



July 2026

NASET Special Educator e-Journal

Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

Table of Contents

Special Education Legal Alert	3
Buzz from the Hub	6
Update from the U.S. Department of Education	8
In Support of Responsible AI in Special Education: A Practitioner’s Perspective	13
Beyond the Classroom: An Evidence-Informed Approach to Teaching Life Skills and Promoting Independence in Students with Moderate-to-Severe Disabilities	16
Acknowledgements	24

Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel
July 2026

This month's update features a single recent court decision because it addresses a wide variety of IDEA issues (e.g., child find, FAPE, and compensatory education) and is illustrative of the time-consuming and non-nuanced approach of our congested and generalist courts. For related publications and special supplements, see perryzirkel.com

On April 14, 2026, a federal district court in New York issued an official published decision in *R.C. v. Garden City Union Free School District*, which addressed various IDEA issues. Starting in kindergarten, the parents expressed to school officials their concern with the academic as well as fine motor and organizational skills of their son. The kindergarten teacher had a colleague observe the child's handwriting. The first-grade teacher provided the parents with suggested at-home occupational therapy (OT) exercises for him; however, when the parents asked whether the school would provide him with OT, the teacher responded: "I don't see a disability, but a weakness is evident." The second-grade teacher sought extra help from administrators for the child's academic struggles, including a referral for multi-tiered system of strategies (MTSS) interventions. Not until the second half of grade 2 did the district conduct an evaluation and determine that he was eligible under the IDEA. At the IEP meeting, the parents asked to discuss possible compensatory education services, but the school psychologist conducting the meeting said that this topic was not within the purview of the IEP team. The resulting IEP, which covered the final few weeks in grade 2 and the entire grade 3, was unsatisfactory to the parents. They also expressed their disagreement with the comprehensiveness of the evaluation and the accuracy of its classification determination. Next, they arranged for an independent educational evaluation (IEE) that consisted of a psychological report, a vision assessment, and a reading assessment. In February of grade 3, they requested reimbursement. In response, the district funded only the vision assessment, citing the IDEA regulation that limited parents to one IEE at public expense per year. At the end of grade 3, the parents filed for a due process hearing, claiming that (a) the district violated its child find obligation by not evaluating the student earlier, (b) the evaluation was not appropriate, (c) the IEP did not meet the applicable procedural and substantive standards for FAPE; and (d) they were entitled to reimbursement for the other two parts of the IEE as well compensatory relief for the other violations. In July of the following year, after 17 hearing days, the hearing officer issued a decision that ruled in favor of the parents. The relief granted included reimbursement for the other two assessments along with \$2510 for vision therapy, payment for 48 future weekly vision therapy sessions at \$170 each, and 240 hours of compensatory education (with half for tutoring in reading and the other half for OT). Inasmuch as New York is one of the handful of states with a second tier, the district appealed to the state review officer (SRO), who reversed all the hearing officer's rulings, except for reimbursement of the other two assessments. The

parents appealed to the federal district court. Both sides filed motions for summary judgment.	
For child find, the parents argued that the SRO failed to consider the pattern that started before the end of grade 1, which marked the boundary for the two-year statute of limitations, and cumulatively continued thereafter.	The court agreed, finding such background evidence relevant. Explaining that the standard, rather than that of the first-grade teacher, is reasonable suspicion, the court deferred to the hearing officer's ruling in favor of the parents.
The parents argued that the district denied them the opportunity for meaningful participation by refusing to discuss compensatory education at the IEP meeting.	The court again agreed, concluding that the district's flat refusal violated its obligation is to at least consider, though not necessarily agree with, the parents' views on an aspect of FAPE.
The district counter-argued that the child find and parent-participation violations did not result in the requisite loss under the two-part test applicable to procedural FAPE.	The court rejected the district's contention, concluding that at least the child find violation resulted in the requisite substantive harm (presumably because the district determined that the child was eligible under the IDEA).
The parents sought additional compensatory education for the arguably harmful effect of the district's parental participation violation.	Not directly addressing the second, harmfulness step for the parental participation violation, the court concluded that the hearing officer's compensatory education award adequately covered both violations.
Both sides provided arguments about the substantive appropriateness of the evaluations and the IEP.	The court concluded that it need not address the substantive issues due to its conclusion that the procedural violations resulted in substantive loss.
Finally, the parents argued that they were entitled to IEE reimbursement for the psychological and vision assessments.	Again avoiding the issue of the appropriateness of the district's evaluation, the court ruled in the parents' favor because the district had failed to file for a hearing and its own evaluation consisted of multiple assessments.
<p>This decision is not necessarily generalizable due to its particular facts and jurisdictional boundaries. It is also not necessarily final, because it is on appeal on the Second Circuit. These caveats contribute to a few overall personal observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The adjudicative process under the IDEA is too often unduly time-consuming and costly. This case has already taken three years, starting with a 17-session due process hearing, and the federal appeals court decision will likely take another year or two. By that time, the child will be at or close to the high school level, and the attorneys' fees alone may exceed the cost of any remedial relief. 	

