

Best Practices in Cognitive Disabilities/Mental Retardation, Autism, and Related Disabilities

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On October 8-10 2008, the Council for Exceptional Children Division on Developmental Disabilities (DDD) sponsored its “Practitioner-Focused” Eleventh International Conference: Best Practices in Cognitive Disabilities/Mental Retardation, Autism, and Related Disabilities. The conference was held at the Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina. 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-evidence based practices, mild mental retardation, transition, multiple disabilities, and paraprofessionals. 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

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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 was based on the presentation entitled “Multiculturalism, Religion and Disability: Implications for Special Education Practitioners” by A. Brooke Blanks and J. David Smith. It examines the fact that educators are often reluctant to discuss religious beliefs when working with students with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families. It asks, however, whether this limits our ability to fully understand the experience of living with disability. It discusses religious beliefs, traditions, and practices that are important to teacher education and as part of the zeitgeist of working with children and their families. This article examines images and teachings about disabilities in three of the religions practiced most widely in the United States: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the second article, the authors investigated how individuals with developmental disabilities in children’s books are portrayed to young readers. In “Literature and the Portrayal of Developmental Disabilities,” Tina Taylor Dyches, Mary Anne Prater, and Melissa

Leininger examined 41 children's books that qualified for the 2006 or 2008 Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award sponsored by the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Special Needs Project. The individuals with disabilities portrayed in the books reviewed were analyzed and categorized across four themes: "characterization of the individual with developmental disabilities, relationships between the character with developmental disabilities and others, changes in characters without developmental disabilities, and special topics in the field of developmental disabilities." The themes are described and analyzed precisely based on how the individuals are portrayed in the books. Individual books are cited providing examples of the themes identified. The portrayal of individuals with developmental disabilities is discussed from a variety of contexts and compared to two earlier studies. Recommendations are also made to future authors and to educators.

"Evidence-Based Social Skills Interventions for Children with Autism: A Meta-analysis", authored by Peishi Wang and Anne Spillane, provides a synthesis of research studies published in the last ten years on interventions to increase social skills for children and adolescents with ASD. Additionally, the article examines the outcomes of these studies and evaluates whether a given intervention meets the criteria for evidence-based practice. Of the 38 studies included in this review, 36 were single subject research studies and 2 were group experimental studies; results varied widely both between intervention types, and with the different studies within each intervention type. While *social stories*, *peer-mediated*, and *video-modeling* interventions all met the criteria for evidence-based, a closer look at the percentage of non-overlapping data points reveals that only *video-modeling* meets criteria for being evidence-based as well as demonstrating high effectiveness as an intervention strategy. The article concludes with a discussion on the implications for practice, which is of particular importance for practitioners who utilize *video-modeling* to teach social skills to students with ASD.

With the large number of students with autism entering the educational system, the need for empirically supported treatment

(EST) in the classroom, and special education teachers with training in autism and ESTs, is becoming critical. In their article, "Learn by Doing: A Collaborative Model for Training Teacher-Candidate Students in Autism", Michael B. Ruef, Nicolette Nefdt, Daniel Openden, Sharon Elmendorp, Kathleen C. Harris, and Suzanne Robinson describe a collaborative model between two universities aimed at (1) providing teacher-candidate graduate students training in ESTs for children with autism and (2) providing empirically supported treatments to local families with children with autism. Pivotal response treatment (PRT) was the treatment selected for inclusion in the teacher training program: PRT is a comprehensive service delivery model that uses both a developmental approach and applied behavior analysis (ABA) procedures and aims to provide opportunities for learning within the context of the child's natural environment. The article provides an overview on the three components of the model: (1) the community-based service delivery system, (2) the Masters/special education credential program and (3) training in PRT. Issues relating to student, family and university participation are discussed along with possible solutions and future directions. The authors conclude the article with a discussion on the benefits of the model, particularly with respect to producing highly qualified teachers in autism, and the implications for including autism training in teacher training programs.

In their article entitled "Research-Based Techniques for Teaching Early Reading Skills to Students with Intellectual Disabilities," Jill Allor, Patricia Mathes, Tammi Champlin, and Jennifer Cheatham discuss the orchestrated integration of key skills and strategies that are explicitly linked to meaning. These strategies are organized according to the major components of reading instruction: oral language and vocabulary, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency and comprehension. The article describes key techniques used in examining effective methods for teaching students with intellectual disabilities to read.

