



‘Quality of Life– Preparation for Life’ in Special Education Settings: Perceptions of this Concept from the Perspective of Educational Staff and Parents

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Abstract

Background

The *Highly Suitable – Quality of Life–Preparation for Life Program* (hereafter “the program”) is implemented from pre-school to age 21 in special education settings. The program is at the core of the special education system in that it promotes the main goal of special education in Israel which is that every person with special needs be integrated in the community according to his/her choices and wishes. The teaching units on preparation for life aim to improve the pupils' self-image and bolster their personal strengths so that they can make choices, be involved, wield influence and make decisions. In the future ,they will be able to enjoy a quality of life according to their preferences and choices, i.e., feel satisfaction, enjoyment and self-fulfillment.

Goals

Optimal implementation of the program depends both on the way it is implemented (such as familiarity with the program, the degree to which the content of the program is addressed in special education settings, or the strengths and challenges in its implementation) and the perceptions of parents and educational staff of the phrase 'quality of life–preparation for life'. For this reason, and given the central position of the program in the special education system, the Ministry of Education's Division of Special Education asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine the program's implementation and the parents' and staff's perceptions of it: The study examined:

1. The staff's degree of familiarity with the program
2. The degree to which the staff addresses the areas of life addressed in the program in the special education settings
3. The way in which parents and staff perceive the combined phrase 'quality of life – preparation of life' and the skills and needs that are important for quality of life while the children are growing up and in adulthood
4. Characteristics of the program's courses of action and the challenges in adopting the program in special education settings

Method

The study was conducted using an online survey. The study subjects were parents of pupils studying in special education settings (special education preschools or schools or in special education classes in mainstream schools) and teaching and treatment staff in special education settings (special education preschools and schools, special education classes in mainstream schools, and local or regional support centers). Eight questionnaires were developed through a joint conceptualization process by the Brookdale Institute's research team, the staff of the special education division and professionals from the Senior Division - Psychological Consultative Service. There were four questionnaires for parents and four questionnaires for education staff for the pre-school level, the 4th-5th grade level, the 8th-9th grade level and the 12th - post 12th grade level.

Main findings

- **Degree of familiarity with the program:** 71% of the educational staff reported that they were not very familiar with the program; 45% of the staff stated that they did not know of the program at all. Only 17% reported that they had participated in training on 'quality of life – preparation for life' as part of their professional development. Correspondingly, 58% of the staff members reported that the key challenge they were facing was a lack of professional knowledge or a lack of tools and 76% of the staff expressed a desire to improve their knowledge related to 'quality of life – preparation for life'.
- Parents and staff were asked to assess **the degree to which the areas addressed in the program are addressed in the special education settings.**
 - The three areas the staff perceived to be the most significant for education for independent, autonomous lives were found to correspond with the three fields that were addressed most. The following three areas were those perceived as most important and were reportedly addressed the most: **interpersonal and social relations** (77% and 89% respectively), **self-care** (71% and 83% respectively) and **health and security** (60% and 84%).
 - The staff rated the **education for healthy sexuality** area as the fourth most important but reported that it was seldom addressed compared to other areas of life. The proportion of staff who considered this area to be significant increased as the grade level increased (from 30% of preschool staff to 43% of 12th - post 12th grade staff) as did the proportion of staff who felt that this subject was addressed sufficiently (from 45% of preschool staff to 48% in 12th - post 12th grade staff).

- The degree of importance that was attributed to **the world of employment** increased with the progression to the higher grades: 52% of 12th – post 12th grade staff believed that this was one of the three most significant areas and 60% felt that this area was sufficiently addressed.
- Few staff members thought that the area of **community and social services** was sufficiently addressed. While 12th - post 12th grade staff expressed this view more than the staff of other grades, only 46% of them reported that this area was sufficiently addressed.
- **Perception of the capabilities of the children and youth:**
 - In all fields that were examined it was found that the degree of belief that parents and education staff had in the capabilities of the children and youth was only at a moderate level. Staff members and parents believed in their capability in the area of **self-determination and self-advocacy** more than in other fields, and parents also believed in their children's capabilities in area of **leisure activity** more than the staff.
 - There were aspects of the children and youth's capabilities in which the belief of parents and staff increased with increasing age up to the 8th-9th grades, after which their belief decreased (in the 12th – post 12th grade). Moreover, many parents of pupils in the 8th-9th grade and 12th - post 12th grade expressed concern over their children's integration in the community as adults.
 - Gaps were found between the staff and parents' perceptions in all life fields assessed
- **Key challenges** that the staff reported in implementing 'quality of life – preparation for life' in the special education settings were: difficulty in obtaining parental cooperation (53%), lack of budgetary resources (50%) and lack of time (48%).
- **The key systemic resources** available to the staff were personal experience and professional knowledge (37%); the availability of skilled special education professional staff (31%); professional study (18%); and a wide range of programs, tools and learning supports (17%).
- **The personal resources** that helped the staff overcome difficulties in implementing the program were: consulting with professionals in the educational setting (72% of the staff), consulting with peers in the educational setting (61%) and contact with the staff of the community or regional support centers (24%).

Recommendations

1. Continuing the development of applied special education curricula as part of the *Highly Suitable – Quality of Life – Preparation for Life* core concept and their assimilation among the professional staff.

2. Increasing the professional staff's familiarity with the program, including exposing them to professional approaches that emphasize the perception of the capabilities of pupils with disabilities in a range of areas of life (particularly the areas of self-care, personal independence and autonomy, health and security, leisure activity and education for healthy sexuality).
3. Increasing the professional staff's awareness of the importance of the program and the need for its implementation and for coping with barriers, including the staff's perception of pupils' capabilities and lack of time and other resources.
4. Increasing parents' familiarity with the program and improving the level of staff/ parent common expectations regarding their perceptions of the pupils' capabilities in the various areas of life and the degree to which these areas are addressed in special education settings. This, to improve cooperation between parents and staff and promote instilling the capabilities and strengths that will allow students to live independent, autonomous lives.
5. A person's quality of life derives from the assessment of his/her own life and the choice of the most suitable and satisfying lifestyle for him/herself. The ability of pupils to identify what quality of life means for them, and to acquire tools that will help them make decisions and guide their actions are vital for autonomous adult life. This makes it particularly important to enhance the familiarity of staff and parents with current pedagogic concepts about the importance of education for autonomy, for self-determination and for self-advocacy at every functional level and every degree of independence. It is also important to develop cooperative efforts between staff and parents that will allow students to practice autonomous behavior in everyday life (i.e., practicing their ability to make choices, to make decisions and to ask for help), even when the pupils' independence is limited, and they cannot perform the actions by themselves.
6. Encouraging the team to address the areas of education for healthy sexuality and community and social services using the professional knowledge that has been developed by the Ministry of Education's Special Education Division.
7. Continuing to encourage peer learning, multidisciplinary teamwork and the use of professional materials that have been developed by the Ministry of Education's Special Education Division – These are resources that enable the implementation of the program.
8. During the research process, a tool was developed for examining perceptions and the assimilation of areas of life using practical, measurable statements. We hope that it will prove helpful to the Special Education Division and professional staff implementing the program.