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*Emphasis on Adolescents and Young Adults*

A RESPONSE TO EVOLVING PRACTICES IN  
ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION  
FOR MILDLY HANDICAPPED ADOLESCENTS

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## Cooperating Agencies

Were it not for the cooperation of many agencies in the public and private sector, the research efforts of The University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities could not be conducted. The Institute has maintained an on-going dialogue with participating school districts and agencies to give focus to the research questions and issues that we address as an Institute. We see this dialogue as a means of reducing the gap between research and practice. This communication also allows us to design procedures that: (a) protect the LD adolescent or young adult, (b) disrupt the on-going program as little as possible, and (c) provide appropriate research data.

The majority of our research to this time has been conducted in public school settings in both Kansas and Missouri. School districts in Kansas which are participating in various studies include: United School District (USD) 384, Blue Valley; USD 500, Kansas City; USD 469, Lansing; USD 497, Lawrence; USD 453, Leavenworth; USD 233, Olathe; USD 305, Salina; USD 450, Shawnee Heights; USD 512, Shawnee Mission, USD 464, Tonganoxie; USD 202, Turner; and USD 501, Topeka. Studies are also being conducted in Center School District and the New School for Human Education, Kansas City, Missouri; the School District of St. Joseph, St. Joseph, Missouri; Delta County, Colorado School District; Montrose County, Colorado School District; Elkhart Community Schools, Elkhart, Indiana; and Beaverton School District, Beaverton, Oregon. Many Child Service Demonstration Centers throughout the country have also contributed to our efforts.

Agencies currently participating in research in the juvenile justice system are the Overland Park, Kansas Youth Diversion Project and the Douglas, Johnson, and Leavenworth County, Kansas Juvenile Courts. Other agencies have participated in out-of-school studies--Achievement Place and Penn House of Lawrence, Kansas, Kansas State Industrial Reformatory, Hutchinson, Kansas; the U.S. Military; and the Job Corps. Numerous employers in the public and private sector have also aided us with studies in employment.

While the agencies mentioned above allowed us to contact individuals and supported our efforts, the cooperation of those individuals--LD adolescents and young adults; parents; professionals in education, the criminal justice system, the business community, and the military--have provided the valuable data for our research. This information will assist us in our research endeavors that have the potential of yielding greatest payoff for interventions with the LD adolescent and young adult.

## Abstract

This paper examines the developmental history of programs for mildly mentally retarded and learning disabled adolescents. Curriculum/instructional alternatives are discussed and a rationale presented for consideration of a student's educational history when making instructional decisions. This rationale is predicated on the perspective that many mildly handicapped students have not been subjected to intensive instruction during their school years despite having received special educational services. Characteristics of intensive instruction and options for the implementation of such instruction is presented.

A Response to Evolving Practices in  
Assessment and Intervention  
for Mildly Handicapped Adolescents

This paper will attempt to place in perspective the evolvement of curriculum/instructional programs for the mildly handicapped adolescent with an emphasis on identifying major influences on current practice. These practices will then be briefly reviewed as an introduction to examining assumptions underlying assessment and intervention in the context of what the authors refer to as intensive instruction.

The literature on educating mildly handicapped students has evolved without sufficient attention having been given to the interaction of students in the instructional milieu and the cumulative impact of their education. Presumably the evolving body of literature is designed to offer a reference for resolving the learning and behavioral problems characteristic of the mildly handicapped. However, if one examines the literature it becomes apparent that its formulation has been approached from several independent and circumscribed perspectives, e.g., assessing current strengths and weaknesses, the determination of learning styles, intervention strategies, curriculum content alternatives, material design and/or adaptation, and placement options. On one hand this is reasonable and explainable considering the interests of researchers and expertise of practitioners. However, learning is a consequence of interactions which are difficult if not impossible to sort out. To continue studying the mildly handicapped adolescent from these perspectives will lead to refinement but may further delay the maximumization of the instructional environment for the benefit of the student. A more realistic approach to curriculum development and instructional planning for the mildly handicapped is warranted.

Rarely do teachers of adolescents engage in teaching a behavior in isolation. Learners bring to the teaching-learning situation a repertoire of responses which precludes the teaching of isolated skills or concepts. Their needs are influenced by what they know and their perception of the importance of what is being taught to them. There is also the ever present concern on the part of teachers for making effective use of the learner's time. Teachers need more than precise assessment data on the students' current performance, materials tailored to the needs of the disabled, and a presumably least restrictive setting. What is needed is a set of pedagogical responses to provide the teacher confidence in the instructional decisions which must be made. These must take into consideration the students' educational history, the effectiveness of the students' previous teachers, previous and current demands on the students, and knowledge of instructional placement options.

