

## CHALLENGES OF THE NEXT DECADE

### Quality Instruction for Students with Disabilities

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The school year has ended, and over 4 million students with disabilities have completed another year of schooling. What have they learned? Has their learning been the direct result of effective instruction or is it merely the product of another year's experience? Will what they have learned serve them in a functional way tomorrow? Should they have learned more or learned something different? Who is responsible for what they have learned over the past 180 days—teachers, parents, administrators, schools, or the students themselves? Has the knowledge base of research influenced what they have learned?

These are examples of questions to be considered in addressing the larger issue of how we will ensure quality instruction for students with exceptionalities in the 21st century.

When the productivity of the special education profession is examined, it becomes apparent that comparatively little attention has been given to improving instruction. This point is illustrated, in part, by the work of Lessen, Dudzinski, Karsh, and Van Acker (1989), who reviewed research on learning disabilities published in nine journals from 1978 through 1987. They found that research on academic intervention constituted only 4% of the articles published during that 10-year period. Research on instructional interventions may not be as easy to conduct or as provocative as position papers; however, if special education

means providing instruction to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities, then it is reasonable to assume that a considerable proportion of the profession's efforts should be concentrated on developing and refining instructional interventions and on identifying the conditions that assure their effectiveness.

### Sharing the Responsibility for Quality Instruction

Improvement in the quality of instruction will not be achieved by delegating the total responsibility to teachers. Teachers clearly share in the responsibility, but it belongs to the profession as a whole. Researchers, teacher educators, administrators, support personnel, and policymakers must assume this responsibility collectively. That means redirecting research priorities of funding agencies, influencing the interests of those who perform research and train researchers, establishing systematic ways for teachers to communicate to researchers the problems they encounter in teaching, and encouraging those who advocate for particular philosophical approaches to first consider their impact on learning. It is also important to communicate these concerns to publishers of instructional resources.

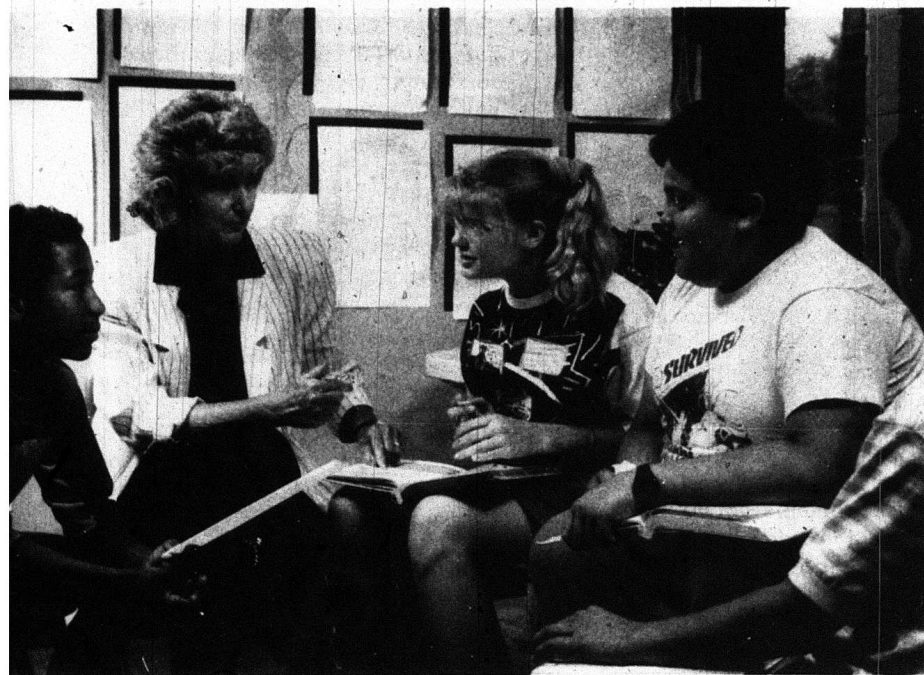
Despite the resilience demonstrated by many students with handicaps, their learning problems tend to resist remediation and persist over time. While learners may share common attributes, they often vary in their responsiveness to teaching strategies, thereby adding to the complexity of instruction. Thus, the type or form of intervention is a primary factor in quality instruction. Teachers do develop and validate effective interventions independent of organized research, but the general knowledge base that guides interventions must be built on valid instructional research. McCarthy (1989), in discussing the emergence and demise of one panacea after another, has pointed out that we do not yet have all of the answers to the problem of children's failure to learn and has suggested that in discussions with parents we would be well advised to emphasize programs that have the strongest research bases, telling them what to do rather than what *not* to do.

