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# Vocational and Personal Effectiveness Training of a Developmentally Delayed Navajo Girl

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## Abstract

*This case history presents the procedures and results of a vocational training program developed for an adolescent Navajo girl functioning intellectually at the five-year-old level. She was able to master legitimate work skills and was successfully trained to work in a cafeteria and improve her social functioning in the community. After training she possessed the necessary skills and maturity to return to her family as a homemaker. The difficulties encountered involved not only the student's personal limitations but the hesitancy of community agents to hire a handicapped Navajo girl.*

As more programs are developed on Indian reservations to identify and help developmentally delayed and handicapped children, it is generally acknowledged that special attention must be given to the long-term goals for these children within their own cultural environment, based on the values and expectations of the child's family and the community.

At the Chinle Valley School for Exceptional Children in Chinle, Arizona, a program for vocational training was developed to provide relevant work and social skills for many of the developmentally retarded Navajo girl in a community work setting on the reservation.

## Method

### Subject

Jeannie R., 17 years old at the time of this study, was born and raised on the Navajo reservation, and is the third oldest of nine living children. Her parents, both Navajos, noticed her slow speech and learning development when she was very young, and so she did not attend school. She was reported to be a generally helpful child until about age twelve or thirteen, when she began to display stubbornness, moodiness, and occasional tantrums when she was prevented from doing what she wanted. When she was about age fifteen, Jeannie's father died, and Mrs. R. was forced to work full time. Left mostly on her own, Jeannie's behavior deteriorated, deteriorated, and her mother sought to place her at the Chinle Valley School in Chinle, Arizona.

Mrs. R. was particularly concerned that Jeannie be taught basic homemaking skills so that Jeannie could return home and care for her younger siblings as Mrs. R. grew older.

Upon admission to the school, medical examination revealed that Jeannie was a generally healthy girl except for recurrent impetigo, a mild speech articulation deficit, and moderate obesity. Psychological evaluation on verbal and nonverbal tests showed Jeannie to be moderately mentally retarded with a tendency to become easily frustrated. Her strong areas were social expressiveness, general fluency in Navajo, and fairly good manual dexterity. Jeannie's skills, mental, and emotional development were that of a four or five-year-old child. The etiology of Jeannie's problems was unclear, although her mother reported that Jeannie suffered a serious head injury at the age of one year, and was subject to viral illnesses and ear infections as a child.

Prior to Jeannie's program, no reports were available showing that any other institutionalized Navajo children with Jeannie's degree of developmental disability could achieve a successful vocational placement. Jeannie was selected as the initial candidate for work placement of students from Chinle Valley School based on several considerations. First, Jeannie was greatly needed at home and expected by family members to assume many homemaking responsibilities. She had shown an initial penchant for learning routine food preparation and serving, as well as caring for extremely immature and disabled students. She showed very

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little progress and no interest in learning traditional academic subjects. An additional reason for beginning a vocational plan for Jeannie concerned her overall training program: She was one of four Chinle Valley School children in another pilot project who were placed in a group home in the community, an opportunity that afforded additional relevant training in social skills as well as in the tasks required of a vocational placement.

## Procedure

In the beginning of Jeannie's stay at Chinle Valley School, the staff attempted to provide a supportive environment for her as well as to individualize a training plan. The school, which was built shortly before Jeannie was admitted, had a large professional staff, and very adequate living, training, and recreational facilities. Jeannie was functioning in the upper half of the 33 developmentally disabled children then at the school.

Because of the potential significance of Jeannie's vocational plan to herself, to other students, and to its acceptance in the Chinle community, extensive planning was essential to increase the likelihood of success. A general procedural plan was developed with the major elements being school staff training, student's prevocational training, arranging a vocational placement, phasing in placement, and developing safeguards.

*School staff training.* The initial task was for the school staff to be thoroughly trained for their role in each step of Jeannie's plan. The Navajo food services director, Mrs. A., who already had rapport with Jeannie, was assigned the direct supervision of Jeannie's training and placement. Mrs. A. and the other staff members were told the importance of ignoring Jeannie's mistakes whenever possible and of praising Jeannie when she showed progress on any task. Each staff member working with Jeannie was given a copy of her step-by-step training goals and subgoals, and instructed to treat any failure in the plan very matter-of-factly by returning to a previously mastered step. Thus, if Jeannie showed serious discomfort on a new task, that task would be postponed and Jeannie would continue with something she was more comfortable with.

