

ACQUISITION OF LIFE SKILLS IN A SIMULATED TOWN FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

**Sharon Field, Lori Blumenstein-Bott, Nancy Sinelli,
Shira Solomon, and Shlomo Sawilowsky**

Abstract

This study examines (a) the self-reported perception of students with disabilities about learning in a simulated environment as compared with school and home, and (b) the extent to which these students acquired and/or improved life skills as measured by observation of behaviors in repeated visits to a life skills training program. The study was conducted at Friendship Circles' LifeTown facility, which contains a library, drug store, salon, movie theatre, medical office, bank, craft store, pet shop, and various kiosks (e.g., ice cream), sidewalks, streetlights, and a park. The core skills taught was budgeting, communication, employment, following directions, money management, problem solving, safety, socialization, and time management to mirror the students IEP goals. Results showed students' perceptions were favorable toward learning in the simulated environment, and observed behaviors representing life skills were statistically significantly higher after repeated learning sessions.

Acquisition of Life Skills in a Simulated Town for Students with Disabilities

A substantial body of literature indicates that life skills instruction is a necessary and critical element of an appropriate education for students with disabilities (e.g., Clark, Field, Patton, Brolin & Sitlington, 1994). Life skills instruction is seen as particularly important in meeting the requirements for transition-focused education (Kohler & Field, 2003) and is viewed as a more intense need for students near the termination point of their formal schooling (Cronin, Wheeler & Lemoine, 2006).

According to Cronin et al. (2005), it is important to give students an opportunity to be introduced to and practice life skills before encountering them in natural environments. Simulated environments have often been used to acquire skills, providing an opportunity to practice in realistic settings with less potential risk if the behavior is not performed appropriately. Simulated environments should not be used to replace community-based instruction or practice in natural environments.

Key Issues in Life Skills Instruction

The purpose of life skills instruction is to prepare students to meet the demands of adult life and community living. Life skills instruction has been defined as specific competencies to include knowledge, skills, and the application of life skills of local and cultural relevance needed to perform everyday activities across a variety of settings (Cronin, Patton & Wood, 2005). A major issue faced by educators in providing community life skills instruction for students with disabilities is the lack of opportunities for a focus in life skills instruction in the general education setting. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004, as amended) requires students with disabilities to be served in the least restrictive environment, which has been operationally defined as where they will have the greatest contact with peers who are not disabled.

IDEA also required that the individualized education programs of all students with disabilities contain statements regarding a) how the student's disability affects involvement with and progress in

the general curriculum and b) measurable goals and program modifications to assure involvement and progress in the general curriculum.

The access to the general education provisions have had many positive benefits for students with disabilities and have provided them with benefits that have typically only been available to their peers without disabilities. For example, a qualitative study reported by Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006 indicated that students with disabilities now have the capability in making coursework choices, which is something that general education students have typically had available to them. Sabbatino and Macrine (2007) summarized the key characteristics in programs spawned by the IDEA legislation, which include socialization skill building, provision of mentors, methods for engaging parents, and curricula relating academics to life experiences.

Although there have been many benefits associated with the general education access provisions of the IDEA legislation, it has also presented many challenges, especially since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation. General education curriculum and assessments have focused on rigorous academic content, making it difficult to provide a sustained focus on life skills instruction in general education settings. Thus, special educators are often faced with a dilemma. In order to meet the transition mandates of IDEA, life skills instruction needs to be provided. However, IDEA also requires that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum and the general curriculum typically does not include life skills instruction.

There are many ways that the general curriculum can be modified to meet specific life skills education needs of individual students (Field, Leroy & Rivera, 1994). Unfortunately, educators often find that, due to the wide discrepancy between the curriculum taught in the general education setting and functional skills instruction, the modifications that need to be made to provide high quality life skills instruction in the general education setting are too extensive to make such adaptations in instruction a reasonable option .

Community-based instruction (CBI), an educational method in which a student is taught to perform skills in the community environment, is often suggested as an alternative to the general education setting for life skills instruction. CBI is the acquisition of life-skill knowledge, performance of life skills, and the appropriate application of knowledge and skills in the community (Cronin, Patton & Wood, 2005). CBI provides students with disabilities the opportunity to interact with persons who do not have disabilities. It also provides them with the opportunity to acquire skills in the settings where they will be used. Therefore, there are typically fewer difficulties with generalization of skills to natural settings when life skills instruction is provided using a community based instruction approach.

Nevertheless, there are challenges associated with using CBI to teach life skills. Some students, especially those with significant educational needs, may need more support for initial skills acquisition than is feasible in typical community settings. A controlled environment can be more easily manipulated, allowing more systematic and intensive instruction during the early stages of instruction. In addition, a wider range of behavior can typically be accepted in simulated environments.

Another challenge associated with using CBI is cost. Community-based instruction can be very expensive due to transportation costs and the low teacher-student ratio required for quality instruction. In a time of restricted public education budgets, these costs can be a significant barrier. This is another reason supporting the potential use of simulated environments as a lower cost alternative.