It is the position of this paper that in making instructional decisions for the mildly handicapped adolescent increased attention should be given to their educational history with particular attention to their responses to intense instruction. It will be argued that merely knowing the current functional level of a 16-year old mildly handicapped youth is insufficient as a basis upon which to make instructional decisions. It is more important to know the nature of the youth's instructional history. Two mildly handicapped adolescents may be determined to be functioning on a similar performance level but an examination of their educational histories may reveal significant differences warranting consideration in future planning. The student who has a history of specialized placement in instruction may be very different from the student who had not been the subject of good instruction, or was identified late, or who has been, in general, socially promoted through previous grades. The student with the history of intense instruction may have more serious disabilities, whereas, the second student, while functioning at the same

level, arrived at that level without the benefit of intense instruction. In planning for the future for these students the authors would propose that the latter student would be a better candidate for intense remedial instruction while the other student would more likely benefit from an application or coping skills oriented curriculum.

### The Mildly Handicapped Adolescent

The most common characteristic among mildly handicapped adolescents is their history of poor school performance. Their learning profiles may vary relative to strengths and weaknesses but throughout their school attendance they have been known for their failure to achieve at the level of expectation held for them. They may also share a history of being exposed to varied interventions which have had only limited impact in remediating their learning disabilities. Some have succeeded in developing strategies which allow them to compensate for their deficiencies, while most have continued to experience the frustrations of failure. Others have had curriculums designed for them which result in their meeting the minimal requirements of schooling but in reality have had the effect of greatly restricting the offerings available to them. The latter may satisfy the needs of school officials but works to the disadvantage of the mildly handicapped youth who as an adult needs demonstrated skills and knowledge more than credentials.

Most mildly handicapped students who were the benefactors of specialized instruction at the elementary level continue to present themselves as adolescents with learning problems. Whether this reflects the resistance of their disabilities to remediation or the weakness of existing interventions remains an unresolved question. The current circumstances which surround the instruction of mildly handicapped adolescents may be accounted for in part by the slowness of the public schools to respond to the needs of these students as

they progressed through the grades and by the lack of validated instructional interventions appropriate at the secondary level. What is known is that learning problems are persistent and it is this persistence which should attract the attention of special educators involved in the design of curriculum and/or instructional strategies.

The emphasis on the mildly handicapped in this article should not be interpreted as an expression of the authors that all mildly handicapped youth have similar needs, that they are equally responsive to instructional strategies, or that they should necessarily be grouped together for purposes of instruction. Within the range of mildly handicapped are students with marked differences in needs and in their responsiveness to instruction. There has, however, been an interesting parallel between programs developed for the mildly mentally retarded and those for the learning disabled. This historical parallel is perceived by the authors to be inappropriate and counterproductive in the search for more powerful interventions and instructional environments commensurate with the varied needs of the mildly handicapped.

#### Program Parallels in the History of Educating the Mildly Handicapped

The pattern of pedagogy in educating the mildly mentally retarded and learning disabled has been somewhat similar. In the case of the mildly mentally retarded the following would apply.

Programs began at the elementary level.

Students identified exhibited a general pattern of low academic performance.

Their poor performance was also generally descriptive of their school behavior.

While achievement in school-related activities was the focus of concern, as a group they presented a wide range of behaviors.



A variety of intervention strategies were promulgated but all lacked sufficient power to correct the learning deficits.

We moved from self contained classes to part time special class placement equivalent to resource rooms.

As elementary students became secondary aged students their learning problems persisted.

Eventually the need for secondary programs became evident.

The failure of intervention strategies at the elementary level resulted in a movement to a functional curriculum, accented with an emphasis on coping skills and options for work study or on the job placement.

Follow-up studies of the mildly mentally retarded populations suggest that once they escape the demands of the school curriculum and settings with similar demands they do reasonably well.

In examining the relatively short history of programs for the learning disabled, we observe a similar pattern in spite of presumably significant differences in the learning characteristics between the two populations.

Students demonstrated a varied profile of deficits.

Initial focus was on elementary programs.

Strong emphasis was on remediation instructional models.

The field was late in developing secondary level programs.

In non-school settings the learning disabled do reasonably well.

The current trend is toward functional or coping skills curriculum.