- Due in part to the individualized nature of the IDEA and the inevitably imprecise and often multi-factor or multi-step standards for its issues (e.g., child find, procedural FAPE, and IEEs), impartial adjudicators may reasonably differ in their rulings. Here, the hearing officer, SRO, and federal district court successively disagreed for most of the issues, and the Second Circuit's decision is subject to speculation.
- The federal courts have such a widely varied and heavily congested case load that they often do not delve into the factual particulars and the legal nuances in their IDEA decisions. Here, for example, the court (a) did not report what the student's disputed eligibility classification was; (b) only superficially analyzed the specific facts for its child find determination; and (c) did not at all explain the basis for the award of $\$2510 + (48 \times \$170) = \$ 10,670$ for vision therapy sessions. Similarly, the court effectively ducked deciding whether the evaluation was proper and whether the IEP was substantively appropriate.

Buzz from the Hub

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-june2026/>

A Parent’s Guide to Using AI for Advocacy in Special Education

AI tools (like ChatGPT) can be powerful supports for parents navigating special education. This guide, by **CADRE (The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education)**, is designed to help you use AI confidently and safely — in ways that strengthen your advocacy, protect your child’s privacy, and support positive working relationships with your child’s team.

[Read the guide here](#)

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Practice Improvement Tools: Practice Guides for Families

ECTA Center’s (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center) practice guides for families explain the DEC Recommended Practices, how to use them using videos and vignettes, and how you will know if practices are working.

[Access the guides here](#) in English and Spanish.

The Science of Reading: An Overview

There are so many pieces to the Science of Reading, that it can be difficult to know where to start. Here are a few highlights, from the **National Center on Improving Literacy** about what the Science of Reading is and what it’s not.

[Read the article here.](#)

“Life Beyond High School: For Young Adults with IDD” – A THINK+change Documentary

Beck Williers is a 23-year-old young man with an exciting life ahead of him. His transition into adulthood did not happen overnight but came through a journey of self-advocacy and community-building. Resilient from the day he was born, Beck and his family show what it takes to create a life full of endless possibilities and finding success through joy.

[Watch the documentary here.](#)

READY, SET, SUMMER! FAMILY TOOLKIT

Kids will be out of school before you know it, so it’s the perfect time to plan days filled with connection, play, and possibility.

The **National Inclusion Project’s** *Ready, Set, Summer! Family Toolkit* is a free resource designed to help families of children with AND without disabilities plan with confidence and make the most of the season.

[Download the Toolkit here.](#)

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education>

Available Grants

<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants>

U.S. Department of Education Marks End of Second Annual Title IX Month with Major Enforcement Recap

July 1, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) marked the conclusion of the second annual ‘Title IX Month’ – honoring the fifty-fourth anniversary of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX).

Fact Sheet: The Trump Administration is Making Higher Education More Affordable, Expanding Opportunity, and Simplifying Student Loan Repayment

July 1, 2026

Effective today, July 1, 2026, key provisions of President Trump’s Working Families Tax Cuts Act (the Act) take effect.

“Presidential 1776 Award: The Ultimate Civics Showdown” to Air on CBS Tonight

June 30, 2026

The “Presidential 1776 Award: The Ultimate Civics Showdown” will air on June 30, 2026 from 8:00-9:30 PM ET on the CBS Television Network, and will be available to stream on July 1, 2026 on Paramount+.

