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By Joe Fisher

Adolescents with Disabilities

For children with disabilities, access to instruction typically centers on improving their basic-literacy skills. Over the past several decades, federally supported research has sought to substantially improve the basic-literacy outcomes of these students. This research effort has culminated in the approach - Response to Intervention (RTI). The translation of the RTI research into school-wide practice is evident in elementary schools in west Michigan and across the nation. (See article in this issue on Jenison's effort to implement RTI.)

However, what about *adolescents* with disabilities access to appropriate instruction? A recent descriptive study of high schools across the United States showed that adolescents with disabilities receive instruction that makes *minimal* use of evidence-based practices (Schumaker et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, the academic outcomes achieved by adolescents with disabilities have been considerably lower than those achieved by their peers without disabilities. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner, Blackorby, & Hebbeler, 1993), researchers learned that a disproportionate number of adolescents with disabilities (38%) drop out of school, and that these students generally demonstrate higher rates of absenteeism, lower grade-point averages, and higher course-failure rates than their peers without disabilities. As discouraging as these outcomes are,

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Schumaker et al. (2002) warns that they may be exacerbated by the emergence of the following trends:

1. The expectation, within NCLB, that all students, including those with disabilities, meet high curriculum and graduation standards;

2. The requirement within IDEA that students with disabilities be included in general education classrooms for as much of the school day as possible; and

3. The expectation within IDEA that programming for students with disabilities be outcome based within the context of successfully mastering the general education curriculum.

Given these trends, if the academic outcomes of adolescents with disabilities are to be markedly improved, these students will need increased access to instruction that not only improves their basic literacy but also their content-area literacy. One approach, researched and developed to improve the content-area literacy outcomes of students with disabilities is Content Enhancement.

Content Enhancement

Using Content Enhancement, a teacher examines content-area standards and identifies the critical content related to those standards that she wants all of her students to learn. Then, she carefully analyzes the content and determines what information may be difficult for students to learn. Based on this analysis, the teacher selects a Content Enhancement Routine to transform the content into a format that scaffolds the learning of high, average, and low achieving students, including students with disabilities. Once prepared, she uses the routine with her student to enhance their learning.

Three types of Content Enhancement Routines have been researched and developed—*organizing routines, understanding routines,* and *remembering routines.* Organizing routines are used to create frameworks that describe key content and reveal the structure of that content. Specific organizing routines include Course Organizer, Unit Organizer, and Lesson Organizer. Understanding routines are used to help students understand important, abstract, and/or complex concepts. These routines include Concept Mastery, Concept Comparison, and Concept Anchoring. Finally, remembering routines are used to help students store are recall important content-area facts, and they include Recall Enhancement and Vocabulary Learning.

The centerpiece of each of these routines is its teaching device. Most of the devices are graphic organizers that map the content for students. Each teaching device has been designed to focus attention on critical content, to prompt discussion about that content, to make relationships between content explicit, and to prompt higher order thinking.

To be effective, research has demonstrated that a device must be used interactively between the teacher and students following an instructional sequence called Cue-Do-Review. During Cue, the teacher names for students the routine to be used, why it was selected, and most importantly how it will help them learn. During Do, the teacher and students work together to co-construct the teaching device. The teacher scaffolds student construction through the use of prompts and questions. During Review, student understanding of the content is checked and reinforced by the teacher.

Numerous research studies have been conducted showing that Content Enhancement Routines increase adolescents with learning disabilities access to content-area information. In one line of research, Bulgren and her colleagues studied the effects of the Concept Mastery, Concept Anchoring, and Concept Comparison Routines (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996). Results showed that students with learning disabilities were able to correctly answer more test questions about concepts taught using these routines than about concepts taught using traditional instruction. Specifically, students scored 15 to 30 percentage points higher on tests following teacher use of these understanding routines. Other lines of research by Lenz and Ellis on the organizing routines and remembering routines show similar results (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996).

Content Enhancement Professional Developers

Several west Michigan districts have begun to adopt to improve student access to the general education curriculum. To do this, these districts have relied upon College of Education alumni including: Cindy Gibson in the Lowell Public Schools, Sue Woodruff in the Muskegon Public Schools, Sue Sims at the Big Rapids Schools, Kelli-Ann Woodruff in the Holton Schools, Patricia Ward and Suzanne Finney at the Crossroads Charter School, and Janette Cochran in the Holland Public Schools.

These individuals do more than use the routines . They become experts and completed a demanding, multi-year program through the University of Kansas to become certified professional developers.

The skills and talents of these certified professional developers are sought by organizations and school districts across the state and the nation. For example, Cindy Gibson has worked directly with the Berrien, Saginaw, and Eastern Upper Penninsula ISDs. Moreover, Sue Woodruff has worked with districts in, Massachusetts, Kansas and Washington.

Research studies clearly document the positive impact that the Content Enhancement Routines have on the increasing struggling adolescents access to the general education curriculum. However, without a network of professional developers available to school districts, this research will likely never be translated into practice and directly impact these students lives. West Michigan is fortunate to be linked to this network through Grand Valley State University alumni. For this reason, faculty in the College of Education are very proud to have these outstanding alumni as their colleagues.

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