Teaching Life Skills

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Abstract

In order to appreciate the historical value for teaching Life Skills, it is important to understand a few relational aspects of special education and inclusion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required that students with disabilities were mandated access to the general education classroom. In the last decade, legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required states to establish challenging standards; implement assessments that measure students' performance, and maintain accountability for achievement in reading, math, and science.

Overview

In order to appreciate the historical value for teaching Life Skills, it is important to understand a few relational aspects of special education and inclusion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required that students with disabilities were mandated access to the general education classroom. In the last decade, legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) "required states to establish challenging standards; implement assessments that measure students' performance, and maintain accountability for achievement in reading, math, and science" (Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, & Karvonen, 2007, p. 2). For students with special needs, NCLB allowed states to develop alternative achievement standards to report "adequate yearly progress for students with significant cognitive disabilities" (p. 2). These are individuals consisting of approximately 1% of the general population. Advancements in expectations for students with cognitive disabilities better allowed them to access the general curriculum through inclusion in general education classes.

Central to the conversation concerning special education and standards based education is the increased attention given to the needs of adolescents and adults with disabilities and the mandate to foster appropriate education opportunities for all students. Education opportunities for adolescents and adults that prepare students to transition from school to young adulthood involves a "comprehensive process that involves identifying needs, planning for them, and ensuring that these are addressed" (Patton & Cronin, 1997, p. 294).

Apprehensions about adult outcomes developed and accelerated after a series of studies indicated that students with disabilities were not transitioning from high school to adult life as well as their non-disabled peers, despite federal mandates (Affleck, Edgar, Levine & Kortering, 1990: Blackorby, Edgar, & Korter

ing, 1991; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985; Wagner et al., 1991; White et al., 1982). In fact, some projections regarding disabled adult outcomes portrayed an epidemic of unemployment and or under-employment, low pay, part-time work, frequent job changes, disassociation with the general community, inadequate functioning in the ability to be independent, and restricted social lives (Halpern, 1993; Sitlington, 1996). Many of these outcomes stemmed from elevated high school drop-out rates. High drop out rates and research regarding adult outcomes indicated that individuals in high school that received special education services were not adequately prepared for adulthood (Patton & Kronin, 1997, p. 2). These outcomes were directly related to the movement of improving the transition process to engage special education students into Life Skills training that would better facilitate improved outcomes.

Historical Perspectives

The concept of Life Skills training stemmed from the belief that all individuals should be able to function in adulthood and the philosophy that while special education was doing a satisfactory job in elementary school; it did not adequately prepare adolescents with disabilities to function well in adult life. While "no one is completely prepared for the realities of adulthood; some students are more ready for the 'big show' than others (Patton & Cronin, 1997, p. 296).

Brown and his colleagues (1979) initially proposed a functional model for teaching Life Skills to high school special education students. Evidence based practices for teaching academic skills to facilitate the transition process from high school to adult life has been described as:

- Teaching prioritized skills with systematic prompting and fading;

- Teaching students to generalize; and

- Promoting access to the general education curriculum through the use of materials, activities, and settings typical of general education (Browder, et al., 2007, p. 7).

This means that all students will have the opportunity to access the general education curriculum based on individual needs.

Most meaningful to teaching functional Life Skills is the relevance of providing instruction in community settings such as restaurants, department stores, grocery stores, banks, and recreational settings. Although, when community locations were unavailable, educators learned through trial and error that a simulated community model also produced generalized responses. In order to offset areas of weakness for the student faced with Life Skills training to aide the transition from high school to adult life, researchers also found "additional resources like books, handouts, laboratory equipment, and other relevant materials as an important way to promote access to the general curriculum" (Browder, et al., 2007, p. 8). Moreover, research substantiated the need for further study to develop Individual Education Plans (IEP) that improved how state standards were integrated with Life Skills.