U.S. Department of Education Partners with the U.S. Department of Justice to Protect Parental Rights

June 30, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced it will work alongside the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to protect parental rights in Kansas.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Issues Statement on U.S. Supreme Court Decision in West Virginia v. B.P.J.

June 30, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released the following statement in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *West Virginia v. B.P.J.*:

U.S. Department of Education Issues Final Rule to Hold All Colleges and Universities Accountable for Low-Earning Programs

June 29, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced a final rule establishing a long-overdue postsecondary education accountability framework. Under the new Student Tuition and Transparency System (STATS) and Earnings Accountability.

U.S. Department of Education Takes Action Against Jefferson County Public Schools for Continued Violations of Title IX

June 26, 2026

Today, as the U.S. Department of Education continues to recognize June as the second annual Title IX Month, the Department's Office for Civil Rights issued a Letter of Impending Enforcement Action to Jefferson County Public Schools.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Vermont's Returning Education to the States Waiver

June 24, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education approved Vermont's Returning Education to the States Waiver, empowering state education officials with greater discretion over their federal education dollars.

U.S. Department of Education Opens Investigations into Maryland State Department of Education and Three Maryland School Districts for Alleged Title IX Violations

June 23, 2026

Today, on the fifty-fourth anniversary of the signing of Title IX, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights opened new investigations into the Maryland State Department of Education, and three districts.

U.S. Department of Education Opens Three New Investigations into Michigan School Districts for Alleged Title IX Violations

June 18, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights opened new investigations into Ann Arbor Public Schools, Monroe Public Schools, and the Chippewa Valley School District in Michigan.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Student Loan Interest Rate Reduction

June 18, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education announced that federal student loan borrowers enrolled in auto pay will be eligible for a 1 percent interest rate reduction beginning July 1.

U.S. Department of Education Opens Title IX Investigation into North Carolina School District for Allowing Men in Girls' Restrooms

June 17, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) opened an investigation into Buncombe County Schools (the District) in North Carolina.

U.S. Department of Education Concludes 50-State History Rocks! Tour to Commemorate America's 250th Birthday

June 17, 2026

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) concluded its national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour, completing visits in all 50 states as part of the Department's celebration of America's 250th birthday this year.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visits Nevada Boys State to Conclude History Rocks! Tour

June 16, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visited the Nevada Boys State Program as the final stop on the Department of Education's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

Secretary McMahon's Letter to Parents of Individuals with Disabilities

June 16, 2026

As the Trump Administration scales back federal micromanagement when it hinders success, we are equally committed to bolstering the efficacy of federal oversight where it is essential.

In Case You Missed It: Linda McMahon - Parents told me special education needs less red tape, stronger results

June 16, 2026

A Letter from Secretary McMahon to America's Parents.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Additional Partnerships to Strengthen Coordination for Individuals with Disabilities Programs, Bolster Civil Rights Enforcement

June 16, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) today announced four new interagency agreements (IAAs) designed to reduce federal bureaucracy and improve the efficient delivery of federally funded programs and activities to better support students and families.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Indiana’s Returning Education to the States Waiver, Freeing Up Millions to Invest in Students

June 16, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) approved Indiana’s Returning Education to the States Waiver, empowering Indiana’s education leaders with greater discretion over their federal education dollars.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Connecticut on Returning Education to the States and 'History Rocks!' Nationwide Tours

June 12, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Seymour High School and Seymour Middle School in support of the Returning Education to the States Tour and as part of the U.S. Department of Education’s History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Takes Action Against Four Kansas School Districts for Continued Violations of Title IX

June 11, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s OCR issued Letters of Impending Enforcement Action to three Kansas school districts, and a Letter of Impasse to Kansas City, Kansas Public School District for failing to comply with Title IX.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Issues Statement on Passage of the ‘No Aid for Ghost Students Act’

June 10, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released the following statement in response to the U.S. House of Representatives passage of H.R. 7892, the No Aid for Ghost Students Act.

Fact Sheet: The Trump Administration Is Simplifying Student Loan Repayment

June 9, 2026

Learn how President Trump’s historic Working Families Tax Cuts Act simplifies student loan repayment by shifting to two affordable repayment plans: the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP) and the Tiered Standard repayment plan.

