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## **Literacy: Introduction to the Special Series**

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# Literacy: Introduction to the Special Series

Literacy for all populations of students, especially for students for whom learning to read poses significant challenges, is considered the primary objective in most educational settings. Historically, literacy instruction (including reading and writing) for students with developmental disabilities has been underemphasized. However, literacy must be an instructional priority if students with developmental disabilities are to achieve desired postschool outcomes and make progress, even within a functional framework of curricula (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Dezell, & Algozzine, 2006). Researchers and educators are joined in their ongoing recognition of the importance of literacy by advocates and legislators, as seen in the emphasis in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990) on access to general education standards and in the emphasis in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) on the broadening and inclusiveness of assessment. The purpose of this special issue is to endorse and contribute to this established priority by highlighting some recent attempts at literacy instruction for students with a variety of developmental disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and physical disabilities.

Three studies in this issue focus on students with intellectual disabilities. Browder, Trela, and Jimenez evaluated a method for increasing students' participation in the reading of middle school literature through training teachers to use adapted books and to follow a task analysis that includes word and sound study, text awareness, and comprehension. Students increased their participation, independence in book awareness, listening comprehension, and other early literacy skills using literature typical of their middle school grade level. Through the program, students became familiar with various aspects of culture and adolescent themes such as coming of age and personal responsibility. Collins, Evans, Creech-Galloway, Karl, and Miller compared the acquisition of functional and core content sight words across three formats: (a) direct massed trial instruction in a special education resource room, (b) direct distributed trial instruction in a general education classroom, and (c) embedded distributed trial instruction in a general education classroom. There were minimal differences in the acquisition and maintenance of both functional and core content sight words across the three presentations, indicating a possible wider range of strategies for sight word instruction. Alberto, Fredrick, Hughes, McIntosh, and Cihak make the case that definitions of literacy that focus solely on reading words provide too narrow a framework for many students with

severe disabilities. Obtaining information from the environment may be accomplished in a variety of ways, including visual literacy, which is the ability to discern meaning conveyed through images. Visual literacy may be the primary mode of literacy for some students, while for others it is only one component of their broader literacy goals and skills. Elements of visual literacy include picture reading and logo reading. This study provides data substantiating the teaching of community logos through a time-delay procedure.

Three studies in this issue focus on students within the autism spectrum. Flores and Ganz investigated the effects of a direct instruction reading comprehension program, *Corrective Reading Thinking Basics: Comprehension Level A* (Engelmann, Haddox, Hanner, & Osborn, 2002). Elementary and middle school students with autism spectrum disorders, mental retardation, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder met criterion (three consecutive probes at 100%) for increasing their abilities to make statement inferences, use facts, and understand analogies. The only modification to the presentation was the addition of visual cues during the using facts condition. All of the students maintained their performance 1 month after instruction. Delano conducted an exploratory study to evaluate the use of Self-Regulated Strategy Development (Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1991) writing instruction on the written language of an adolescent with Asperger syndrome. Instruction targeted the student's use of action words, describing words, and revisions. Following instruction, the student demonstrated gains in the quantity and quality of his writing samples that were maintained 2 weeks after the study concluded. Chiang and Lin contribute a literature review of studies on teaching reading comprehension, focusing on text comprehension (academic reading comprehension) and sight word comprehension. Instructional strategies used with students with autism spectrum disorders included flash cards and a progressive time-delay procedure, a discrete trial reading and writing program, incidental teaching procedure, multimedia instruction, computer-based video instruction, stimulus class technology and observational learning, book-based learning, computer-based instruction, peer tutoring, cooperative learning groups, and procedure facilitation (i.e., anaphoric cuing, prereading question, and cloze). The instructional methods employed are compared to those identified as effective by the National Reading Panel.

In the final article, Hanser and Erickson provide preliminary data concerning the use of *Literacy Through Unity: Word*

*Study* (Erickson & Hanser, 2007), which uses integrated word identification and communication software for students whose physical disabilities lead to complex communication needs. The software, used in conjunction with augmentative communication devices, provides scripted lessons which teach phonics, letter-by-letter spelling, and icon sequencing. Three participants improved in their ability to identify words and sequence icons and were able to generalize the sequences learned to nontraining settings as well as generate novel sequences.

We hope that the literacy articles in this special issue give families and practitioners additional ideas for promoting literacy in the individuals they care about. We also hope that the articles inspire further research regarding literacy instruction for students with a variety of developmental disabilities. Continued research provides the empirical base necessary to substantiate the interventions that will be most effective in promoting critical literacy skills for maximizing independence and participation.

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