Transition Planning

This background for teaching Life Skills led to federal mandates ensuring that transition planning for adolescents to adulthood would provide a framework linking employment and living arrangements to a curriculum that would meet guidelines for all high schools to follow. These stipulations should include an IEP outlining transition services for students aged 16 and older, coordinate activities outlining an outcome-oriented process to education, and involve postsecondary issues of concern like education, vocational training, adult services, independent living, and community participation based on a given student's individual needs, and in response to his or her interests and preferences. Optimal transition activities should include,

- Meaningful instruction,

- Community experiences,

- Envelopment of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and

- Acquisition of daily living skills and vocational training to help young adults get jobs (Patton & Cronin, 1997, p. 296).

Transition goals should meet instructional needs that can be met in the classroom or the community and begin at the preschool level if necessary. Overall, transition planning should be comprehensive, based on the student's strengths, invite student and family participation in creating objectives, offer cultural, family, community, and gender sensitivities, and offer supportive, critical timing, and efficient prioritization of goals and future needs (p. 297).

Central to reasons why teaching Life Skills is vital to students with disabilities is in assuring a level of independence for future living. "Independence for these children means providing them

with the opportunity to get more control over their own lives, their environment, and the way they are addressed" (van der Putten, Vlaskamp, Reynders, & Nakken, 2005, p. 613).

Teaching Life Skills

The idea of teaching Life Skills is not brand new, but in the last few years, it has drawn more attention, because of the federal mandates for more standardized education and higher expectations. Critical parts of teaching Life Skills have focused on several areas of adult preparation. Life Skills' content itself should be integrated with scholastic abilities and social skills, and potentially offer training in Personal Finance, Health and Hygiene, and Practical Communications. This content is optimally supported by infusing school and businesses within the work community. To facilitate these opportunities, teachers should partner and seek support from business owners that might offer their workplace for job placement opportunities.

Depending on the severity of the disabilities experienced by individuals in Life Skills training programs, researchers reported deficits in money management skills, home cleanliness, social behavior, and meal preparation as areas that should be recognized and integrated into IEP development for students entering the independence of adulthood. Additional skill areas that should be developed and infused into Life Skills teaching to ensure success include: personal maintenance, communication, community utilization, clothing care and use, and food preparation (Schalock & Harper, 1978). Travel training such as bus riding, street crossing, and driving a car should support money management training to offset debt problems and inadequate employment issues (Martin, Rusch, & Heal, 2001, p. 247). Individuals with disabilities also experience gaps in their nutrition stemming from the inability to understand proper nutrition coupled with inadequate meal preparation (p. 248). Researchers further urged Life Skills programs to teach appropriate hygiene, telephone skills, active leisure skills, and social skills. Also fundamental to teaching Life Skills, educators have a responsibility to understand that community success and acceptance is vital to outcomes in program development. The two most critical factors of teaching Life Skills should revolve around the integration of education skills and community skills.

Social Skills Development

Social skills development is crucial to enabling individuals with disabilities to attain success in community environments. Schloss and Schloss (2001) reported that poor interpersonal skills were a major impediment to developing appropriate social success in community environments. Contributing factors to poor social development included the interplay of immaturity and poor academic achievement resulting in the inability to communicate needs that negatively impact employment, social competence, and the disabled person's "quality of life" (p. 269). The interplay of these two factors impact social aptitude in community and school environments producing the need for educators to offer social skills training as part of teaching Life Skills. Johns, Crowley, and Guetzloe (2005) further substantiated the need for

improved social skills to ensure success in academic environments and life and indicated that in a school environment, poor social skills produce:

- Limited learning opportunities;
- Impaired social and academic opportunities; and
- Social isolation (p. 1).

In response to the need to develop social skills, a multi-faceted approach was advised. These components included providing direct social skills instruction, recognizing and utilizing teachable moments to improve social skills, recognizing the teacher as a model for social skills training, actively and positively recognizing the appropriate use of social skills, utilizing special group projects to teach social skills, resolving conflict, and teaching self-management and anger management (p. 3). All of these issues deeply impact special education and how it is applied for students transitioning from school to the community environment.

