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The Role of Functional Skills Instruction

While many students transition successfully into adult life, many are at risk for experiencing difficulty during this period (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Even greater difficulty has been reported for students with disabilities (Brollier, Shepard & Markley, 1994; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2007). Therefore, students with disabilities, and particularly students identified as having an intellectual disability, should be provided functional skills instruction within the educational environment with the premise of teaching skills necessary for successful transitions into adulthood.

Functional skills, according to Cronin (1996), are the tasks that help individuals become successful and independent adults. Vandercook (1991) stated, “a true functional skill is one that is initiated, used, and maintained under typical circumstances” (p. 320). Functional skills are often taught in conjunction with functional academics. Bouck and Joshi (2012) defined functional academics as an approach to teach “students the skills to help them be productive members of society and support post school outcomes” (p. 140). Functional academics may include “core subject content, vocational education, community access, daily living, personal finance, independent living, transportation, social skills and relationships, and self-determination” (Bouck & Joshi, 2012, p. 140). This article will discuss functional academics as it relates to successful transitions into adulthood through literacy, social skills, self-determination, and community involvement instruction.

Transition to Adulthood

In order to create a context for the understanding of functional academics and functional skills, it is imperative to view this notion within the broader scope of the concept of transition. High school transition can be “a period of *floundering* that may occur for at least the first several

years after leaving school as adolescents begin to assume a variety of adult roles in their communities” (Halpern, 1992, p. 203). Evidence of the difficulty experienced by students with disabilities during this critical transition was brought to light through a number of follow-up and follow-along studies (Hasazi et al., 1985; Hasazi, Johnson, Hasazi, Gordon, & Hull, 1989; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; Wagner et al., 2007) conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, schools in the United States are federally mandated to make available to youth with disabilities, techniques, skills, and the guidance necessary to facilitate successful transition to adult life.

A number of recurring areas of need were highlighted in these studies, among which was the need for what Kohler and Field (2003) and IDEIA (2004) refer to as student development. Critical to student development is the need for instruction in functional life skills. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), (2001) mandated that such instruction be substantiated by scientifically based research. Researchers have identified functional skills that lead to post-school success (Bouck, 2010; Test et al., 2009).

Functional Literacy

Literacy can be considered a functional skill when viewed in terms of everyday spoken and written communication. Literacy can also be a means for students with disabilities to access other academic areas. Being literate also increases these students’ opportunities to interact with peers and gain entry to community offerings. Literacy as part of a functional skills curriculum should focus on those skills that increase students’ ability to be autonomous and independent (Ruppar, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011).

An essential component of being literate is acquiring reading skills. Reading can be a struggle for many students with disabilities; therefore, the use of evidence-based reading instruction can help them acquire basic reading skills needed to function in school and

community settings (Pullen & Cash, 2011). Although it may seem late for effective reading intervention, secondary students with disabilities benefit from instruction which focuses on word study and text comprehension (Malmgren & Trezek, 2009). Diagnostic, prescriptive reading programs (e.g., The Wilson Reading System and Corrective Reading) are particularly effective in bolstering adolescent students' skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For students with disabilities, reading allows them to find work, participate in leisure activities, and pursue interests outside of school and/or work settings (Forts & Luckasson, 2011).

A second essential component of literacy is the ability to write. Writing instruction can allow for participation in class activities as well as a feeling of being a member of the classroom community (Ruppar et al., 2011). In addition, because of the increasing demand for writing in everyday life, students with disabilities must become as proficient as possible in this skill (Graham & Harris, 2011). A writing strategy, such as Cognitive Strategy Instruction, provides students with disabilities with a structure for understanding and approaching writing tasks (Guzel-Ozmen, 2009). Writing, as part of functional literacy, presents an opportunity for students to develop essential skills as well as to develop an additional meaningful means of communication and social connection within their respective communities.