U.S. Department of Education Probes Colorado School District Amid Reports of Rampant Racially-Discriminatory Programming

June 8, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) initiated investigations into Cherry Creek School District (the District) in Colorado amid allegations that it allows or sponsors a wide range of racially-discriminatory programming.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Connecting Talent to Opportunity Challenge Semifinalists

June 8, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced the 10 states selected as semifinalists for the Connecting Talent to Opportunity (CTO) Challenge.

U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker Highlights Civics Education at History Rocks! Event in Arizona

June 5, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker visited Legacy Traditional School as part of the Department of Education’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

In Support of Responsible AI in Special Education: A Practitioner's Perspective

By Tim Ranis, NBCT, M.S. Special Education

First, I would like to thank the authors of "Generative Artificial Intelligence and the Individualized Education Program" for producing an article bringing forward the emerging role of generative artificial intelligence in special education. At a time when public discussion of AI often swings between promises of unrealistic automation and science-fiction driven fear, this review offers a reasonable conclusion: generative AI should serve as a support tool rather than a replacement for educators' expertise. I strongly support that central conclusion.

As a special education teacher with nearly three decades of classroom experience in different school districts, at different levels, and an active presenter on AI-assisted IEP development, I share the authors' concerns regarding professional judgment, legal compliance, privacy, and maintaining the individualized nature of every student's educational plan. These are non-negotiable responsibilities that remain with educators regardless of the tools they employ.

When I began using AI to write IEP sections over a year and a half ago, my first concern was completing my paperwork. After the relief of completing several late IEPs, my second thought concerned student data and privacy. That experience is why I share the concerns of the authors. I examined the privacy contracts of each provider, including free, paid and institutional accounts. Based on this, I now teach educators to use district-approved platforms with appropriate data protections and to have a professional contract with the AI company to control data and protect any student data they input.

Where I hope to expand the discussion is how we think about AI in practice. Much of the current literature evaluates AI as a one-step drafting tool: a teacher provides a prompt, AI generates a response, and the product is evaluated. While a valuable starting point, this framework captures only a fraction of how I have been training educators to integrate AI into their practice.

In my experience, the greatest value of generative AI is not that it writes an IEP, because it doesn't. Rather, it serves as a collaborative partner that helps organize complex information, identify patterns across multiple documents, synthesize evaluation data, draft legally appropriate language, and reduce the mental burden associated with IEP documentation. The educator remains the decision-maker throughout the process. The teacher is "The Professional". AI isn't handing anything in or sending anything out. AI accelerates organization and drafting; the teacher supplies professional judgment, contextual understanding, ethical reasoning, and knowledge of the student.

This distinction is critical. The relationship is not one of replacement but of augmentation. I describe responsible AI use in a 90/10 proposition. 90% is mechanical, exhausting labor of compiling data, writing narratives, searching historical records, summarizing comments, and crafting the words that go on the paper, which may come from multiple sources. Given time, both AI and the teacher can create those words. However, AI does it in mere seconds; for us, it would take hours.

The part the AI can't do is the 10% of the process that lives in the professional judgment only the teacher can provide. We know which phrases need to be added and where the AI has introduced unsupported information or misunderstood the context (hallucinated). While the AI can create highly individualized narratives, goals, accommodations, and descriptions when given good input data, only a human can write the IEP. The teacher retains 100% of the clinical, executive decision-making. Only the human knows the context of the kid.

The literature rightly emphasizes the danger of overreliance. However, an equally important risk deserves consideration: underutilization. Special education continues to experience significant teacher shortages and burnout driven in large part by documentation demands. If responsible AI implementation allows experienced educators to devote more time to students, families, instruction, and collaboration while reducing repetitive administrative work, then its greatest contribution may not be producing better documents but preserving the professionals who create them.

I also believe future research should move beyond evaluating isolated AI outputs and instead examine iterative human-AI collaboration. Many practitioners engage with AI through multiple cycles of refinement, correction, and reflection, producing documents that neither humans nor machines would create independently.