*Student's prevocational training.* The Chinle Valley School staff was responsible for training Jeannie at the school and at the group home to gradually increase her competence in each prevocational skill included in the plan until she performed at a level that might be satisfactory to a restaurant proprietor. The consultants, together with Mrs. A., decided on four tasks that Jeannie could, with additional training, develop into legitimate work

skills. These tasks were: Washing and drying pots and pans, putting away clean dishes according to differing sizes and storage sites, sweeping and mopping the floor, and cleaning refrigerators. Each of these tasks were broken down into simpler steps and the staff was trained to use specific instructions and praise for each step attempted.

*Arranging a vocational placement.* The Navajo director of Chinle Valley School contacted a community cafeteria owner, and arranged a series of meetings with the consultants to plan for the trial placement of students. When an agreement was reached, the school staff and consultants began orienting and training the cafeteria kitchen personnel (all Navajo) to accept and help Jeannie when she started work. When necessary, modifications in Jeannie's prevocational training were made depending on the needs of the cafeteria staff.

*Phasing in placement.* When the consultants, the school staff, and Jeannie's foster parents agreed that she was ready, a step-by-step procedure for gradually phasing Jeannie into the work setting was initiated. The primary steps, under direct supervision from Mrs. A., were:

- They visited the cafeteria for lunch for several days to acquaint Jeannie with the general setting;
- After three days, Jeannie was walked through the kitchen and introduced to the staff;
- They made longer visits with kitchen staff in the second week when Mrs. A. would discuss details of kitchen routine with the staff while Jeannie watched and listened;
- In the third week, Mrs. A. began to perform the tasks designed for Jeannie in the cafeteria kitchen with Jeannie observing and answering Mrs. A.'s questions;
- After three visits of observation only, Jeannie helped Mrs. A. as instructed. On each succeeding day, Jeannie was responsible for more work, while Mrs. A. observed;
- Once Jeannie reached an acceptable performance level on the specified tasks, a designated cafeteria staff person assumed Mrs. A.'s supervisory role.

*Developing safeguards.* The consultants were concerned about the project's known and unknown risks, and attempted to plan ahead for difficulties that might arise. The major safeguard was training all persons involved with Jeannie to carefully observe and monitor her emotional status and mood at all times. To facilitate this task, the consultants developed a scale to make a "subjective assessment of comfort". The instrument consisted of a five-point scale, in which a "5" indicated inability to function due to panic, "4" indicated much help required for Jeannie to function, "3"

indicated mild encouragement and support needed, "2" indicated some anxiety noted but no performance dysfunction, and "1" indicated that Jeannie was rated during prevocational training twice a day by school staff and every work day by her foster parents before work, by cafeteria kitchen staff after work, and by Mrs. A. when Jeannie arrived at school after work.

There were additional safeguards included. A "practice failing" exercise used at the school during prevocational training taught Jeannie to "pretend" that she had made a mess in the kitchen and then to matter-of-factly clean up the mess and return to work. A daily log was kept by school staff with inputs from the group home and the cafeteria. Daily supportive counseling sessions were conducted after work with Jeannie and Mrs. A. to assess her progress as well as her subjective assessment of comfort. Cafeteria staff were instructed to avoid making new demands on Jeannie until the school staff had a chance to introduce and train for new tasks desired. Finally, a plan was made to remove Jeannie from the cafeteria if she panicked or refused to function ("5" on the Subjective Assessment of Comfort scale), or otherwise could not function. If there were two consecutive "failure" days, Jeannie would not work for one week or until she was emotionally prepared to return.

### Results

The primary result of this project was that Jeannie was successful in her job placement at the cafeteria and was able to continue working in the community in a second placement after the cafeteria closed for the winter. The restaurant owner, his staff, and the Chinle Valley School staff and consultants all agreed that Jeannie became an excellent worker and showed much progress in her own maturity and self-management. The proposed plan went according to schedule. The staff was receptive to their own training, and the food services director, Mrs. A., was instrumental in coordinating Jeannie's prevocational training and relationships with other school kitchen staff.

Jeannie's initial adjustment at school was characterized by wide mood swings and occasional temper tantrums. She developed a growing rapport with the staff and a few of the other students. In her "good" moments Jeannie was extremely sociable, greeting every new adult with a big smile, a vigorous handshake and a loud "What's the name?" However, she continued to withdraw and become oppositional and baby-like when confronted with failure, teasing, criticism, or any stern treatment by the staff. When early attempts to involve her

in the educational program failed, Jeannie was allowed to help in the kitchen where she received much support from Mrs. A. Jeannie reportedly was very helpful and comfortable working in the kitchen, doing routine tasks such as dishwashing, place setting in the cafeteria, and making sandwiches. However, Jeannie showed extreme frustration and regression when she accidentally broke dishes or made a mess.