As adolescents they continue to demonstrate learning problems similar to those experienced in the elementary grades.

The history of developing programs for the mildly mentally retarded is significantly longer than that of programming for the learning disabled. In many ways the characteristics of the mildly mentally retarded are also less complex. However, this history has not resulted in powerful interventions nor even a sound basis for curriculum development at the secondary level for the

mildly mentally retarded.

Currently we have programs for the mildly mentally retarded being dissolved as students are assigned to presumably least restrictive placements without full consideration of the instructional implications. This may be occurring because of insufficient evidence in support of particular curricular or instructional strategies. The state-of-the-art on programming for the mildly mentally retarded is neither promising for the future nor is it a reinforcing testimony for special education.

In assessing the contemporary scene in learning disabilities, Lowrey, Deshler, and Alley (1978) identified five program options. These included the remediation model, tutorial model, learning strategies model, functional curriculum model, and the work-study model. The two which closely approximate curriculum for the mildly mentally retarded include the functional and work-study models. Both have face validity and are receiving considerable attention in the public schools. The functional curriculum model has as its goal the development of skills which will enable students to function independently in society. Consumer information, career education, financial management, grooming, and homemaking skills are emphasized. Users of this approach assume: (a) that the learning disabled adolescent requires direct instruction in this area to adequately function in society, (b) the student cannot benefit maximally from a traditional curriculum, and (c) a specific set of skills can be identified which can be taught to enable independent functioning over a period of time. The work-study model directly provides instruction to the student in job and career related skills. Frequently, this model is implemented by the student spending half the day in an instructional setting, where s/he is presented with job related information, and the other half of the day in an actual job setting. This model assumes that it is necessary to provide specific training

to the student in job related skills. In both approaches there is an implied emphasis on accepting the student's current level of academic performance and building on this level a set of applied-coping-functional behaviors. It further suggests a lack of confidence in remediation strategies which might result in strengthening the academic performance of the students. This movement toward an applied-coping-functional curriculum for the learning disabled may be necessary for some adolescents but lacks sufficient justification as a generalized practice. Unfortunately the face validity may cause the trend to become institutionalized much as occurred in the case of the mildly mentally retarded.

#### Observations Related to Concerns

The following observations reflect the authors' concern for the need to avoid the repetition of program development errors characteristic of the history in programming for the mildly mentally retarded as secondary curriculums are made more responsive to the needs of the learning disabled adolescent.

1. There is the implied assumption in referring to learning disabled adolescents that their instructional and educational histories are the same. The fact that a student has been in school for 8-10 years and subjected to a variety of educational programs because of his/her learning problems does not in itself offer much information on the intensity of the instruction experienced by the students nor their capabilities to profit from instruction. It may be that in spite of the array of programs or number of years in school the student has experienced that in reality the individual has not been the recipient of intense instruction over a sustained period of time. The key

factor warranting investigation may be the intensity of instruction over time not the amount of time in instruction. This means that we must further explore what constitutes intense instruction and how to measure effects.

2. The current trend in program development for the learning disabled adolescent appears to be moving in the direction of a coping skills curriculum. This suggests a lack of confidence in the power of remedial intervention. While such an approach may well benefit many learning disabled adolescents the allowance of this trend to mature unchecked would be unfortunate. It may be justifiable at this point in time to develop applied instructional programs for particular students under the guise of enhancing their immediate entry into society with some independent life skills. However, if the focus of curriculum development for this group shifts predominantly in that direction, the development of powerful remediation interventions may never occur. The error in the logic of the coping skills orientation is that it assumes the learner is not capable of further academic skill development. It again places responsibility for non-achievement on the learner and ignores the previous history of the student's school interaction which failed to produce sufficient results.
3. The emphasis on least restrictiveness as being implemented in the public schools today appears to reflect concern for the student's immediate social needs and is not in the best interest of the learning disabled adolescent from the perspective of instruction and life long needs. The authors, i.e., Meyen and

Lehr (1980), have previously discussed the position that the selection of the least restrictive environment for the mildly handicapped should be based on knowledge of conditions which offer the highest probability for remediating academic performance related deficits and not conditions which are socially least restrictive. They have also argued that many of the required conditions are not likely to occur in the typical regular classroom setting and by their omission the regular class becomes highly restrictive. The inclusion of social benefits for the mildly handicapped or "value" enrichment for their non-handicapped peers is not sufficient compensation for ineffectual instruction.