While younger teachers may embrace AI more easily, ironically, I believe AI holds more promise for veteran teachers. As we mentor, as we grade assignments, as we modify curriculum, as we run departments, as we chair committees, as we coach teams and clubs, as we spend our time supporting all the soft skills our students need modeled, AI gives us back paperwork time. Time to either pour into our students or find some work-life balance. Understanding and embracing this collaborative process may provide a more accurate representation of AI's emerging role in special education.

Every hour a special education teacher spends performing repetitive documentation tasks is an hour that cannot be spent supporting students, collaborating with colleagues, communicating with families, or recovering enough energy to remain effective the next day.

Ultimately, I believe the literature and practitioners share far more common ground than disagreement. We agree that IEPs must remain individualized, legally compliant, and grounded

in professional expertise. We agree that educators—not algorithms—bear responsibility for educational decisions. We agree that careful oversight, ethical safeguards, and appropriate training are essential.

The next important question is no longer whether AI belongs in special education, but how thoughtful partnerships between educators and AI can strengthen the profession while preserving the human at its heart.

We've lost too many teachers to burnout over the years.

Artificial intelligence cannot replace special educators. However, properly implemented, it may help keep more exceptional educators in the profession long enough to continue changing students' lives.

Beyond the Classroom: An Evidence-Informed Approach to Teaching Life Skills and Promoting Independence in Students with Moderate-to-Severe Disabilities

By Revitche Quijano

Abstract

This study examines the impact of integrating functional life skills instruction within a secondary special education classroom serving students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Using a practitioner-based qualitative case study approach, instructional practices combined academic curriculum with structured life skills training, community-based instruction (CBI), and behavior support systems. Data were collected through classroom observations, student performance monitoring, and reflective teaching practices over the course of an academic year.

Findings indicate that students demonstrated increased independence in daily living tasks, improved communication skills, and enhanced participation in both classroom and community settings. The integration of real-world applications, including budgeting, household tasks, and pre-vocational activities, supported the generalization of skills beyond the classroom environment. Additionally, structured behavioral supports contributed to improved self-regulation and task engagement.

This study highlights the importance of evidence-informed, functional, and student-centered instructional approaches in preparing students with moderate-to-severe disabilities for meaningful participation in daily life. Implications suggest that integrating life skills instruction within academic frameworks supports improved outcomes in independence and transition readiness.

Keywords: special education, life skills instruction, moderate-to-severe disabilities, community-based instruction, transition, independence

Introduction

Special education at the secondary level extends beyond academic instruction to include the development of functional life skills, independence, and meaningful participation in daily life. For students with moderate-to-severe disabilities, success is not measured solely by academic achievement, but also by the ability to communicate effectively, regulate behavior, and navigate real-world environments. As a result, instructional approaches must move beyond traditional academic frameworks to incorporate practical and functional skill development.

Research in special education and transition planning emphasizes the importance of preparing students with disabilities for life beyond school through structured, real-world learning experiences (Test et al., 2013; Wehman, 2013). Community-based instruction (CBI), functional

life skills training, and behavior support systems have been identified as essential components in promoting independence and improving long-term outcomes for this population. These approaches support the generalization of skills across settings and enhance students' ability to function more independently in their communities.

In practice, however, integrating academic instruction with functional life skills remains a challenge in many secondary special education settings. Teachers must balance curriculum requirements with individualized student needs, while also addressing communication, behavioral, and adaptive skill development. This requires implementing structured, evidence-informed instructional models that are both flexible and responsive to student needs.

This study examines the integration of life skills instruction within a secondary special education classroom serving students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Specifically, it explores how structured instructional practices, including community-based instruction, classroom-based functional activities, and proactive behavior supports, contribute to students' independence and functional outcomes. Using a qualitative practitioner-based case study approach, this research aims to provide insight into effective strategies that support student growth in both academic and real-world contexts.

The findings of this study contribute to the field of special education by highlighting practical, evidence-informed approaches that can be implemented in similar classroom settings. By examining the impact of integrated instructional practices, this study seeks to support educators in developing meaningful, student-centered programs that prepare learners with moderate-to-severe disabilities for increased independence and successful participation in daily life.

Literature Review

The development of functional life skills and independence is a central focus in secondary special education, particularly for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Research has consistently emphasized the importance of transition-focused instruction that prepares students for meaningful participation in postsecondary environments, including employment, community engagement, and independent living (Test et al., 2013). These outcomes require instructional approaches that extend beyond traditional academic content and incorporate practical, real-world applications.

