

From schools to community: achieving independence and community integration through leisure education

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Article:

Introduction

According to the Office of Special Education (1987), approximately 190,000 students with disabilities graduate from public schools each year. Although these students are prepared for transition into adult life through special education, vocational training, functional skill development, and some adapted physical education programs, little specific training is offered for time these individuals are not at work. Potentially, some students lack skills or knowledge of what to do when not at work, which in turn may interfere with integration into their communities (Bellamy & Wilcox, 1982; Schleien & Ray, 1986; Voeltz, Weurch & Wilcox, 1982).

Cooperation in leisure education and programming between schools and the community are essential to bridge the gap in transition and successful community integration of students with disabilities. Community-based recreation programs have potential to serve as this vital link. Unfortunately, this link has not been well established.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it addressed critical contributions leisure education can make toward independence and community integration for individuals with disabilities. Second, it explains how community-based recreation personnel can work with schools to facilitate leisure opportunities and experiences for these individuals. In an attempt to describe how community-based personnel can work with schools, a model recreation transition program for individuals with developmental disabilities that works cooperatively between school and community-based recreation systems is described.

Education for Leisure

One major goal of special education for students with disabilities is preparation to enter adult life and become involved in the life of their respective communities. Consistent with the concept of normalization, every individual should have opportunities for maximum integration both physically and socially. Additionally, individuals with disabilities should be allowed dignity of risk, freedom from overprotection, and opportunities for normal endeavors.

Leisure education through the school and in the community can provide knowledge, skills, and opportunities for students with disabilities to allow them to pursue normative recreation activities. Rusch, Chadsey, White & Gifford (1985) described community integration as a process whereby individuals with handicapping conditions can participate in residential, employment, and recreational settings with non-handicapped peers as equal. To realize this total integration, students with disabilities need to be educated in leisure and recreation.

Much research exists to support recreation and leisure's contributions to development of skills and personally attributes of individuals with developmental disabilities. Specifically, recreation and leisure participation can improve and enhance these individuals' self-concepts (Hourcade, 1977; Shank, 1975; Van Andel & Austin, 1984), competence (Iso-Ahola, 1982; Ivison, 1971; Koocher, 1970), and social skills (Laurie, Buchwash,

Silverman & Zigmond, 1978; Novak & Heal, 1980). Additionally, research strongly supports that successful integration of individuals with disabilities into the community is negatively affected by lack of recreation participation (McDonnell, Wilcox, Boles & Bellamy, 1985; Schleien & Ray, 1986). Finally, leisure education specifically has been determined to assist in developing social skills, contribute to vocational success, enhance learning, and facilitate integration into community life (Collard, 1981).

Providing Recreation and Leisure in the Schools

The school milieu is one example of an ideal environment for providing education and training in recreation and leisure. Students in special education are already learning how to prepare for adult life through transition programs and vocational training programs. Educating for leisure seems appropriate and necessary before the student enters the community.

Unfortunately, recreation and leisure education programs are rarely available in schools despite the legal provision under Public Law 101-476, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formerly PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) (Bedini & Morris, 1987). Public Law 101-476 provides for any number of related services (including recreation) "as needed to enhance the educational goals of the handicapped child." Recreation as a related service "provides instruction, assistance, and intervention to enhance and expand the quality of the educational process provided to students with handicapping conditions" (Bullock, 1989, p. 374).

According to the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation (n.d.), leisure will make up much of the time that those served by PL 94-142 [sic] will experience; therefore, recreation and leisure services should be viewed as essential in the total education of all handicapped children. "Recreation and leisure services... can play a very significant role in assisting individuals to develop to their maximum potential and function as independently as possible in all realms of life" (Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation, n.d., p. 31-32).

Leisure education as one of the areas of recreation as a related service is designed specifically to improve leisure participation and leisure life style of students with disabilities through development of leisure attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for recreation participation. Leisure education cannot be effective within the schools alone, however. Therefore, cooperation of community-based recreation programs is paramount.

