Community-Based Instruction for Students with Mental Retardation

SPE 694 Method Evaluation #2

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Community-based instruction (CBI) for students with mental retardation is designed to help such students generalize the skills and strategies needed for the community setting. According to Turnbull, Turnbull and Wehmeyer (2007), the catchphrase is: “Teach it where you want your students to practice it” (p. 223). The practical life skills which can be taught through CBI are essential for students with mental retardation to develop their highest degree of independence.

In theory CBI has no limits: It can be applied to job training, shopping at the mall, a stop at a bank to make a deposit, and lunch at the pizza parlor. However, educators focus intently on work-related skills for students with mental retardation, since these are so critical for independent living. Thus, CBI is intimately tied to transitional services.

Yet work skills, themselves, do not stand alone. A good deal of research has been conducted on the social skills necessary for persons with mental retardation to maintain employment. Results have been mixed and may depend on the job environment. For example, Huang and Cuvo (1997) point out that social skills are much more important in a job involving office work than a job involving washing dishes. Nevertheless, they conclude: “social skills often play a major role in the job success in competitive employment” (p. 5). Thus, there is a strong argument that social skills should be incorporated into vocational training.
Not all life skills instruction needs to take place in community settings. Research by Morse and Schuster (as cited by Heward, 2006) has found that classroom “simulation training” is effective as a supplement when students are taught in the community twice a week. This strategy may be practical for schools which cannot place their students in the community on a daily basis.

In fact, simulation training may have other benefits as well. Students must be prepared to be confronted with typical life problems: What do you do if you need to miss work when you are sick? When you do not have transportation? These life problem simulations can be taught first in the classroom and with ever-greater frequency in community settings (A. Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 224).

As an ethical rule and in accordance with IDEA’s requirement that students be involved with the determination of their own futures, vocational training should follow the desires of the particular students. In other words, in as much as is realistically possible, students with mental retardation should choose their own careers.

Various vocational programs exist for students with disabilities. These include those developed by universities, CBI guidelines published by the Council for Exceptional Children (1990), as well as programs designed and modified by individual public school systems. Whichever program is used, the program should accommodate the wants, needs, and abilities of the individual student.

Some debate exists on the compatibility of CBI with the principal of inclusion. How can students with mental retardation be working off school campus and still be in class with non-disabled peers? According to Snell and Janney (2006), the primary benefits of inclusion to students with mental retardation are social and academic. Yet
during high school, or at least the latter phase of high school, the benefits of inclusion for students with mental retardation must be considered.

First, it should not be assumed that CBI does not socially benefit students with mental retardation. This would depend upon the environment in which the student trains and works. Hopefully, the students with mental retardation can both be trained on social skills by the special education teachers and learn to interact naturally with employers and employees on the job-training site. Secondly, one must measure the actual benefit of a student with mental retardation sitting in a U.S. History or Geometry class as opposed to being trained in independent life skills.

Certainly, the social benefits of inclusion can still be reached through mainstreaming. A study by Heiman and Margalit (1998), for example, showed that students with mild mental retardation in mainstreamed schools have, through peer interaction and the development of social skills, a diminished sense of loneliness as compared to students with mild mental retardation in self-contained classrooms. Thus, social benefits can be acquired without full inclusion.

The goal of special education is to provide special students with the most fulfilled lives possible given their disabilities. This includes self-determination and independent living. Because students with mental retardation have difficulties with memory and generalization, CBI is essential for them to reach their full potential. Other approaches are beneficial, but should not detract from CBI.
Sources


