

Introduction to Teaching Students With Mental Retardation

Cecily is a high school freshman who had never taken classes with her peers before eighth grade. The eighth-grade experience was not an easy one. "Inappropriate questions," "frustrated," "no friends," and "always late for class" were words her teachers used to describe the first few weeks of the past school year.

Until last year, Cecily had always been in special education classes. When her parents proposed enrollment in classes with her neighbors and peers without disabilities, school officials were skeptical. The principal noted that there were no special classes in her school and no support system for Cecily. She worried that the transition from middle to high school would be difficult. Nevertheless, the school agreed to give it a try. Now, after a year, the experience is being called a "triumphant success." What happened?

Student volunteers and supportive teachers transformed Cecily's school experiences. Cecily's teachers adapted their lessons and tests for her, and peer "buddies" provided assistance in every class. They helped her focus on what was expected in her assignments, held her to high expectations, and provided feedback on how she was doing. For the first time, Cecily tackled multiplication, division, word problems, and fractions. She gave a presentation in history class and read *The Odyssey*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Romeo and Juliet* in English class. Why didn't Cecily make this kind of progress before? Her father thinks it's simply because nobody challenged her to do it.

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Mental retardation is a disability characterized by significant limitations, both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills (American Association on Mental Retardation, 2002b). Mental retardation is not something you are, like tall or short. Nor is it something you have, like blond hair or long arms. It is not a medical, physical, or health disorder. Mental retardation is a way of functioning that begins in childhood and is characterized by limits in both intelligence and adaptive skills. Mental retardation is reflected in the match between a person's strengths and weaknesses and the structure and expectations of his or her environment.

People with mental retardation need special assistance to learn the tasks that many of their peers learn incidentally. The learning problems caused by mental retardation can create obstacles in many areas of life, and these problems are often aggravated by prejudice and discrimination. With support from families, friends, teachers, neighbors, and peers, students with mental retardation, like Cecily, can be successful in school and in the rest of their lives.

In most school districts across the country, students with mental retardation are being taught in schools and classrooms alongside their neighbors and peers without disabilities. And, that's the way it should be.

Bringing Learning to Life: Using the IEP to Help Cecily Meet Her Educational Goals

An **individualized education program (IEP)** is a specially designed plan that documents current levels of performance; goals, objectives, and services for improving that performance; and dates on which services will be provided, who will provide them, and how they will be monitored to ensure success. Cecily's teachers refer to her long- and short-term objectives in her IEP in order to provide the assistance she needs to succeed—not just in school, but later in life as well. Cecily's IEP addresses the following areas:

Activities for Daily Living Success

- Life away from home
- Family and personal money management
- Childcare and family living
- Personal hygiene
- Personal independence (food, clothing, shelter)
- Personal recreation and leisure
- Community living and responsibility

Activities for Personal-Social Success

- Self-awareness, self-confidence, social responsibility
- Social relations and personal independence
- Communication and problem-solving skills

Activities for Occupational Success

- Job possibilities
- Job requirements
- Work habits
- Employment skills

While achievement of these goals is important for all students, students with mental retardation often need more assistance than their peers. Career education competencies are considered especially crucial for success in adulthood, so Cecily's teachers make sure to include activities for occupational success in the school day.