

Research to Practice in Cognitive Disabilities/Mental Retardation, Autism, and Related Disabilities

Stanley H. Zucker
Arizona State University

Cindy Perras
Peel District School Board

Howard P. Parette
Illinois State University

Darlene E. Perner
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

On January 31–February 2, 2007, the Council for Exceptional Children Division on Developmental Disabilities (DDD) sponsored its Tenth International Conference: Research to Practice in Cognitive Disabilities/Mental Retardation, Autism, and Related Disabilities. The conference was held at the Sheraton Keauhou in Kona, Hawaii. The DDD Board of Directors decided to devote this issue of *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities* to conference papers. The conference brought together educators from school and college classrooms from all over the world. The conference included pre-conference training institutes and strands on assistive technology, autism/autism spectrum disorder, cognitive disability-best practices, differentiated instruction, multiple disabilities, and wellness. The conference provided many parents, teacher educators, researchers, teachers, and other practitioners an opportunity to gather to learn the most current information related to providing services for individuals with mental retardation, autism, and other developmental disabilities.

This special issue can enable those who attended the conference to see expanded papers, prepared by presenters, and also give those who were unable to attend an opportunity to benefit from the thoughtful work done by conference participants.

Presenters were asked to submit papers

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stanley H. Zucker, Special Education Program, Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, Box 872011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-2011. Email: etdd@asu.edu

based on their conference presentations. Papers submitted were reviewed by the Guest Editors who selected the papers for publication. We think the selection of papers represents an interesting assortment of topics and formats ranging from discussion papers to databased research to descriptions of classroom techniques. The papers selected do not necessarily represent all the topics covered at the conference but they do give a good idea of the variety and quality of the presentations. We would like to thank those authors who submitted papers for their efforts in making this Special Conference Issue possible.

The first article is based on the pre-conference training institute on assistive technology. Acknowledging the important role of assistive technology (AT) in special education service delivery to students with developmental disabilities and achievement in the general curriculum, Howard P. Parette and George R. Peterson-Karlan describe an evolving understanding of the compensatory nature of AT. In their article, "Facilitating Student Achievement with Assistive Technology" emphasis is placed on the importance of AT for *access to* and *productivity within* both the life skills and academic curricula. Following a discussion of the distinction between AT, instructional technology, and universal design for learning (UDL), the authors emphasize three distinct aspects of the educational process where 'consideration' of AT is involved: IEP development, instructional interventions, and student progress monitoring. The authors then take the position that the benchmarks for determining AT effectiveness, or outcomes, are student achievement in the academic and life

skills curricula as evidenced by district- or state-wide measures of student progress.

The second article is based on the pre-conference training institute on Autism Spectrum Disorder. Increasing rigor for student progress monitoring and success in the general curriculum (required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and the response to intervention (RTI) mandate (articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004) present challenges to education professionals working with students having ASD. Brenda Smith Myles, Barry G. Grossman, Ruth Aspy, Shawn A. Henry, and Amy Bixler Coffin present in their article, "Planning a Comprehensive Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders Using Evidence-Based Practices," two compatible models for implementing effective intervention approaches with students having ASD. Components of both the Ziggurat Model and the Comprehensive Autism Planning System are described, accompanied by *a brief exemplary case study to illustrate how these approaches* foster consistent use of supports to ensure student success and data collection to measure that success.

The next article was the lunchtime keynote address by J. David Smith. In his paper "Mental Retardation and the Problem of "Normality": Self-Determination and Identity Choice" the meaning of the category and concept of mental retardation is explored through the words of a fictional character, and the accounts of real people who have been injured and stigmatized by the label. Examples of the extremes to which people have gone to avoid or escape the term mental retardation are provided. The classification of retardation is presented as a fabrication with no coherence in the characteristics and needs of the people placed under its conceptual umbrella. Dr. Smith calls for new terminology and, more importantly, new thinking about this misunderstood and nearly forgotten population of children and adults.

"Lessons Learned Through Implementing a Positive Behavior Support Intervention at Home: A Case Study on Self-Management With a Student with Autism and his Mother" is a unique article authored by Suk-Hyang Lee, Denise Poston and her son, AJ Poston. Through narrative, the authors are intro-

duced and each one explains his or her role in incorporating a positive behavior support intervention using self-management to initiate and complete AJ's nighttime routine of getting ready for bed. Concerns of the authors are expressed in terms of the family context and the intervention. The results of the positive behavior intervention and its outcomes are described and critiqued by the authors. They conclude with a thorough discussion of what they learned throughout the intervention and thereafter including roles and responsibilities, and involvement and empowerment for AJ. Lee further describes her perspective as the researcher and the lessons she learned while implementing a positive behavior support intervention with a family in their home.