Applications

Role of Students

Individuals with special needs have long described a group of individuals impaired cognitively or physically in a way that impacts their interaction in school and community environments. In response to these needs, special education was developed as a series of educational mandates aimed at helping these students learn effectively and develop appropriate capacities for coping. Many special education students have impaired thinking skills, which has resulted in instruction focused on rote memorization rather than education helping them develop complex thinking, problem solving, and decision making (Alley & Deshler, 1979). These instructional philosophies sometimes lead students to develop dependence and learned helplessness. In order to overcome these issues, students with disabilities should be taught higher order thinking strategies. Appropriate thinking strategies designed to help all students access general education curriculum and receive the most appropriate Life Skills training includes: observing, describing, organizing, questioning, problem solving, and time management (Lombardi & Savage, 1994, p. 27). These skills underscore social skills development programs, Life Skills education programs, and service learning.

Role of Teachers

In order to promote an educational environment that encourages students to develop problem solving skills, "teachers should create a psychologically safe environment that encourages students to express opinions and to defend answers" (Lombardi & Savage, 1994, p. 27). Teachers also must be models of good listening, respect, and possess the willingness to allow their own erroneous thinking to be questioned. These beliefs should be supported by the philosophy that "thinking skills can be taught," and "all children are capable of thinking at abstract levels, although the quality of thinking may differ" (p. 27).

Teachers also have an obligation mandated by their lawful responsibility to ensure "a system of diversity" to be constructed for all students. This philosophy directly relates to deeply evaluating and holding in high esteem the ideas, opinions, or evidence advanced by others to make improved, informed judgments and decisions (Lombardi & Savage, 1994, p. 27). In offering and honoring the strengths and attributes of others, teachers have an obligation to understand best practice in delivering education interventions for all students. In advancing educational strategies for teaching Life Skills, teachers should be aware of a couple of different approaches that might offset difficulties and allow them to cultivate attitudes of "equality for all."

Service Learning

One strategy for teaching Life Skills education is service learning. Service learning is a "teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007, p. 227). Positive student outcomes attributed to service learning includes increased school attendance, an improvement in grades, better self esteem, expanded community involvement, and enhanced acceptance of cultural diversity (p. 227). Service learning has been advocated as a means of promoting inclusion and access to the least restrictive environment, because all students can access equal opportunities for community based instruction while developing improved social skills (Gent & Gurecka, 1998). Service learning also provides meaningful ways to offer job skills training, social and interpersonal growth, self care, and safety as part of teaching Life Skills, which should be directly linked to post-school outcomes like "postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community involvement" (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007, p. 241).

Virtual Reality Technology

Another strategy that teachers should be aware of is that Virtual Reality technology can be utilized for teaching Life Skills to deaf students. A Virtual Reality program has been utilized at Lake Sybelia Elementary School in Orange County, Florida by resource staff to improve academic skills of hearing impaired students. In collaboration among educators, defense contractors, and the government, a project was developed to improve academic and social success for deaf students. In addition to improving math scores, the system also prepares students for tests, and offers them the ability to navigate through a virtual town and interact with townspeople. Students can practice scenarios like approaching a stranger, practicing a fire drill, or even placing a fast food order. The virtual reality opportunity allows students to improve academically and gain access to social and community advancement (Savides, 2002, p. 12).

Role of Administrators

From a systemic perspective, school administrators have the job of providing stewardship for the whole system of a school. Administrators should keep a couple of issues in mind for developing the most effective Life Skills training program.

