1 Research and Program Overview

RESEARCH

The teaching of age-appropriate literacy skills in the instruction of secondary-level students with significant disabilities is a relatively new area of interest for those in the field of special education. For many years, individuals with significant disabilities were not taught to read, or were taught through a variety of unsuccessful means. In the past, students with disabilities were often taught sight and functional/safety words. While this was beneficial, "real" literature, such as age-appropriate novels and poems—literature that is used in general education—was not often seen as an option for poor readers or nonreaders. Limited research is also available in this area.

In a review of studies by Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Algozzine (2006) dealing with reading instruction and students with significant cognitive disabilities, it was found that most of the studies done in this area involved functional sight word acquisition and picture identification. Very few studies involved comprehension, phonics instruction, or phonemic awareness.

Our goal was to help our students improve their literacy skills and have accessibility to literature, so different methods for increasing our students' access to literature were researched. Any technique that could help students learn words and develop reading skills would be looked at and tried to see if it was helpful for the students. We felt the access to literature and words provided students in special education should equal that provided to students in a general education program.

When the search for information on the topic of teaching age-appropriate literature to students with disabilities began, current research and best practices were reviewed. At first, we were overwhelmed by the information. A Google search of "teaching reading to students with disabilities" yielded 8,470,000 results. After reviewing the "hits," it was found that the vast majority of the articles were about students with varying degrees of learning disabilities. There were also many lesson plans with accommodations for students with disabilities.

At this point, we needed a more specific definition of the population of students with whom we were working. Our classrooms are described as having students with intellectual disabilities. Our state recognizes the standard range for IQ levels of 52–68 for mild, 36–51 for moderate, 20–35 for severe, and below 20 for profound intellectual disability. The Merck Manual Online Medical Library (see Sulkes, 2006) describes the ranges of mental retardation and intellectual disability as needing different levels of support.

> Support is categorized as intermittent, limited, extensive, or pervasive. Intermittent means occasional support; limited means support such as a day program in a sheltered workshop; extensive means daily, ongoing support; and pervasive means a high level of support for all activities of daily living. (para. 4)

Other areas of eligibility in our classrooms include multihandicapped, autism, and other health impaired. Every student has his or her individual strengths and needs, but for the sake of a consistent definition—so you will know what our students "look like"—the IQ categories, moderate to severe, and the levels of support, from limited to extensive, will be used.

Next, a narrower Internet search using "reading and students with mental retardation" was done. Out of those results, most were textbooks, definitions of mental retardation, or aimed at teaching life skills. Finally, searching for "teaching age-appropriate literature to students with mental retardation" generally resulted in college catalogs with class descriptions and more definitions of mental retardation. There were not many articles that included step-by-step instructions on how to do the type of teaching we were hoping to do.

Since more academic findings and current research would be more helpful, a search was done through the Hunter Library at Western Carolina University and Ramsey Library at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. Research was done using a wide variety of journals. They included *Journal of Special Education, Remedial & Special Education, Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, Education & Treatment of Children, Child Language Teaching and Therapy,* and *Learning Disability Quarterly.*

We were surprised to find there were not many articles on the topic. Using the Academic Search Premier, "reading and students with disabilities" yielded 296 results but "teaching reading to students with severe disabilities" yielded 0. "Improving literacy skills" yielded 9, and "reading and students with mental retardation" yielded 5. A couple of things became evident to us: there was not a wealth of information available to us, and we were going to have to develop our own way of teaching and assessing that worked with our population of students.

Selection Criteria

For this review, certain criteria for each study were required.

1. A study needed a publication date after 1990. This criterion was chosen to assure more current information and best practices.

2. The studies had to be empirically based or a review of empirically based research.

3. The studies needed to deal with students who were considered to have moderate to severe disabilities. The students in the studies had to be receiving special education services.

4. The studies had to deal with strategies for increasing reading skills.

The results of the review of literature indicated there are many different ways to approach the teaching of reading to students with disabilities.

Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is the basis for two studies (Allinder, 2000; Stecker & Fuchs, 2000). While more an assessment method than a teaching method, CBM is a data-based assessment that helps "monitor progress of individual students on an ongoing basis, determine what to teach, quickly determine if instruction is effective so that necessary changes in instruction can be made, and write measurable individual education goals" (Scott & Weishaar, 2003, p. 154). Both Allinder and Stecker and Fuchs looked at the effect curriculum-based measurement had on student progress. Both also used teachers who were teaching students with disabilities. The findings in their studies were similar. Students who have teachers who monitor the CBM and revise their instructional plans according to their students' needs progress at a faster rate than those whose teachers do not.

Specific techniques for increasing literacy skills for students with significant disabilities were discussed in five of the articles: Basil and Reyes (2003), Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003), Collins and Griffen

(1996), Faykus and McCurdy (1998), and Winterling (1990). Among the techniques discussed were a computer program with teacher assistance, least intensive prompts, oral fluency, token reinforcement, and time delay. The computer program increased literacy skills, and token reinforcement combined with other techniques helped with word recognition. Time delay was found to be a good tool in teaching reading skills and improving progress. This tool helped show progress in the comprehension of sight words and safety-related issues concerning warning labels.