Wake County Model Program

To test effectiveness of leisure education on successful integration of students with disabilities into their communities, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is currently conducting a research and demonstration project. It is designed so that senior in selected high school classed for students with developmental disabilities in Wake County, North Carolina, are involved in weekly leisure education sessions to help prepare them for transition from school to community. This project stresses advantages of a community-based approach to leisure education to enhance independence and community integration. Through it students are given opportunities to explore what leisure means to them and determine their likes and dislikes. Additionally, they receive help in identifying specific recreation resources in their own communities, neighborhoods, and environs, and are taught how to use them. This design highlights community-based recreation services and personnel as essential in assimilating these students into their communities.

The program is conducted by a certified therapeutic recreation specialist (CTRS) who provides formal leisure education for students, both individually and in small groups. Focus is on helping students identify and develop interests, planning skills, resource skills, assertiveness, leisure and self-awareness, and decision-making skills, and then to test this knowledge in practical and appropriate settings.

This community-based approach allows students to work within their own resources rather than simulating activities in the school neighborhood or gymnasium or through school functions (i.e., transportation, companions, fee, discounts/waiving). Although simulation may be beneficial for the sake of exposure and practice, it does not lend to application of learned skills into the students' own neighborhoods. Since most

students' leisure is spent away from the school environment, the model leisure education program focuses on use of real situations in the students' own communities to encourage carry-over of leisure skill development into students' own environments, thus requiring little to no transference of skills.

Throughout the program, students relate their own resources--i.e., friends, transportation, money--to their individual interests. The CTRS helps students apply these resources to fulfill various leisure interests. By using this approach, students are better able to become self-reliant in planning for their own leisure within available resources and within their own communities.

Preparation

The program can be divided into two major phases. The first phase of implementation is preparatory. Leisure education sessions conducted in the schools include activities such as identifying interest, dealing with barriers, becoming more aware of community resources, and planning evening and weekend activities. In this model leisure education program, the CTRS encourages students to share their ideas and interests with family and friends. Sometimes, however, students do not feel comfortable sharing their ideas even with those closest to them. Role playing with the CTRS helps these students feel more comfortable and confident in asserting and sharing their ideas for fun.

Once interests are identified, students name their own ideas for leisure on a week to week basis. This list of from 3 to 10 ideas becomes homework for the students. This assignment is given to encourage students to take responsibility for their own leisure, as well as to realize the importance of enjoyment during leisure.

When the CTRS recognizes that students are better able to identify their own leisure ideas and are beginning to overcome some initial barriers to having fun, more in-depth sessions are conducted to concentrate on planning skills. For example, after looking through activity pictures, recreation pamphlets, newspapers, etc., a student may express a desire to play miniature golf. She/he first uses resources such as a phone book to find location nearest to her/his home or within her/his resources. When a location has been identified, transportation is discussed. The student is encouraged to consider questions such as: Does her/his family have a car? Is this location on a bus route? Once transportation is designated, the student investigates details of the activity. Role playing is utilized in preparing the student to call the facility. After the student has learned appropriate phone skills, and is comfortable with the process, she/he calls the miniature golf course inquiring about such things as cost, hours of operation, and discount nights. Skills such as interest identification, communication, overcoming transportation barriers, and resource awareness are based to becoming independent and self-reliant in planning for one's own leisure interests.

Implementation

Once some of these basic skills are familiar to students, the second phase of the leisure education program begins. This phase involves the introduction and actual use of recreation services and facilities in community-based settings. Students begin by planning outings to be taken with the CTRS. These outings include a variety of recreational opportunities in libraries, swimming pools, community centers, skating rinks, exercise classes, etc. Students plan these trips initially with the help of the CTRS who encourages them to plan activities in which they are not already participating with family or friends. Once plans are made, the trip is taken.