First, administrators should understand the difficulty in teaching Life Skills, because the content is hugely subjective. As described earlier, multiple interpretations for how the teaching is administered varies per school in accordance with how it is defined in a given environment. In approaching the content to be presented in teaching Life Skills, administrators should be mindful of the multi-cultural impacts (Becker, 1994, p. 23). As educators, we must become aware of our own attitudes governing ethnicity, cultural differences, and foreign languages. Administrators possess the primary responsibility in ensuring that each of these properties are examined and considered to promote the most effective educational environment.

Second, administrators should consider the needs of all cultures, which are that all people want to stay healthy, help family members, learn useful skills, and feel like valued citizens (Becker, 1994, p. 23). These considerations comprise the issues of greatest concern in providing educational opportunities that meet the needs of all students. Administrators hold a primary and lawful responsibility of supporting teachers in best practice. Teachers should feel supported and accommodated in providing students with a nurturing and accessible education environment for all students.

Issues

Overcoming Barriers to Teaching Life Skills

The most significant barrier in teaching Life Skills is in understanding the multiple assumptions, interpretations, and attitudes of how Life Skills programs are viewed by teachers, the community, and families. Educators must be taught more inclusive strategies for teaching Life Skills (such as the Service Learning Model). Multiple students in all educational environments can benefit from similar training offered in Life Skills classrooms, such as money management, job skills training, and preparation for adult living.

Special education often remains a segregating experience through high school, despite lawful mandates aimed at delivering equal educational opportunities for all students. To overcome some of these barriers, general education students and special education students should be offered similar education opportunities, such as job training within the community and service learning opportunities. Currently, service learning is "employed by approximately 46% of all high schools," with little evidence as to how students with disabilities are included in these programs (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007, p. 227). It would be useful to investigate ways of integrating service learning opportunities for both general education and special education students.

Conclusion

Teaching Life Skills should be a program offered for high school special and general education students to meaningfully prepare them for adulthood and daily living. Given the multiple family and community gaps experienced by multiple students, many adolescents are not well prepared for adulthood. While evidence

suggested that special education students were even less prepared for independent living than their general education peers, it would be beneficial to connect all teaching to real-life learning to provide students with meaningful and authentic learning environments.

Specifically incorporated within a Life Skills Program, a multi-faceted approach to daily living, money management, and community engagement should be considered and underscored by service learning and a multi-cultural lens for curriculum development. This suggestion considers ways for how teachers can interact meaningfully with all students in all education environments.

Given the substantial interpretations for how Life Skills courses are taught in different high schools, new teachers are well advised to seek mentorship in developing best programming. Partnerships, collaboration, and understanding are recommended approaches in overcoming systemic gaps that might be experienced by all teachers new to education. Lastly, if a new teacher is hired for a Life Skills teaching assignment and is unclear on how to proceed, the new teacher should visit other regional high schools with outstanding programs and communicate with other teachers from other schools in similar situations to implement similar qualities in their program. Connecting with other schools in other programs, while sometimes daunting is an approach that is recommended for all new teachers as a way of developing relationships and collaboration.

Terms & Concepts

Inclusion: Inclusion is the total integration process of special education students in general education classrooms offered according to the special education student's needs. It is also the principle and practice of considering general education as the placement of first choice for all learners.

Life Skills: Evidence based practices for teaching academic skills combined with community skills to facilitate the transition process from high school to adult life for individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities. These skills should be directly linked to post-school outcomes like postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community involvement.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB): A federal mandate that requires states to establish challenging standards and implement assessments that measure students' performance, while maintaining accountability for achievement in reading, math, and science.

Service Learning: Teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Social Skills Training: Training for students purposed by utilizing special group projects to teach social skills, resolve conflicts, and teach self-management and anger management.

Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities describe a group of individuals impaired cognitively or physi-

cally in a way that impacts typical ways of interaction in school and community environments.

Transition: Transition has been described as a "comprehensive process that involves identifying needs, planning for them, and ensuring that these are addressed."

Virtual Reality: A technology that allows users to interact with a computer simulated, real or imagined model or environment.

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