The prevocational training at school and the group home revealed Jeannie's strengths and weaknesses. She could, with practice, learn to use cleaning materials well and ask for inspection. However, she was confused by any additional assignments or by wordy elaboration of the assignments she knew. She also had difficulty sorting dishes and utensils of similar sizes and shapes. The prevocational training plan lasted about two months, during which time Jeannie showed continued progress and diminishing frustration in following routine mealtime tasks three times daily.

Jeannie showed considerable excitement about "getting a job", and her daily Subjective Assessment of Comfort scores showed that she had no serious discomfort preparing for the placement. In fact, although a few crises did occur, all raters saw that Jeannie rarely showed mild or growing discomfort and so her comfort scores were generally very low throughout the project.

The first difficulty occurred just before the placement when the cafeteria owner began to show concern about her coming to work. He apparently was worried about possible negative reactions of his kitchen staff. Later on, when the procedure became more specific and cautious, he agreed to participate for a trial period only if there were no problems with his staff or the customers. He insisted that he had to think of his business first, and that Jeannie must come to the placement already skilled in her job. With this tentative approval it was decided to use the proposed setting, since the physical aspects of the restaurant, with its spacious kitchen and Navajo staff, lent itself well to the proposed plan.

The first serious problem directly involving Jeannie occurred in the second week of placement, when one of the school staff decided to make a "live" videotape of Jeannie's program in the cafeteria kitchen. The taping unfortunately was not planned well and changed the kitchen routine, causing lunch to be delayed. The entire kitchen staff, including Jeannie, became upset. The cafeteria owner, who had become very supportive, said that Jeannie's placement was causing too many problems and might have to stop. However, with

careful negotiation and promises to avoid future problems, the owner relented and the next day everything was back to normal. Jeannie's Subjective Assessment of Comfort scores on the day of upset reflected her serious discomfort when she heard that she might have to leave work (a rate of "4" was made by the kitchen staff) but she responded to the support of the staff.

Jeannie's second crisis occurred in the fourth week of work. Until then, Jeannie had shown increasing responsibility and decreased tantrums at the group home and at school, as well as at work. On one morning, however, her foster mother reported that Jeannie had for a few mornings begun to complain about doing group home chores, saying that she "had a job" and would not do housework. That day Jeannie argued loudly with her foster parent to no avail, and then began to tantrum and refused to go to work. The foster parent scored her "5" on the comfort scale and later took her to school instead of work. There Mrs. A. counseled Jeannie. The next morning Jeannie did her chores and went back to work; that day she earned three "1"s on the comfort scale.

No other serious disturbances threatened the further progress of Jeannie's vocational placement program. In her second job, Jeannie "graduated" to become one of the cooks in a church congregational cafeteria for older citizens in the community. The same step-by-step preparation procedures were used and Jeannie was again successful. She also became extremely popular with the elders, who enjoyed her excellent style and related to her as a competent adult. On both jobs, Jeannie received compensation appropriate to her position. A savings account was opened for her at the bank and she received an allowance which she used mostly to buy clothes and gifts. Jeannie's academic progress continued to be very slow, but was seen by all, including the Chinle Valley School director, to be secondary to her social, vocational, and home-making progress.

## Discussion

This vocational and personal effectiveness project was designed as a model for the children at Chinle Valley School for Exceptional Children and for other handicapped students on the Navajo reservation. However, many of the procedures and concepts are applicable to any rehabilitation program. Several features stand out as essential for the success of such a program. These are:

- A coherent team of staff members and consultants who can work together and who are dedicated to the single goal of project success,
- Careful planning and preparation prior to any placement actions,
- The task analysis of each skill into small steps that can likely be performed,
- A psychological orientation of the team so that realistic personal and social expectations are made of students based on their developmental level,
- Effective daily monitoring systems, used by individuals with different perspectives on the student. Both personal and vocational progress should be recorded, and there should be a common place where daily reports and data are examined and used for ongoing assessment of the case,
- Effective administration which coheres purposes and facilitates cooperation in the vocational training, as well as doing public relations and liaison work essential to a successful vocational placement.

With careful planning and monitoring, Jeannie was able to master legitimate work skills and was successfully trained to work and improve her social functioning in the community. She was judged to possess the necessary skills and maturity to return to her family as a caretaker. The efforts of the team and the student's own hard work and motivation were sufficient to overcome difficulties and make the community aware of the potential contributions of handicapped persons.