Social Skills

Students with disabilities are at risk for diminished social skills. As a result of this deficit, their ability to successfully navigate their personal and educational environments may be negatively impacted. Social skills are those skills or behaviors that are perceived and positively reinforced by others as socially acceptable and then therefore lead to the avoidance of socially awkward situations (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2005). It has been suggested that while an

academic disability in the classroom may not be evident on the playground, difficulties with social skills impact a student wherever they may go (Snider & Battalio, 2011).

According to Johns et al. (2005), teaching social skills can involve various instructional methods. Direct instruction identifies a specific student, a particular skill, and then instruction is delivered, progress is monitored, and opportunities are provided to use that skill across various environments. Another strategy for teaching social skills is taking advantage of the teachable moment where a socially awkward moment is addressed with immediate feedback in a constructive manner. A third strategy is for the teacher to model appropriate social skills for the students, and to check for understanding. A fourth strategy suggested is recognizing or acknowledging when a student displays appropriate social skills and providing positive feedback. A fifth strategy is to have students participate in group projects that emphasize working together on social skills such as giving and receiving a compliment, and how to express thankfulness. Additionally, instruction in conflict resolution will benefit students as they interact in a social world.

Self-determination

The need to provide students with disabilities the necessary functional skills to become active participants in their education and planning for their future has led to an increase in instruction in self-determination skills over the last two decades. According to Carter, Lane, Crnobori, Bruhn, and Oakes (2011), self-determination is “the capacity to direct one’s life in ways that are personally valued” (p.100). Denny and Davison (2012) suggested that research has demonstrated a relationship between self-determination and optimistic outcomes for students as they transition to adulthood.

Self-determination instruction includes teaching skills essential for potential success. These skills include decision-making with regard to education, leisure, vocational training, and independent living (Palmer, 2010). Instruction to increase self-determination may include teaching students how to develop problem solving skills; how to set personal goals, how to make personal choices; how to set goals and develop plans to reach those goals; and finally instruction on self-regulation (Wehmeyer, 2002).

Community Involvement

According to Carnahan, Hume, Clarke, and Borders (2009), independence is essential in order for individuals to successfully integrate into the community and employment. Independence skills can be taught across disciplines. Teachers actively engage students with disabilities in the planning of their futures in order to help them recognize, analyze and generalize information. Therefore, educational agencies, through the application of functional skills, teach students with disabilities at an early age to learn to think and function independently (Carnahan et al., 2009).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (2004) ensures that all children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate education, along with special education services that prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. IDEIA (2004) states that transition planning should help students enter “vocational education, postsecondary education, community participation, adult services, independent living, integrated employment, and/or continuing and adult education” (Sec. 602(34) (A)). Therefore, schools provide transition services in order to prepare students with disabilities for adulthood (IDEIA, 2004). Often these transition services are taught through community involvement. Therefore, community involvement is a key addition to instruction in functional skills, including

functional academics. Through community involvement, students are provided with hands-on opportunities to learn skills necessary for a successful adulthood.

Gerhardt (2007) stated that students with disabilities should be exposed to jobs in order to learn the skills necessary to be successful. Individuals with disabilities will need to learn through experiences on a job to know what skills and conditions are needed in order to successfully gain and sustain employment. When students with disabilities are provided vocational opportunities through experiential learning and functional academics, they can learn firsthand the skills that can be generalized into other environments and settings.

Vandercook (1991) concluded that recreation and leisure skills also should be taught within the context of community involvement in functional academics. When recreation skills are taught as a component of functional skills instruction, students are able to effectively generalize those skills into other environments with peers without disabilities. These skills help individuals with disabilities adapt in social situations through community involvement.

Discussion

For students with disabilities as well as those who are at-risk, functional skills are an essential instructional component. Functional skills instruction should include a focus on transition to adulthood, functional literacy, social skills, self-determination, and community involvement. These components of functional skills instruction help facilitate independent living skills that are an integral part of adult living.

There is a recognized need for functional skills instruction in education that focuses on teaching the skills necessary for independent adult living. The teaching and learning of these skills can aid in the development of productive citizens. A functional academic program that

integrates the teaching of functional skills provides opportunities for at-risk students, such as students with disabilities, to experience more successful post-school outcomes.

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