Morocco, Hindin, Mata-Aguilar, and Clark-Chiarelli (2001) evaluated a program designed to improve literacy skills for students with disabilities. The program was designed for students with and without disabilities using cooperative learning and peer tutoring. The students were involved in phases of learning that began with teacher instruction and ended with the students writing about their understanding of the literature. Age-level materials and activities designed to increase comprehension of the materials were used.

To read about the literacy program was very exciting. For too long, teachers in special education have limited their students to simple, often non-age-appropriate literature. They have looked only at the reading level rather than the whole process of understanding literature. This study shows that not only can students learn and benefit from literature programs; they can work with their peers and grow in their comprehension and appreciation for literature.

After looking at the research, we discussed different ways to increase reading and literacy skills. We really liked reading about the literacy program. One of us had taught using a similar thematic approach with elementary school students for many years. We decided to look into the theme approach to see if that way of teaching would benefit our students.

A basic definition of theme teaching is that it "involves creating an array of activities around a central idea. These activities are integrated into every aspect of the curriculum within a concentrated time frame, ranging from several days to a few weeks" (Kostelnik, 1996, p. 2). In the book *Themes Teachers Use* (Kostelnik, 1996) the authors describe what it means to use theme teaching in the classroom:

- Providing hands-on experience with real objects for children to examine and manipulate
- Creating activities in which children use all of their senses
- Building classroom activities around children's current interests
- Helping children acquire new knowledge and skills by building on what they already know and can do

- Providing activities and routines that address all aspects of children's development—cognitive, emotional, social, and physical
- Including a wide range of activities that address variations in children's learning styles and preferred modes of involvement
- Accommodating children's needs for movement and physical activity, social interaction, independence, and positive self-image
- Providing opportunities for children to use play to translate experience into understanding
- Respecting the individual differences, cultural backgrounds, and home experiences that children bring with them to the classroom
- Finding ways to involve members of children's families (Kostelnik, 1996, p. 2)

In an English as a second language (ESL) Training Manual (Burkart & Sheppard, n.d.), ESL teachers were given information about using themes in their teaching. Steps in the process included "(1) Selecting a Theme, (2) Brainstorming Associations, (3) Writing Questions, and (4) Developing Activities" (pp. 2–4). This manual also included information about adapting passages to help with comprehension. Some suggestions included:

(1) Write shorter sentences. (2) Simplify the vocabulary. (3) Simplify the grammar. (4) Rework the sentence entirely, if needed. (5) Add additional language for clarification. (6) Don't be afraid to repeat words, and (7) Use cohesive devices (e.g., then, such, first, however, it, also). (p. 7)

Teaching using themes lends itself to working with students who have different ability levels. It is also up to the teacher to "strive to create individual theme-related activities that cover a range of goals" for the student. (Kostlenik, 1996. p. 2).

After looking at the definition and basic steps for using a thematic approach in teaching, we decided this was the way we wanted to approach teaching literacy skills to our students. We were very adamant about using literature that was age appropriate, and this approach lent itself to using literature that was at the age level rather than the reading level of our students. Books could be adapted to student developmental levels, activities could be incorporated into daily schedules, and learning could be modified for individual learning needs. Now that the research had been done and steps in the thematic approach to teaching had been found, it was time to get to work and create the program that would be the most beneficial to our students.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW, PREMISE, AND GOAL

A school librarian is quoted as saying, "Encouraging people to develop real skills and transfer them to their lives is at the heart of literacy. Real literacy equals independence" (Pitcher & Mackey, 2004, p. 3). Independence should always be the goal of programs for students with special needs. A good literacy program is instrumental in developing this independence. Our program is based on a vision for excellence in literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities.

It is our philosophy that our students have the right to an exciting instructional program and that this program should be equal in quality to the general education program. As we sought to develop such a program, we examined our philosophy, established an overall goal, and listed the principles we consider basic in meeting this goal.

The program is based on the premise that students with moderate to severe disabilities can be successful in the acquisition of literacy skills. Our responsibility as teachers is to facilitate success.

The program goal is to assist students with moderate to severe disabilities with the acquisition of literacy skills.

PROGRAM PRINCIPLES

The following principles are at the core of this literacy program:

- The special needs and learning styles of the students should be kept at the forefront.
- When necessary, support and modifications should be provided.
- The program should be based on general education standards but should also emphasize functional skills.
- Materials and instruction should be age appropriate. Through the use of age-appropriate literature, our students can learn about and relate to adventures, families, faraway places, emotions, and the experiences of others while also gaining an understanding of their own lives.
- A team approach, which includes parents, should be utilized.
- General education opportunities should be provided.
- Planning should be based on a thematic or integrated approach. Through thematic instruction, our students make connections between life and the written word and among subjects such as science, reading, social studies, written expression, and math.