Community-based instruction (CBI) is widely recognized as an evidence-based practice that supports the acquisition and generalization of functional skills. CBI provides students with opportunities to apply learned skills in authentic settings, such as grocery stores, public transportation systems, and community spaces, thereby promoting independence and social competence (Wehman, 2013). Through repeated and structured exposure to real-world environments, students are better able to transfer classroom learning to everyday situations.

In addition to community-based instruction, integrating functional life skills into classroom

instruction has been shown to improve student outcomes. Embedding skills such as money management, communication, and daily living tasks into academic lessons enables students to develop competencies directly applicable to their daily lives. This integrated approach aligns with the goals outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which emphasizes preparing students with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Behavioral support systems also play a critical role in facilitating successful learning outcomes for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Proactive strategies, including structured routines, visual supports, and clear expectations, have been shown to improve student engagement, reduce challenging behaviors, and promote self-regulation. These supports are particularly important in creating predictable learning environments that enable students to participate more effectively in both academic and functional activities.

Despite the established importance of these practices, challenges remain in effectively integrating academic instruction, life skills training, and behavioral supports within a single instructional framework. Educators must navigate diverse student needs while maintaining alignment with curriculum standards and individualized education program (IEP) goals. This highlights the need for practical, evidence-informed models that demonstrate how these components can be effectively combined in real classroom settings.

This study builds on existing research by examining the implementation of an integrated instructional approach within a secondary special education classroom. By focusing on the combined use of community-based instruction, functional life skills training, and structured behavioral supports, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on effective practices that promote independence and transition readiness for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative practitioner-based case study design to examine the impact of integrating functional life skills instruction within a secondary special education classroom serving students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. A case study approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of instructional practices implemented in a real classroom setting and their influence on student outcomes. This design enabled the exploration of instructional strategies in their natural context, focusing on the interaction among academic instruction, functional life skills, and behavioral supports.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a public high school special education classroom within a California

school district. Participants included students with moderate-to-severe disabilities who required significant support in communication, behavior, and daily living skills. Instruction was aligned with students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), with an emphasis on both academic and functional skill development.

The classroom environment was structured to support student learning through consistent routines, visual supports, and collaborative instructional practices. Support staff, including paraprofessionals and a behavior specialist, contributed to implementing instructional and behavioral strategies.

Instructional Framework

The instructional approach integrated academic content with functional life skills to promote independence and real-world application. Instruction followed a structured, gradual release model: teacher modeling (I do), guided practice (We do), and independent application (You do).

Key components of the instructional framework included:

- Community-based instruction (CBI) in real-world settings
- Classroom-based functional life skills activities (e.g., food preparation, budgeting)
- Structured behavioral supports, including visual systems, routines, and proactive strategies
- A teacher-designed weekly life skills program targeting independence and transition readiness

This integrated approach ensured that academic learning was consistently connected to real-life application.

Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of an academic year through multiple sources to capture student progress and instructional impact. These included:

- Classroom observations of student participation and engagement
- Monitoring of student performance in functional tasks (e.g., money handling, task completion, communication)
- Informal assessment of skill development during classroom and community-based activities
- Reflective teaching notes documenting instructional practices and student responses

The use of multiple data sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of student growth and instructional effectiveness.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify patterns related to student independence, communication, and behavioral development. Observational and

performance-based data were reviewed to determine recurring trends in student progress across instructional settings.

Themes were identified based on consistent improvements in:

- Task independence and completion
- Communication and social interaction
- Behavioral regulation and participation

These themes were used to interpret the impact of the integrated instructional approach on student outcomes.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed consistent patterns of student growth across three key areas: (a) increased independence in functional tasks, (b) improved communication and social interaction, and (c) enhanced behavioral regulation and classroom participation. These findings reflect the impact of the integrated instructional approach combining academic instruction, functional life skills training, community-based instruction (CBI), and structured behavioral supports.

