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Editorial¹

Throughout the world the amount of disability related programs has proliferated. Greater attention is being given to include persons with disabilities into the mainstream of society. As important as this is, many programs omit key principles that can enhance quality and make them effective. In this editorial I would like to discuss important themes which are essential to address when planning programs with individuals who have disabilities. These principles include: (1) the role of life supports; (2) transitions; (3) personal responsibility; (4) self-determination and choice; and (5) neighborhood schools. They reflect the most progressive and contemporary approaches to human service delivery and education.

For example, supports are a way to help people with disabilities become more independent and able to control the direction of their own life. In recent years there has been a strong shift toward designing education and human service programs in such a way as to emphasize the role of supports in enhancing the success of persons with disabilities. No one person is the same with or without a disability. Every individual needs some level of help or assistance to succeed. There are some persons, for example, with very severe disabilities who need a great deal of support to succeed in school, work, home, and the community. The trick is to meet the person where they are at and then with them establish an array of supports to help move forward.

Supports can be identified from community organizations or agencies. Those supports found to

be the most productive include personal connections through friends, acquaintances, or experiences; the telephone book; the individual and his or her friends; the news-paper; and other colleagues. Five general types of support option categories have been identified. These include: (1) employer supports; (2) transportation supports; (3) community supports; (4) personal and independent living supports; and (5) recreation and social integration supports.

Taking full advantage of all the support resources available to assist an individual with achieving his or her education, community living or employment goals does not typically happen for persons with severe disabilities. Just because a support is available at the workplace or in the community does not necessarily mean that the person will automatically access it or benefit from its use. It is not uncommon for an individual to not know that potential supports are available to him or her, how to choose among the alternatives, or how to go about accessing a desired support. A critical factor in the use of a variety of supports is the role of the teacher who helps the individual with identifying, choosing, and accessing needed supports at whatever level of assistance he or she prefers.

A second theme includes life transition. There are many transitions across the lifespan and they often create a lot of dislocation and frustration in our life. Individuals with disabilities are no different. For example, when young children with developmental delays enter kindergarten, this is often the first time that they will have a teacher with no disability training; similarly, classmates will for the most part not have a disability and adjustments will need to be made accordingly.

¹ Portions of this editorial were adapted from *Exceptional Individuals in School, Community, and Work*, Austin, TX: PRO-ED, 1997.

Kindergarten for children who cannot hear, cannot see, are severely mentally retarded, or have cerebral palsy can be very difficult. On the other hand, kindergarten with the right help and support can be an absolute outstanding experience, one that will open a whole new feeling of value and self-esteem.

As the child grows and moves through school over the years, a new transition looms. Facing the future of adulthood and the challenges of establishing a career, making new friends, traveling independently and finding a place to live are major life changes for all young people, including those with a disability. Many students drop out of school before reaching 21 or even 18 with no job and no purpose. Transition across the life span is a life challenge that all individuals face.

A third principle of all disability programs is taking personal responsibility. This issue is especially salient for the large number of individuals labeled 'mildly disabled', the high incidence population of persons with mild mental retardation, behavior disorders, physical disability, learning disabilities, and speech impairment. Each of these persons carry their own respective labels that some psychologist, diagnostician, or teacher has made based on tests and evaluation. This label is a descriptive term about a given person but does not really focus on the values and needs that a particular individual needs to develop in order to enter competitive employment and face the challenge of community living. In order to meet these worthwhile goals, one needs to learn how to exercise personal responsibility.

Personal responsibility involves self-control around members of the opposite sex in a variety of social situations. Financial habits and the ability to save money which has been earned is another example of taking responsibility. Attending work on time and accepting criticism from a supervisor is yet another illustration of personal responsibility. The list is endless, yet it defines those students who are to succeed vs. those who will fail after leaving school.

Special education teachers working in collaboration with other members of the educational team, should not concentrate exclusively on the instruction of selected academic and career edu-

cation skills, but instead need to infuse personal responsibility habits and patterns into curriculum for students with disabilities. While teachers cannot possibly take on the role of parents, they can certainly influence the direction in which students are headed. We cannot possibly ignore these societal issues and challenges which our children and their families face because we are all a part of one society. To provide didactic instruction which functions solely in a vacuum from real life activities, real life new experiences, and day-to-day events which influence the behavior of students is a serious error in shaping the educational direction of students.

Another theme associated with quality programs is self-determination. The emphasis on self-determination for persons with disabilities can be traced to the independent living and self-advocacy movements that emerged in the 1960s, when persons with disabilities organized to assert their rights of citizenship, express their needs and concerns regarding services designed to assist them, advocate for social and political change, and demand access to the neighborhoods, jobs, schools, and activities enjoyed by persons without disabilities. As these movements have strengthened, disability legislation has followed suit, culminating with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (PL 101-336), a broad-based civil rights bill for citizens with disabilities, and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments, which mandate that programs and activities funded by the Vocational Rehabilitation system promote consumer choice and self-determination (sec. 2(c)(1).

Self-determination, as described in the educational and psychological literature, is a theoretical construct that encompasses a number of psychological and behavioral attributes, such as goal-setting, choice, environment control, internal motivation, autonomy, and self-advocacy. Self-determination also requires that an individual be provided with knowledge, competencies, and opportunities necessary to exercise freedom and choice in ways that are valuable to the individual and further his or her goals. Most people develop self-determination as children and adolescents, as they are given greater responsibilities and free-

dom by their parents and teachers. A final guiding principle includes providing education in neighborhood schools. Over the last few years, educators have made great progress in developing models for educating children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. The focus of many of these efforts have been to educate children with disabilities in the regular school, and whenever possible, in the regular classroom. A number of schools have developed methods of educating students with severe disabilities in the regular school environment. Fostering greater inclusion of individuals with disabilities during the school years rests on two premises. The first premise is that if society is for everybody, then schools should be for everybody. Therefore, the first measure of a school should be the extent to which it can serve all its students. The second premise is that schools are responsible, not only for the education that students receive, but also for what students are prepared to do once they graduate. That is, the schools are responsible for providing services in ways that ensure that their graduates will be successful. For the typical student, success is measured in outcomes such as meaningful work, a place to live, and personal fulfillment that includes a social network of friends and family; these goals are equally valid for students with disabilities. Education in an integrated environment and is the best way to

prepare students to live in integrated communities as adults.

Segregation often leads to the isolation of children with special needs. It can limit their opportunities for social interaction and make it more difficult for them to develop appropriate interpersonal skills. The lack of such skills creates obstacles to proper adjustment. Without the experience of living and working in community settings, it becomes more difficult for students with disabilities to live and work in the 'real world' after they leave school. In addition, separate placements can stigmatize children with special needs. A sense of being different may cause a child to develop a negative self-image, which can prove to be a greater obstacle to living a fulfilling life than any disability or learning problem.

These five themes should have universal acceptance around the world. They span philosophical and personal issues but also reflect important service delivery considerations. Disability occurs across the life span and we must look at it as a life experience not a condition, disease, or illness. Disability is part of life and people will manage disability in their life as well as they can be exposed to culture which embodies themes such as discussed above.

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