stories, and by their own examples. Positive behavioral strategies are implemented on a school-wide basis and encourage students to practice the three skills (above) within all components of their day. Behavioral support is correlated to success in school, work, and community access. For this reason, students are explicitly taught why they are making good behavioral choices and are provided the tools to make good decisions. Academic and vocational teachers (in the school) conduct pre-task training as an important part of student preparation. Teachers plan activities to allow students to practice interviewing for jobs, participate in travel training on public transportation, and learn social skills needed to secure and maintain employment and community access.

Functional Academics as a Component of Transition Success

Reading teachers in this program use two distinct, yet collaborative strategies to improve reading proficiency. First, decoding and comprehension are intensely taught through

direct instruction. This method has been shown (within this school setting) to increase students' (with intellectual disabilities) reading level during each year of participation. A large majority of the students who participated in the intense direct instruction program made positive gains in their decoding and comprehension skills.

The second component to functional reading is geared toward decoding and comprehending community access words. The constructivist approach is once again applied to the reading strategy. Students learn functional vocabulary that correlates with their vocational interests, transportation needs, social interests, and aspirations for independent living. A student who aspires to work in a restaurant needs to become proficient with reading words directly related to the environment. This idea drives the importance placed on what is primarily taught. Of course, there are many words that share commonality between many community settings. Words used in danger signs, transportation signs, and words used to gain basic medical or community access are reinforced with all students.

Functional math also plays a vital role in preparing a young person with a disability for actively participating in the community. A person who learns to make purchases, count change, and manage personal finances has a significantly higher level of independence over a person who lacks these skills. Time is another important consideration for employment and social activities. Teaching a student to use a watch or timer to manage breaks on the job creates a level of independence in the work setting. A person who knows how to set an alarm to wake in the morning, understands the time needed to dress, and the time needed for transportation to work enjoys a higher level of independence than one who lacks these skills. This reasoning is the logic behind teachers creating a priority for students to learn math functionality to support independent living and employment.

Normalization Theory as a Component of Successful Transition

Normalization theory is a guiding pedagogical principle used in developing transition strategies for these high school students with intellectual disabilities. Normalization implies, "as much as possible, the use of culturally valued means in order to enable, establish, and/or maintain valued social roles for people" (Wolfensberger & Tullman, 1982, p. 131). This theory elucidates constructs that are pertinent to building social networks within the community as well as maintaining relationships with peers in a workplace setting. Normalization theory concludes that when a person's social role is appreciated within a setting, other desirable outcomes will be "accorded that person within the resources and norms of his or her society" (Wolfensberger & Tullman, p. 131). One's consideration as a valued and equal part of a community setting is a mandatory premise to equal treatment, respect, and adequate access to social opportunities. When a person is devalued to a position less than others in a setting, the person may not have access to increased job responsibilities, social opportunities, and managerial respect.

A focus of community-based instruction is placed on normalizing the student within preferred community settings. This premise of normalization is considered as a fundamental component when building natural supports within a community setting.

Building natural supports at times seems somewhat short-sided by building supports based on employees currently within the person's (with a disability) immediate environment. People are often transient in their employment and especially within jobs that are entry level and may not offer benefits. One can argue that the person with a disability may be set up for failure when coached to become too dependent on specific coworkers currently working in the business. This program endeavors to teach students with a disability social skills, community survival skills, and employability skills to gain functional independence, with less need for direct supports. This instructional method utilizes the theory of normalization and offers the person the dignity of risk (as coined by Persky, 1972) afforded to non-disabled peers. Persky suggested that people with disabilities should be free to live their lives without undue burden and experience the "dignity of risk" (p. 199) that drives self-determination and autonomous behavior. The dignity of risk does not mean leave people with disabilities to their fate, but rather asserts support for the person with a disability to make decisions and decide his or her plan of action (to the fullest extent possible). This requires a spectrum of supports, but when applied in balance with the person's needs, can create an environment that includes the person as a valued and contributing member of society.

Conclusion

In summation, it is recommended that secondary-level schools develop a strategic plan of action that incorporates functional reading and math, along with community-based instruction that addresses community access and employability. These components work concomitantly to build skills needed for securing and maintaining employment, living independently, and enjoying equal status and dignity within preferred settings.

Arguably, many young people with intellectual disabilities need support to function proficiently within community settings. Teachers and caregivers must advocate for the rights of young people with intellectual disabilities. A well thought out transition plan accompanied with a solid foundation of functional academic skills and community experiences likely will create an avenue to higher levels of employment, life satisfaction, and self-worth.

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Appendix A

Curricular Materials Used in this Program: Standing Up for Me, Dare to Dream for Adults, Life Centered Career Education, Brigance Transition Skills Inventory, [Brigance Diagnostic Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills, Revised, 1999](#), SRA Direct Instruction Reading curricula (various levels), Job Talk.