Increased Independence in Functional Tasks

Findings indicate that students demonstrated measurable progress in performing daily living tasks with increased independence. Through repeated exposure to structured classroom activities and community-based instruction, students showed improvement in completing tasks such as handling money, preparing simple meals, organizing materials, and maintaining personal and environmental hygiene.

Students who initially required significant prompting were observed completing tasks with reduced assistance over time. The consistent integration of real-world applications within academic instruction supported skill acquisition and generalization across settings, particularly during community-based experiences and classroom-based follow-up activities.

Improvement in Communication and Social Interaction

Findings further indicate notable growth in students' communication abilities and social engagement. Students demonstrated increased capacity to express needs, make choices, and interact appropriately with peers, staff, and community members.

Participation in structured classroom routines and real-world environments provided students with opportunities to practice functional communication skills in meaningful contexts. As a result, students showed increased confidence in initiating interactions and responding to social expectations, particularly during community-based instruction activities.

Enhanced Behavioral Regulation and Participation

Improvements in behavioral regulation and classroom participation were also evident. The implementation of structured routines, visual supports, and proactive behavior strategies increased student engagement and reduced challenging behaviors.

Students demonstrated greater ability to transition between activities, follow classroom expectations, and remain engaged in both academic and functional tasks. The consistency of behavioral supports, combined with collaboration among instructional staff and behavior specialists, supported the development of self-regulation skills and more positive participation in the learning environment.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings suggest that integrating life skills instruction within a structured and supportive educational framework leads to meaningful improvements in independence, communication, and behavior among students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. The combination of classroom-based instruction and real-world application played a critical role in reinforcing skill development and promoting student success across multiple settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of integrating functional life skills instruction within a structured secondary special education classroom for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. Consistent with prior research, the results demonstrate that combining academic instruction with real-world application supports the development of independence, communication, and behavioral regulation (Test et al., 2013; Wehman, 2013).

The observed increase in student independence aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of transition-focused instruction. By embedding life skills such as budgeting, food preparation, and daily routines into academic learning, students were given meaningful opportunities to apply these skills in both classroom and community settings. This integration supports skill generalization, a critical factor in promoting long-term independence for students with significant support needs.

Improvements in communication and social interaction further reinforce the value of community-based instruction (CBI). Real-world environments created authentic contexts for students to practice functional communication, make choices, and engage with others. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that exposure to natural settings enhances both social competence and confidence among students with disabilities.

The positive changes in behavioral regulation observed in this study also support the

effectiveness of structured and proactive behavior support systems. The use of visual supports, predictable routines, and clear expectations contributed to increased student engagement and reduced behavioral challenges. These strategies reflect established best practices in special education, where consistency and structure are essential for supporting students with moderate-to-severe disabilities.

This study also highlights the importance of integrating multiple instructional components into a cohesive framework. Rather than addressing academic instruction, life skills, and behavior separately, the combined approach allowed for more meaningful and consistent learning experiences. This integrated model may serve as a practical example for educators seeking to balance curriculum requirements with functional and individualized student needs.

Despite these positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. This study was conducted within a single classroom setting, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, data were primarily based on observational and practitioner-based measures rather than standardized assessments. Future research may benefit from incorporating quantitative data and expanding the study across multiple settings to further validate the effectiveness of integrated instructional approaches.

Overall, this study contributes to the field of special education by providing an evidence-informed model that demonstrates how structured, functional, and student-centered instruction can support improved outcomes for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. The findings emphasize the importance of preparing students not only for academic success, but also for meaningful participation in daily life and their communities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating functional life skills instruction within a structured secondary special education classroom can lead to meaningful improvements in independence, communication, and behavioral regulation among students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. By combining academic instruction with real-world applications, community-based experiences, and proactive behavioral supports, students were provided with consistent opportunities to develop skills essential for daily living and long-term success.

The findings underscore the importance of implementing evidence-informed, student-centered instructional approaches that extend beyond traditional academic outcomes. As schools continue to address the complex needs of students with disabilities, integrating life skills and transition-focused instruction remains critical to preparing students for meaningful participation in their communities.

Given the ongoing shortage of qualified special education teachers in the United States, the

development and dissemination of effective instructional models are essential. The approach presented in this study offers a practical and replicable framework that can support educators in improving outcomes for students with moderate-to-severe disabilities across diverse educational settings.

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