Middle school students need to learn to participate in their peers’ community activities, such as going to the library, going to the movies, renting videos, or shopping in the mall.

Summer

Addressing Students’ Functional Skills in Inclusive Settings

Teri L. Burcroff • Daniel M. Radogna • Erika H. Wright

Here's an important question for educators in inclusive classrooms: When do we teach students with significant cognitive disabilities how to shop for and purchase groceries and clothing, buy compact discs (CDs), or dine in a restaurant? It is a well-established fact that students with significant disabilities need to learn skills and routines in the environment in which the skills will be used, such as a local department store or the mall (Bates, Cuvo, Miner, & Korabek, 2001; Kluth, 2000; see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”)

Many other questions arise when we place students with severe disabilities in inclusive general classrooms. Is peer tutoring enough? How do we make community outings inclusive? How do we teach functional skills in an inclusive way? When inclusion means the students are educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day, when and how do we as professionals address those other needs? This article explores questions like these and provides some fresh perspectives and solutions.

Pleasant Valley Inclusion Program

Including the Community

We developed a program to address students’ functional community-referenced skill needs within the context of an inclusive middle school. The nine students for whom this program was designed were included in general education classes throughout their entire school career. The middle school guidance counselor initiated the program, based on the belief that, although the students were receiving excellent services in general education classes, an important component of their education was missing. In particular, the individualized education program (IEP) goals that were identified in collaboration with the students’ IEP teams would be better addressed by recognizing that the community is an inclusive environment within which students must learn important skills.

Developing Guiding Principles

We determined to establish a set of guiding principles to ensure that the program would not be interpreted as a
return to a self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities and life skill support needs. The guidance counselor and the special education teacher, who volunteered to be the case manager for this group of students, developed the guiding principles. The first author, who served as a consultant to the district, assisted in this process.

The inclusive philosophy of the school district became the foundation of our guiding principles; we then submitted the principles to the special education supervisor for approval. In the initial planning phases, we identified four principles and one caveat (see Table 1). We were then able to infuse subsequent phases of the program with the established parameters and develop the actual method of implementation.

**Implementation**

**Definition of Inclusion in Middle School**

The next step in the development process involved defining what inclusion should comprise for middle school students with and without disabilities. In this phase, we conducted a survey of the environment and the activities of students without disabilities. This was completed with the notion that elementary-school-age children without disabilities would experience the majority of their school day in one classroom, venturing out of the general education classroom for classes such as band or chorus. The environment outside of the school was considered for a student of this age in the context of field trips and activities engaged in with adult supervision (e.g., crossing the street).

As children without disabilities enter middle school, the school environment

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### IN THE PROCESS OF BEGINNING TO INCLUDE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSES, SOME NECESSARY COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM MAY HAVE BEEN MISSED.

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**An Important Domain of Special Education.** Historically, special education teachers taught daily living and vocational skills (Meyer, Peck & Brown, 1991). Those skills were taught to ensure independence in the community, although they were often taught in isolated settings. Then came inclusion.

**The New Processes of Inclusion.** Inclusion changed the landscape of special education. Special education service delivery changed. Students educated in self-contained settings were losing out on important parts of the education process, namely the general education curriculum (Will, 1986) and social interaction with typically developing peers (Tichenor, Heins, & Piechura-Couture, 2000). The next years ushered in significant changes in the roles of all educators and in the education that students with disabilities were provided. Recommendations that students with all types of disabilities should be included in general education classes increased (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). With this new means of service delivery, educators began to note the significant progress made by students in social skills in integrated settings (Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997).

Time passed and textbooks were written to describe how to teach students with disabilities in general education classes (Bradley, King-Sears, & Tessier-Switting, 1997; Friend & Bursuck, 1999). These textbooks even covered the various means in which functional skills could be taught within the context of a general education lesson (Field, LeRoy, & Rivera, 1994).

**Time for More Change.** Billingsley and Albertson (1999) noted that in the quest for inclusion we may be neglecting the learning needs of many students with moderate to severe disabilities. The literature provides information on how to address functional skill needs in general education classrooms (Field et al., 1994). The use of peer tutors, naturally occurring opportunities, and other instructional techniques are identified and recommended as strategies to use to teach these important skills within the context of an integrated school, but is that enough? If we know that skills need to be learned and practiced in the settings in which they will be used, should not those skills be taught there? Is it enough to teach those skills in general education classrooms, hoping that they will generalize (Stokes and Baer, 1977)? The dilemma arises when the definition of inclusion used by the school district does not include the more traditional services provided by special education teachers, such as in vivo instruction to increase generalization of skills pre-taught in the classroom (McDonnell & Ferguson, 1988).

