



Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Chapter 4: Intellectual Disability

Discussion Questions

1. How has society's understanding of intellectual disability changed over time? Why do you think changes in terminology, educational opportunities, and expectations matter?
2. The current definition of intellectual disability includes both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Why is it important to consider both rather than relying only on an IQ score?
3. The chapter discusses concerns about cultural and linguistic bias in intelligence testing. Why is it important that assessment decisions are based on multiple sources of information rather than a single test?
4. How do adaptive behavior assessments help educators better understand a student's strengths and support needs? In what ways are adaptive skills different from academic skills?
5. The chapter explains that some causes of intellectual disability can be identified, while others remain unknown. Why is it important for educators to understand possible causes while avoiding assumptions about individual students?

6. Students with intellectual disabilities often experience challenges with attention, memory, metacognition, and generalization. How should these learner characteristics influence classroom instruction?
7. Why are high expectations important for students with intellectual disabilities? How can educators balance maintaining high expectations while providing appropriate supports?
8. The chapter emphasizes functional academics. What are functional academic skills, and why are they an important part of instruction for many students with intellectual disabilities?
9. Why is it important for students with intellectual disabilities to have opportunities to develop independence, self-determination, and meaningful roles within their classrooms and communities?
10. The chapter notes that students with intellectual disabilities are educated in general education classrooms more often than in the past, yet many still spend much of the day in separate settings. What factors should schools consider when making placement decisions?
11. The chapter discusses instructional strategies such as scaffolding, explicit instruction, task analysis, cooperative learning, and positive reinforcement. Which of these strategies do you think would have the greatest impact on student learning? Why?
12. Why is positive reinforcement particularly important for students who have experienced repeated academic failure? How can teachers build confidence while still maintaining high expectations?

13. Decisions about graduation requirements and diploma options can have long-term implications for students with intellectual disabilities. What factors should educators, students, and families consider when making these decisions?
14. Renee Garcia encourages educators to "Always expect more than others think is possible." How does this statement relate to the ideas of inclusion, independence, and person-centered supports discussed throughout the chapter?
15. After reading this chapter, what do you think are the most important responsibilities educators have when teaching students with intellectual disabilities?

About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

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