The next article by Emily Bouck, Laura Bassette, Teresa Taber-Doughty, Sara Flanagan, and Kathryn Szwed. It examines the effectiveness of pentop computers in teaching multi-

plication facts to middle school students with intellectual disabilities. A multiple probe design was used to assess the progress of students using this intervention. The results indicated that students using a pentop program improved in the percentage of correct math facts completed. Limitations and suggestions for future research are included.

The natural instructors to teach self-care and domestic skills to children with autism are their parents. In their article, “Effectiveness of Parent and Therapist Collaboration Program (PTCP) for Teaching Self-Care and Domestic Skills to Individuals with Autism,” Atilla Cavkaytar and Elena Pollard present the results from a study they conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Parent and Therapist Collaboration Program (PTCP). The researchers developed, implemented and evaluated the PTCP to determine its effectiveness in helping three parents, in collaboration with their child’s habilitation therapist, to successfully instruct their children with autism in the acquisition of specific self-care and domestic skills. The parents and therapists were trained using the “Teaching Self-Care and Domestic Skills Manual” prior to the home-based instruction. The authors describe and discuss the results of their study in terms of each mother’s success in teaching the self-care and domestic skills to their child with autism and its relation to the involvement of the habilitation therapist.

Instructional rubrics can be an effective assessment tool in directing students’ learning. In their article, “Effects of Instructional Rubrics on Class Engagement Behaviors and the Achievement of Lesson Objectives by Students with Mild Mental Retardation and Their Typical Peers,” EunJung Lee and SoHyun Lee investigated the use and effectiveness of instructional rubrics on students’ class engagement behaviors and their achievement of lesson objectives. Their investigation was conducted in three classrooms during Korean language instruction. The participants in each class consisted of one female teacher, and one male student with mild cognitive disabilities and his general education classroom peers. All participants were trained on the rubrics that targeted standard-based lesson objectives (i.e., the original and modified ones) and an on-task rubric application form designed for the

students with mild cognitive disabilities. Class engagement behaviors were measured using partial-interval recordings and the achievement of lesson objectives was determined through self-assessment. The investigators provide a thorough discussion of the positive results that were found related to class engagement behaviors of the students with cognitive disabilities, and the achievement of lesson objectives for all student participants.

Literacy is one of the most important educational goals yet educators of students with severe and/or multiple disabilities are often in search of strategies to develop literacy skills. A review of the research on literacy instruction indicates that students with significant intellectual disabilities and visual impairments are underrepresented. In their article, “Increasing Comprehension of Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities and Visual Impairments during Shared Stories”, Pamela J. Mims, Diane M. Browder, Joshua N. Baker, Angel Lee, and Fred Spooner explore read-aloud, or shared stories, as a potential intervention. Shared stories have been shown to help increase emerging literacy skills in students with significant intellectual disabilities. In this study, the least-to-most prompt system was used to promote listening comprehension, a critical literacy development skill, during shared stories for two students with significant intellectual disabilities and visual impairments. Outcomes indicate that both students improved on the correct number of responses to comprehension questions and interestingly, one of the students demonstrated an ability to generalize responses across people and settings as well as maintain results. The article concludes with suggestions from the authors on applying this intervention to practice and a discussion on directions for future research.

Parents, who wanted to improve collaboration with their children’s school, and provide meaningful information (e.g., through scrapbooks and student profiles) about their children with disabilities, helped to initiate the development of the *Family Assessment Portfolio* (FAP). In the article, “Evaluating the Acceptability and Effectiveness of Family Assessment Portfolios,” Hedda Meadan, James R. Thompson, Mayumi Hagihara, Julie Herold, Sarah Hoekstra, and Samantha Manser first describe

the FAP, which was developed and enhanced to include multimedia materials (e.g., movies and webpage), then report the purpose of their study which focuses on evaluating the acceptability and effectiveness of the FAPs. The participants of this study were parents, FAP facilitators, and pre-service and in-service teachers. These three groups provided feedback about the goals, procedures and outcomes of the FAP through questionnaires and/or interviews after having some experience with or exposure to the FAPs. Results and discussion of this study center on support-

ing the social validity of the FAP as a means to communicate meaningful information about a child. The authors provide the perceptions of and suggestions for the FAPs as offered by each group of participants.

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 Special Conference Issue find the information valuable and timely.