**Evolution of Inclusion.** Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley (1999-2000) found that as implementation of inclusive practices has evolved, the term inclusion has evolved also. Their research indicated that experts have interpreted the concept of inclusion in many ways. These interpretations include such things as:

- Time in general education classes.
- Supports within those classes.
- Placement in general education classes.
- The use of alternative settings for instruction.

Educators have developed programs according to those definitions or components of those definitions.

**Supplying Missing Program Components.** The issue that faces many school districts is that in the process of beginning to include students with disabilities in general education classes, some necessary components of the program may have been missed. For the case in point, in an effort to ensure that students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities were afforded access to the general education curriculum, the use of alternative settings for instruction was lost in the shuffle. Which brings us back to the question of when do we teach the students how to buy groceries, clothing, or a CD? In other words, when inclusion means the students are educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day, when and how do we as professionals address those other needs?
The program was intended to address the needs of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities who demonstrated a need for specific instruction in functional, age-appropriate, community-referenced skills.

The program must be inclusive.

a. If students with disabilities went into the community ideally they must go with their typically developing peers.

b. The number of students with disabilities going on any given trip would be small, defined as one or two.

Students must be based in the general education classroom.

a. A self-contained special education class was not a desired outcome.

b. Students would leave the general education class much like their peers do for chorus or band.

c. If a unit of instruction was too abstract or an activity was inappropriate, that time would be used to teach functional skills.

The amount and type of community instruction would be commensurate with the chronological age of the students. If middle school students without disabilities went to the mall to buy clothes, that would be an appropriate skill to learn.

Before each biweekly foray into the community, the teacher gave the parents an outline of skills/activities that would be addressed during that trip.

Funding

With the guiding principles established and a set of age-appropriate activities identified, based on the individual needs of the students, the next step required a financial commitment by the district. The principal and school district business manager set up an account in the budget for activities within and outside of the school that might require cash. With this component in place, the special education teacher had access to funds, as opposed to a purchase order, for use in community-based lessons.

Year 1 Implementation

The first issues to address were staffing and scheduling of general education classes for the participating students. The case manager and the guidance counselor examined the needs of each student, based on the student’s IEP, and developed student schedules that reflected the guiding principle of an inclusive program. More specifically, students were not all placed in the same general education class at the same time, ensuring that trips into the community would consist of only a small number of students (see Table 1).

The first group of students was assigned to three teams of general education teachers, two seventh- and one eighth-grade team, respectively. The students were based in the general education class with support provided by whichever special education teacher was assigned to support that class. The case manager’s role was to facilitate inclusion for the students participating and to provide instruction in specific community-referenced functional skills.

The teams then examined and modified the curriculum and classroom activities, according to the student’s IEP. When the material or activity presented in the class was clearly inappropriate or considered too abstract, the case manager provided the modified materials; or students were taught a functional skill in another setting. These functional skills were taught in the class using naturally occurring opportunities in the classroom and outside of the class when it was appropriate. It is important to note that a foreign language is required of all middle school students. Only one student from the group of students with disabilities participated in the foreign
language requirement, and this was a decision made by the IEP team. During that time period, the teacher/case manager pretaught functional skills required for the next community-based session, such as reading supermarket signs or clothing labels. The students then participated in community-based activities to reinforce and generalize the skills taught in school.

The trips into the community occurred on a biweekly basis. Parents were involved in the development of IEP goals and objectives; before each foray into the community, the teacher gave the parents an outline of skills/activities that would be addressed during that trip (see Table 2).

In addition, if a parent had a particular request, such as, “Can you please help Timmy buy a birthday card for Aunt Betsy?” the teacher modified the objectives for the trip to honor that request. One adult was assigned to each student, and a peer without disabilities accompanied the students into the community. The peer component proved to be particularly challenging because boys rarely would volunteer to go, and only a few girls volunteered. This finding is supported by the work of Cook and Semmel (1999), who stated that students without disabilities tend to view their peers with disabilities in more of a care-taking than friend role, and they often did not return after the initial trips.

### Student Self-Advocacy Activities

An additional skill that we specifically addressed with the participating students was that of self-advocacy (Wolery, 1999). We deemed self-advocacy skills particularly important because adult case management and community support systems routinely incorporate self-advocacy opportunities and quality assurance evaluations for their consumers. One student who participated in the first year provided her own transition information to the high school teachers during a faculty meeting. For other students, the special education teachers provided the information. The participating student described her needs, her expectations, and in some instances her limitations. She also described the units that she could participate in during science class and communicated to the teachers her ability to identify units that were too difficult. It was during those difficult units that she participated in a school-based job in the nurse’s office. That school-based job addressed work-related IEP goals, such as social interaction, following directions, and working independently.

### Year 2 Activities

The middle school principal’s hands-on involvement and dedication to the success of the program was pivotal. Certainly his knowledge and understanding of special education was a factor, but more so was his commitment to the success of the program and to addressing the needs of its students and staff.