Given the ongoing professional attention focused on the communication needs of young children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Carol S. Alpern and Dianne Zager highlight in their article, "Addressing Communication Needs of Young Adults with Autism in a College-Based Inclusion Program," the communication functioning of adolescents and young adults with ASD. The authors focus particular attention on the impact of language patterns on social and vocational functioning of this group of individuals, one that is often ignored in the professional literature. Guidelines for assessment and subsequent communication intervention goals are presented for consideration by readers. These guidelines are complemented by a discussion of a model campus-based inclusion class designed to meet the communication needs of post-secondary students with ASD.

The next article concerns the requirement to use evidence-based practices in the classroom that has been established over the past few years in our legislation. In his article, "State of Evidence Regarding Complimentary and Alternative Medical Treatments for Autism Spectrum Disorders," Gardner T. Umbarger, III addresses the issue of complementary and alternative medical (CAM) treatments used to treat children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and the necessity to provide evidence of their effectiveness. Using the 2006 Council for Exceptional Children's proposed evidence-based practices identification criteria and the preferred methodologies of the Institute for

Education Sciences, Umbarger reviewed CAM interventions for ASD. He examined each identified CAM intervention such as dietary interventions, heavy-metal chelation, and music therapy and used the CEC standards to determine the efficacy of these CAM treatments, classifying them into four categories from “interventions that are research-based and recommended” to “interventions that are not recommended.” Additionally, a thorough discussion on CAM treatments and a number of recommendations for special education researchers are provided.

Although recognized as having distinct diagnostic criteria from autism, Asperger Syndrome researchers continue to disagree on the specific characteristics of this syndrome. Brenda Smith Myles, Hyo Jung Lee, Sheila M. Smith, Kai-Chien Tien, Yu-Chi Chou, Terri Cooper Swanson, and Jill Hudson in their article, “A Large-Scale Study of the Characteristics of Asperger Syndrome” present results from a study they conducted which focused on identifying Asperger Syndrome characteristics. Their investigation involved assessing and describing the characteristics of Asperger Syndrome which were exhibited in 33 female and 123 male youths with Asperger Syndrome. The results they report relate to family history, cognitive profiles, social cognitive skills, adaptive behavior, behavior, temperament, and sensory issues. Each of these areas is discussed to help specify the characteristics of adolescents with Asperger Syndrome.

Comic Strip Conversations have been used to improve the social skills of students on the autism spectrum. In their article “Using Comic Strip Conversations to Increase Social Satisfaction and Decrease Loneliness in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Melinda R. Pierson and Barbara C. Glaeser extend the effectiveness of this strategy to three lower elementary-aged male students diagnosed as exhibiting high-functioning autism. One elementary special education teacher and her two paraprofessionals used Comic Strip Conversations for a period of 6 weeks with three students who exhibited signs of loneliness. All participants became more involved socially and actively began to seek friendships. The educators working with them noted increased friendships in the classroom

and on the playground as well as visible signs of social satisfaction among the participants.

The next study investigated the effects of tutoring on the reading achievement of elementary students with cognitive disabilities and specific learning disabilities as well as students receiving Title I reading programs in Project MORE (Mentoring in Ohio for Reading Excellence). In “Effect of Tutoring on Reading Achievement for Students with Cognitive Disabilities, Specific Learning Disabilities, and Students Receiving Title I Services,” Jan Osborn, Amy Freeman, Margaret Burley, Rich Wilson, Eric Jones, and Stacey Rychener describe school-based action research. The authors highlight volunteer tutors, early reading instruction, reading interventions, and one-to-one instruction. Students were pre and post tested on both informal and standardized measures of reading performance. Intervention students were matched and compared to control students in similar school districts. Results demonstrated significant positive effects for the intervention. Generally, intervention students had month-for-month gains and outperformed comparison students in reading over the six month period.

Achieving self-determination has evolved as a major goal for individuals with development disabilities. As a result, educators are in a key position to support youth with developmental disabilities in realizing self-determination. On April 21, 2007 the Board of Directors of the Council for Exceptional Children, Division on Development Disabilities approved the position paper, “Technologies for self-determination for youth with developmental disabilities,” authored by James R. Skouge, Mary L. Kelly, Kelly D. Roberts, David W. Leake, and Robert A. Stodden. The final paper in this Special Conference Issue focuses on a self-determination model that uses “new media” (e.g., digital cameras, PowerPoint, camcorders) “to give voice to youth and their families,” particularly within transition and IEP meetings. Skouge and his colleagues not only present a model to support youth in gaining self-determination, but also provide a description of this process by using a case example of a student who shared his PowerPoint presentation at his IEP meeting. The authors conclude with the challenge to educators to invite

the voices of families and youth through digital storytelling into their classroom.

The conference provided researchers and educators with the opportunity to explore current research, topical issues and best practices

relating to mental retardation, autism, and other development disabilities. We hope readers of this Research to Practice Special Conference Issue find the information valuable and timely.