

Best Practices for Practitioners

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On October 10-12, 2004, the Council for Exceptional Children Division on Developmental Disabilities (DDD) sponsored its Ninth International Conference: Best Practices for Practitioners. The conference was held at the Alexis Park Hotel in Las Vegas. 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 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 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.

Over time, the use of characters with disabilities in children's books has evolved to the point where today we would expect characters with disabilities to be positively portrayed and fully accepted and integrated in society. Tina Taylor Dyches and Mary Ann Prater have previously developed guidelines for evaluating children's literature, utilizing both general literary standards as well as standards related to the portrayal of individuals with developmental disabilities (including autism). In the first article, "Characteristics of developmental disability in children's fiction," Dyches and Prater describe their current study, which examined the characterization of individuals with developmental disabilities in children's fiction books and compare these characterizations with those from an earlier study. Results showed that characters with developmental disabilities made more deliberate choices, were educated in more inclusive settings, were more accepted in their communities, served in more helping roles, and the disability was only one of many character traits. It should be noted that all of the books analyzed in this study qualified to be considered for the 2002 and 2004 Dolly Gray Award in Children's Literature.

IDEA has long promoted family involvement in planning a student's educational plan. Best and evidenced-based practices also support family involvement in the student's educational programming. Unfortunately, research indicates family involvement is far from the desired level. In the next article, "Family perceptions of student centered planning and IEP meetings," Amy L. Childre and Cynthia R. Chambers report results from a qualitative study concerning the family perceptions of

the purpose of the IEP meeting and their level of participation prior to the incorporation of the Student Centered Individualized Education Planning (SCIEP) protocol. Findings indicate greater family involvement and satisfaction with the planning process following the use of SCIEP. Implications for teacher training programs include developing a variety of approaches to utilize with students with disabilities and their families including the use of SCIEP.

Colleen A. Thoma and Elizabeth Evans Getzel in their article "Self-determination is what it's all about: What post-secondary students with disabilities tell us are important considerations for success," describe results of a series of focus group interviews conducted with post-secondary students with disabilities about the importance of self-determination in their success in those settings. Participants attended community college and/or state universities in Virginia and were between the ages of 18 and 48. They indicated that self-determination skills were important to their success in taking courses, finding the supports they needed, and advocating for their rights. Implications for supports for students with disabilities in post-secondary settings, as well as those K-12 students who are planning to transition to post-secondary educational settings are discussed.

In "Teaching social communication skills to young urban children with Autism." Jennifer A. Loncola and Lesley Craig-Unkefer examined the responses of students with autism to a cognitive-social skill model of intervention. The intervention used play sessions to teach interaction skills. Sessions included an organizer or planning portion in which students talked with the teacher about what activity they would participate in, the play session itself which included prompted verbal interactions, and a review session immediately following the play session during which time the student processed what had taken place. Through this intervention, the authors saw an increase in the students' commenting skills and the overall complexity of language.

Stacey Jones Bock, Julia B. Stoner, Ann R. Beck, Laurie Hanley, and Jessica Prochnow compared the effectiveness of two commonly used communication strategies: (1) the Picture Exchange Communication System

(PECS) and (2) voice output communication aids (VOCA). Previous research indicated both approaches are effective interventions for persons with complex communication needs. "Increasing functional communication in non-speaking preschool children: Comparison of PECS and VOCA" expands the research base by comparing the effectiveness of the communication strategies with six preschool children who were non-speaking and were not using an ACC system. Five of the six children appeared to develop a preference for one modality over the other. Results underscore the fact that communication is multimodal and that communicators express themselves using more than one method. Additionally, the results indicate that children can learn at least two systems of communication simultaneously, thus, allowing for the child to select the method better able to convey the message the communicator seeks to relay by selecting his or her own voice.

The next article by Melinda R. Pierson and Barbara C. Glaeser discusses the use of comic strip conversations in providing positive behavioral support to students. In "Extension of research on social skills training using comic strip conversations to students without Autism," the authors describe how these methods were used with four students with severe social skill deficits. They incorporated the use of a personal symbol dictionary to assist students with comprehension. Comic strip conversations were used as a way to instruct appropriate social skills behavior as well as processing behavior during teachable moments during the day. By using the technique, students were better able to respond in social situations.

Play is an integral part of early childhood development in which typically developing children learn social and language skills, as well as appropriate behaviors, problem solving, and a variety of other cognitive skills. For many children with autism, however, play does not appear to come naturally and thus these children must be specifically taught to engage in social and play activities. In "Let's play: Teaching play skills to young children with Autism", Amanda Boutot, Tracee Guenther, and Shannon Crozier explore the various aspects of play, discuss several means of teaching play skills to children with autism, including milieu strategies, peer-medi-

ated instruction, and discrete trial training, and make suggestions for future research. Additionally, the article describes a case study comparing the efficacy of two methods of play skills instruction for children with autism.

In their study “Teacher interaction styles and task engagement of elementary students with cognitive disabilities,” Ockjean Kim and Susan C. Hupp examined the interaction styles of teachers. An analysis of videotaped interactions showed that teachers are more directive in their interactions than responsive to students. Interactions were categorized as verbal or non-verbal direction and verbal or non-verbal responses. Teacher interactions were correlated with student responses and discussed in relation to student attention to task. While attention to task was rated by frequency and duration, this study showed that only frequency was significantly increased by teacher interactions.

General education curriculum appears to be mandated in federal education, but often specialists in the field advocate for functional curriculum. In her article “Impact of factors on curriculum and instructional environments for secondary students with mild mental retardation”, Emily C. Bouck examined factors that might influence the choice of secondary settings and the type of curriculum chosen for students with mild mental retardation. The author examined teacher variables such as gender, degree held, endorsements, and years teaching with the choice of inclusive or functional setting and general education or functional curriculum. Also examined were school size and location (urban, suburban, or rural) for impact on the choice of setting and curriculum. Findings indicate a need for more

research to determine what is driving the choice of curriculum and setting for secondary students with mild mental retardation.

Children and youth today, referred to in the final article as Millennial children, including those with mild disabilities, have grown up in a world surrounded by varying technologies. According to the authors, Howard P. Parette, Brian Wojcik, George Peterson-Karlan, and Jack Hourcade, technology use is deeply embedded in the lives of Millennial children on a regular basis, and for students with disabilities, the use of preferred technologies may facilitate learning. In “Assistive technology for students with mild disabilities: What’s cool and what’s not,” the authors advocate development and use of a technology “toolkit”, which is, in essence, an array of technology devices having broad applicability to many students with mild disabilities in a particular classroom. Within the toolkit, technology devices that have an appeal to current school-age students with mild disabilities are identified as “cool.” The article reviews a variety of cool tools that may assist in writing, reading, math, and memory and organization. Additionally, the article describes cool technologies that are up and coming. The authors conclude that cool technologies hold great potential to contribute to the academic success of many students with mild disabilities.

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 Best Practices for Practitioners Special Conference Issue find the information valuable and timely.