
Introduction

A Quest for Change

It could be argued with a good deal of persuasiveness that when one looks over the history of man the most distinguishing characteristic of his development is the degree to which man has underestimated the potentialities of men.

—Seymour Sarason, quoted in *Christmas in Purgatory*

THE WAY WE WERE

This book is the result of a process begun several years ago. Although our curriculum was adequate, we felt the need for improvement. Parent lobbying, concerns for quality of life, and government mandates were among the influences leading to a quest for change.

Our typical classroom schedule included story time, independent work sessions, self-help skills, group time, and special activities. Story time was based on juvenile materials, the work was repetitive and not productive, and skills for independent living were taught through multiple trials. Resources for providing excellent instruction were within reach, but not utilized in the most effective manner.

INCREASED AWARENESS

During 2000 to 2001, a number of influences began to lead to change. Through an excellent graduate program in severe disabilities at Western Carolina University, we were exposed to new ways of thinking about the rights and abilities of individuals with special needs. As we learned that

improved quality of life can improve behavior and that students with special needs should be taught using age-appropriate materials, we began to consider ways to improve our instructional program. We became increasingly aware of augmentative and alternative methods of communication and the promise they held for improving the lives of many students with special needs.

PARENT LOBBYING

At the same time we were becoming aware of the need for an improved quality of life, parents were exerting influence by lobbying for change. Many of our students' parents had broad visions for their children. They were advocating age-appropriate programs and rich educational opportunities. When these visions became missions, change began. Our parents played an important part in planting seeds of discontent with the way things were and in painting visions of meaningful instruction for children with special needs.

GOVERNMENT MANDATES

In addition to our heightened consciousness concerning the need for change, another altering force appeared. The Federal Government, through No Child Left Behind, began to demand that students with special needs be tested in language arts and math. Although there are issues with the No Child Left Behind program, and much more research and appropriate development are needed, the requirements presented a vehicle for change. This was the first time in history that students with significant cognitive disabilities were required to achieve in academic subjects linked to the standard course of study.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Realizing the need for a meaningful, interconnected, and age-appropriate program, we began to look for ways to give our students opportunities similar to those of their general education counterparts. Among the first steps in the planning of our program was the examination of published research. We also focused on listening to and talking with experts in the field of special education and literacy instruction.