Developing, disseminating, and applying a validated instructional knowledge base is the precursor to quality instruction. Unfortunately, our current investment in developmental instructional interventions and appropriate curriculum options is insufficient to make a substantial difference within a reasonable time frame. An increased investment is needed in resources, energy, and commitment combined with a renewed emphasis on applying programs, practices, methods, and materials that are known to be successful with students with exceptionalities. Much is known about the power of cooperative learning models (Johnson & Johnson, 1987); peer and cross-age tutoring systems (Good & Brophy, 1984; Greenwood et al., 1984); learning strategies (Deshler & Schumaker, 1984); computer-assisted instruction and the use of adaptive devices (Cain & Tabor, 1987); the importance of engaging in academic behavior (Stallings, 1980); collaboration (Pugach & Johnson, 1988); instructional accountability (Reith & Evertson, 1988); intensity of instruction (Meyen & Lehr, 1980); direct instruction (Gersten & Carnine, 1986); and cognitive strategies (Sheinker, Sheinker, & Stevens, 1984). Much is also known about accommodating cultural diversity in the classroom and about the motivation of students.

The problem is that if teachers are to apply validated interventions, they must have opportunities to observe these strategies at work and to receive instruction in their use. Because the number of special education teachers frequently is insufficient to warrant an investment by school districts in inservice experiences specifically geared to their needs, these teachers often must translate information gleaned from inservice sessions designed for regular education teachers to suit their particular needs.

### Using Technology

In an era of technology, it is tempting to sidestep the basic commitment required to improve the quality of instruction by assuming that technology will provide the solutions. Technology does have much to offer by way of courseware, assistive devices, and the delivery of inservice instruction to teachers. However, it presents the same dilemma as other forms of



instructional intervention do: Teachers cannot design, develop, and implement it on their own. Thus, the potential of technology remains largely untapped as a resource for the improvement of instruction.

Researchers, developers, vendors, and administrators must assume primary leadership in enhancing the role of technology as a contributor to quality instruction in the next century. The responsibility of teachers is to (a) understand the conditions under which instructional technology is the most effective or preferred option, (b) know what is available, (c) advocate for resources, and (d) develop sufficient programming skills to be able to use authoring systems for tailoring instructional technology to the needs of individual students and employing technology to achieve economies of time and energy in instructional management. This requires a major investment of effort on their part, but it will be in vain if the profession as a whole does not assume its responsibilities.

## Conclusion

If quality instruction for students with exceptionalities is to be achieved in the next century, it is essential to apply what is known about prevention, including establishing early childhood programs, providing family support

systems, redefining what constitutes quality instruction in general education, capitalizing on the advantages of technology, and reestablishing appropriate instruction as the central purpose of special education. Funding agencies must make instruction-related research their top priority for the future, thereby attracting the attention of the research community to the complex question of what instructional interventions work best with particular learners. Without a concentrated commitment to the improvement of instruction, mediocrity will prevail and the blame will continue to be misplaced on students and teachers when in fact it is the system and the profession that must change.

If instruction that is appropriate to the needs of learners who have exceptionalities is the purpose of special education, then the profession must discipline itself to invest in developing interventions that make a difference in how students learn. It does not require a revolution for this to occur.

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