In planning for the second year, we identified the following factors to restructure and refine the program:

- Engaging peers without disabilities in more meaningful interaction and providing instruction on how to handle unusual behavior and circumstances.

### Table 2. Examples of Community-Referenced Functional Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Activities Engaged in Outside of the School Building</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 1. Clothing | • Finding sizes of clothing and shoes on actual items in the store  
• Trying on the clothing using a changing room  
• Identifying care instructions that may influence the purchase of that item  
| 2. Food | • Shopping using aisle markers  
• Comparing prices  
• Choosing and purchasing items listed on a recipe  
• Using a predetermined amount of money to buy needed items  
| 3. Eating out | • Manners  
• Reading a menu  
• Menu Math—including determining tax and tip  
• Eating at different types of restaurants: buffets, fast food, or sit-down  
• Gaining the attention of wait staff  
| 4. Crossing the street | 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Activities Engaged in Within the School Building</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Doing the laundry for the Home Economics department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using a microwave to prepare foods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Continuing to teach self-advocacy skills and attending more closely to the development of self-monitoring skills to increase independence in school and in the community.
• Providing for more time to preteach the next unit to be covered in the general education class and preteach appropriate responses for dealing with uncomfortable social situations that may occur during class, which would allow for a higher level of participation in the inclusive setting.
• Focusing attention through the IEP process on clarifying and clearly defining individual community skill goals.

Team members needed to write IEPs to address these highly individual needs without sacrificing access to the general education curriculum. This is a program that provides a framework that can be used but also is adaptable to different schools and ages of students.

Guiding Principles Revisited
Initial implementation of the program brought to the fore school-specific issues that suggested a reexamination of the program in light of the guiding principles. The first principle, that of meeting the functional, age-appropriate community-referenced needs of the students, remained a clear intended outcome of the program.

The second and third principles required clarification of administrative commitment and better communication of the goals of the program. This became apparent when, at the initial outset of program development, many teachers, in both general and special education, thought that this would relieve them of inclusion responsibilities—that is, of including students who were performing significantly below grade-level expectations.

More to the point, a sense that a self-contained class was in the works became apparent; and some teachers began identifying potential members of that class, including students with learning disabilities. We addressed this misperception at all levels of the administration in meetings, through memos, and by word of mouth. As we explained, this new program did not exclude the participating students from their general education classes. But on occasion, when the activity or content of the lesson was inappropriate or not considered to be the best use of the student’s time, the teacher provided the students with opportunities to learn those skills that the general curriculum does not specifically address—skills that are imperative for independent functioning as an adult. In addition, we took only small groups of students into the community on any given day, because of changing caseloads from 1 year to the next. As a result of our communications and work, the administration made a further commitment to the second and third guiding principles.

The final guiding principle also represented a challenge in that, as time went by, it became increasingly difficult to take the students into the community. The reasons for this were many, including winter weather that precluded travel and difficulty in rescheduling, as well as changes in the needs of the participating students. Because the special education teacher made a conscientious effort to remedy the situation, we felt it necessary to periodically perform a self-study to determine the extent to which the programs’ intended outcomes had been achieved.

Final Thoughts
This program model represents one means of addressing the functional skill needs of students with more significant disabilities in inclusive settings. The guiding principles provide a structure within which a school can define inclusion in a meaningful way for all of its students. Data from the program indicates that all students made progress

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**Table 3. Overview of Best Practices and Program Elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Practice</th>
<th>Program Element at Pleasant Valley (PV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion (Brown et al., 1979)</td>
<td>Students at PV are fully included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional, age-appropriate curriculum (Brown et al., 1979)</td>
<td>Individualized education programs (IEPs) reflect age-appropriate, functional skills. Community referenced activities address the functional skill needs of the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-based instruction (Dymond, 1997)</td>
<td>Community-referenced and community-based instruction are the basis for the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills instruction (Strully &amp; Strully, 1984)</td>
<td>Including typically developing peers on trips outside of the building provides opportunities for social skills instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination (Wehmeyer &amp; Schwartz, 1997)</td>
<td>Self-advocacy has increasingly become a major component of the program as the student’s level of confidence (as reported by their parents) has increased.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students in the program regularly practiced self-advocacy skills.

toward achieving their individual goals and objectives with moderate or significant improvements, as reported on the student’s IEP progress reports. Parents reported increased confidence when the family engaged in activities in the community.

In addition, social interaction at family functions increased due to the fact that the students were involved in independently purchasing items that the parents requested, such as birthday cards. The program continues to evolve and challenges continue to arise, but the commitment to the unique needs of this particular group of students has been made and this district’s definition of inclusion evolves with it.

References


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TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 35, No. 5, pp. 52-57.

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