

Teaching Students with Disabilities: Intellectual Disabilities ¹

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Introduction

Students with intellectual disabilities have limitations in cognitive ability and often lack skills in proper social behavior and self-care. Although there is a broad range in cognitive ability of students described as being intellectually disabled, the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) states that such individuals have an IQ of 70–75 or lower (2011). Agricultural education programs are valuable for students with intellectual disabilities because they encourage career success, vocational skills, and social interaction. The agricultural education teacher may need to provide accommodations for students with intellectual disabilities to ensure that they have equal opportunities to be successful in the agricultural education program.

Intellectual Disabilities Description of the Disability

Intellectual disabilities will cause students to develop more slowly than typical students, and they may come to the agricultural education program at varying stages of development. Students with intellectual disabilities share two general characteristics: 1) a lack of intellectual functioning and 2) a lack of adaptive behavior skills (Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2013). Limited intellectual functioning can result in decreased memory recall, decreased task generalization, and decreased

self-determination. Poor adaptive behavior may lead to problems in conceptual, social, and practical skills.

The cause of an intellectual disability may not be known for specific students. However, research suggests that intellectual disabilities can be caused from genetic conditions, problems during pregnancy, problems at birth, and other health problems or diseases during stages of development (NICHCY, 2011).

Application in the Learning Environment

Modifications of teaching strategies and content of teaching material will vary by the individual with an intellectual disability. However, general strategies can be used to help learners with intellectual disabilities. Concepts that are difficult or complex should be broken down into more simple components (i.e., chunking). As the student learns each component, additional components can be added until the larger concept is taught and learned. Modeling is another useful teaching strategy for students with intellectual disabilities. Students benefit from seeing the action or behavior before they are asked to complete the assignment. Many of these students have difficulty with memory recall and benefit from application and repetitiveness of material. When the student is able to relate to the usefulness of the activity or task, he or she is more likely to be motivated in learning the concept. Agricultural education programs are ideal in this regard because the curriculum is usually

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applied to real-world contexts in which students are able to directly apply the activity to their lives.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The classroom environment should be arranged in ways that allow students with intellectual disabilities to stay on task and focused. Special consideration should be given to the seating arrangements of students. Students with intellectual disabilities should be seated in an area where the teacher and/or teaching aide can easily monitor the student and provide quick assistance if needed. Furthermore, the student should be seated around peers who are willing to help the student stay on task and not by students who may promote the student to engage in unacceptable behavior. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are best taught in small groups or even in a one-on-one setting. When selecting students for small groups, select students who will work well with the intellectually disabled student.

Feedback is very important for all students in the classroom. When providing feedback to students with intellectual disabilities, make sure the feedback is as immediate as possible. If feedback is not immediate, students may not be able to identify the cause and effect of their behavior, resulting in a missed learning opportunity (Reynolds, Zupanick, & Dombeck, 2013). Feedback should be provided directly to the student and can be a combination of verbal and written praise or reprimand.

Classroom material, such as readings, homework assignments, quizzes, and tests, may need to be modified according to the student's IEP team. The challenging curriculum in agricultural education should be revised to ensure that it is taught in a way that students with intellectual disabilities are able to comprehend the subject matter. If the challenging curriculum is taught at a pace too quick for the student, the student may become overwhelmed and unable to focus on the basic components of the lesson. Prior to teaching the lesson, plan what you want the student to gain from the lesson and modify the learning objectives and teaching methods accordingly.

LABORATORY ENVIRONMENT

The laboratory environment provides many options for students to learn and apply skills in practical situations. Teaching methods should include concrete examples and visual demonstration whenever possible. Many students who are intellectually disabled learn best through visual and kinetic experiences. Pairing pictures, videos, and demonstrations with hands-on learning opportunities works extremely well. For example, the agricultural education

teacher may provide step-by-step pictures and a demonstration of how to properly complete plant propagation prior to allowing the students to complete the task on their own. If possible, students may further benefit by performing each step of the task one at a time, while the procedure is being demonstrated.

Laboratory environments also provide great opportunities for students to learn and socialize with typically developing peers. Students with intellectual disabilities should be placed in lab groups with peers who will help foster a favorable learning environment. In order to ensure that each student in the group participates fully in the activity, assign student roles or have students assign roles for themselves.

NON-FORMAL ENVIRONMENT

The non-formal learning environment can provide students with intellectual disabilities with skills in social interaction and appropriate behavior, in addition to learning experiences directly associated with the purpose of the trip. It is important to create an environment with clear behavior expectations and consequences if the expectations are not followed. A structured environment with a focus on student safety is essential when traveling. Make sure the student is fully aware of bus safety and that the student understands that he or she must stay with his or her group during the experience.

Conclusion

Students with intellectual disabilities commonly receive special education services in public schools. School personnel need to identify the severity of the disability and make proper requirements for modification of the curriculum as well as plan for the student's transition into adulthood. Agricultural education can play a vital role in strengthening the social and career readiness needs of students with intellectual disabilities. The agricultural education teacher should use teaching strategies that assist students with low cognitive ability. Strategies include, but are not limited to, modifying challenging curriculum, chunking information, providing visual and kinetic learning experiences, and pairing students with well-minded peers. The physical learning environment should be altered to ensure a safe learning environment that is the least distracting to the student as possible. For more resources about working with students with intellectual disabilities see the following websites below.

http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/Services%20to%20Children%20with%20Disabilities/Disabilities/disab_fts_00014_061105.html

<http://aaid.org>

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/special-needs/teaching-children-developmental-disabilities-classroom-ideas>

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