During the outing the CTRS encourages the student to act independently, without relying on cues from the CTRS. For instance, when a student enters a recreation center with plans to play a game of pool, it is hoped that the student will approach center staff and request equipment needed without prompting or assistance. Checking out equipment independently can be a very important step toward increasing students' levels of self-reliance and confidence. During the outing, appropriate interactions and participation with others are encouraged. This example demonstrates the potential community center personnel working with the CTRS have in developing skills and encouraging independence in students.

It is normal for some apprehension to exist for people with disabilities in dealing with the general public. To allay these anxieties before these outings actually take place, the CTRS visits each facility to locate and orient a selected staff member who is interested in being a contact person for the student. This contact person is then introduced to the student during the first planned outing as someone who is there to help when needed by answering questions, assisting in confusing situations, and helping with registration. The contact staff person should be friendly, helpful, and encouraging--not someone who may create a dependency barrier for the student. In this way, the contact person becomes an integral part of the integration process by making the student more comfortable in this new environment.

As the students develop skills necessary to plan, get to and from facilities, and participate independently in community-based recreational activities during their free time, the CTRS gradually withdraws from the planning supervision. The student takes on more responsibility and eventually functions independently. Much of the transition process relies on concerned community-based recreation personnel who encourage and welcome students into their leisure communities. Preliminary findings of the project show that through this design students become more self-initiating in their leisure pursuits. Additionally, they identify their needs more readily, participating in more activities, and are more secure and independent in activities that involve community programs and services. This connection between school facilitators and community-based personnel is an essential factor in such success.

Providing Recreation and Leisure in the Community

Few projects offer recreation in the schools as described above (LIFE: A New Direction, 1988). There are still many ways, however, in which community-based recreation agencies can be essential links in integrating students with disabilities into their communities. As noted earlier, the community-based recreator could participate with schools by being receptive to new participants, as in the example of the contact person who works with school programs to welcome students into the community.

Another way community-based recreators can serve as links between school and community is by providing leisure education in school settings themselves. The community-based recreator has the potential to initiate contact with far more students with disabilities at school than at her/his agency. This contact can be arranged through contracting, cooperative agreements between school and community programs, or, based on the philosophy of the agency, through direct services by community agencies to the school system. As a crucial part of the total delivery system, the community-based recreator is a direct source from which students learn much about what their community offers for fun, and how to take advantage of these activities.

Another example is providing a leisure education program at the community-based recreation agency itself rather than in the schools. Participation could be encouraged through the school system and other community agencies. In this example, the community-based recreation agency would take the bulk of responsibility to prepare students for independence and community integration into non-special programs in the community-based agency and at home.

Conclusion

The program described here offers many benefits for both community-based recreation agencies and students with disabilities. Students have opportunities to learn skills that allow them to interact with non-disabled peers, identify and express their recreation and leisure needs, interact in community-based agency settings without anxiety, and more fully assimilate into their own communities. It is hoped that this process leads them to independent leisure pursuits in non-segregated programs. Since these programs usually offer more varied types of programs at various time and places, they afford a person with a disability opportunities to choose. As noted, participating alongside person without disabilities can be beneficial to persons with disabilities. Social skills, as well as leisure activity skills can be enhanced greatly through these interactions. Self-esteem improves, new friendships begin, and participants' support systems broaden. In turn, integration during recreation and leisure activities may help a participant interact better and more appropriately in other social and job-focused situations.

Appropriately integrating person with disabilities into regular non-segregated programs can benefit community-based recreation agencies, too. Through this process, the agency may find it does not have to rely as much on segregated programs to provide services for participants with disabilities. A thrust toward this integrated programming could serve more citizens who have traditionally fallen through the cracks. In turn, a greater number of participants might utilize the community's services and programs.

Leisure interests are learned through a variety of experiences during one's lifetime. Many persons with disabilities do not have opportunities or abilities to try a variety of regular non-special recreation programs. Community-based recreators can be a key to open these doors to people who otherwise do not have the opportunities. Through networking and linking with schools, community recreation programs can become more involved in transition and integration of people with disabilities. A practice community-based recreator can help reach those who would otherwise be lost in the shuffle.

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