#### Implications for Assessment and Intervention

In reviewing the history of program development for the mildly mentally handicapped and the learning disabled there appears to have been a subtle or at least unvoiced commitment to assuring a level of comfortableness for the mildly handicapped learner. Much of what is done instructionally in behalf of the handicapped occurs in a context of protectiveness. This is not to suggest that the handicapped lives in a sheltered and protected environment. Certainly they are subjected to abuse and unnecessary infringements upon the rights as well as belittlement by virtue of having their talents ignored. But in the realm of decision-making on placement and on instructional programming there is a tendency to be unduly sensitive to exposing the handicapped learner to pressure or high expectations. The consequences of these responses may well account for the failure of curriculum and interventions to date. The personal costs of living a life inhibited by marginal performance are great. Curri-

culum development and instructional planning for the mildly handicapped should be guided by the results (within reason) of instruction and not restricted by the assumed demands placed on the learner. We must learn to accept the personal cost of remediation. This applies to the learner and parent as well as to professional. This brings us to the topic of intensive instruction as an alternative to perpetuating the extant situation.

In advocating intense instruction as essential to the remediation of the academic deficits characteristic of the mildly handicapped, it obviously becomes necessary to define what is meant by intense instruction. It would be presumptuous to suggest that intense instruction can be measured as a single variable or that all learners respond alike to the same level of intensity. Intensive instruction is presented as a set of circumstances which impact on the actual interaction of the learner in the instructional situation. The following discussion is based on previous work of Meyen and Lehr (1980).

Intensive instruction can be characterized by:

1. The consistency and duration of time on task
2. The timing, frequency, and nature of feedback to the student based on the student's immediate performance and cumulative progress
3. The teacher regularly and frequency communicating to the student his/her expectancy that this student will master the task and demonstrate continuous progress
4. A pattern of pupil-teacher interaction in which the teacher responds to student initiatives and uses consequences appropriate to the responses of the student.

The student's history of interaction with these circumstances related to intensity of instruction is important in determining the most appropriate educational setting for the student. It is also our view that in assessing

the academic achievement of the mildly handicapped, the exclusive emphasis given to the current functioning level of the student as determined by achievement tests and other cognitive instruments is limiting. A more useful approach, in addition to establishing the student's level of performance, would be to determine the intensity of the instruction per unit of time which contributed to the student's current level of functioning. We recognize that while this is a researchable hypothesis and possibly practical as an approach in the future, it does present a variety of problems in reconstructing evidence of past instruction. Use of such information in instructional planning for the mildly handicapped adolescent may extend their formal education. This should be accepted as a necessary condition of remediation. It is unreasonable to assume that an individual who experiences learning deficits throughout most of his/her elementary and secondary educational careers will have achieved a desired level of competency at the usual age for graduation.

The point being presented is that for the mildly handicapped emphasis must be placed on the intensity of instruction not merely elapsed time. It is further speculated that for the mildly handicapped student placed in the regular class, that a higher proportion of time is spent in the context of elapsed time rather than on task and consequently the environment becomes restrictive from the perspective of remediation. At least it inhibits rather than enhances the student's performance.

In order for intensive instruction to occur several conditions must exist. These include: low pupil-teacher ratios, teachers capable of implementing the features of intensive instruction, materials which allow for individualization, the employment of instructional management practices which incorporate the specifying of objectives and careful monitoring of pupil progress, and flexible scheduling which enables instruction to occur within



varied time frames. We have also argued that the conditions in the typical classroom currently are not conducive to the provision of intense instruction and that decisions on least restrictive placements for the mildly handicapped should be based on a determination of settings which offer the highest probability that intense instruction appropriate to the students' needs will occur. The degree to which such conditions emerge will be greatly dependent on reorienting those responsible for educational assessment and decision making regarding appropriate instruction. Examples of options worth exploring include the following:

1. In making placement decisions on mildly handicapped adolescents, evaluators should give consideration to the nature of the student's educational history and to the degree possible determine the intensity of the instruction which contributed to the student's current level of functioning.
2. If a student is not identified as mildly handicapped until junior or senior high, consideration should be given to placement of the student in a highly intense instructional program for a period of two to three months or until the effectiveness of the remediation has been substantiated and then begin to increase participation in the regular classroom setting. During this period of time attention would be given to determining the kinds of conditions which are necessary for the respective student to be maximally responsive to instruction. This would apply to the academic and vocational domains of the curriculum.
3. The pupil-teacher ratio in mainstreamed classrooms should be reduced to 15 to 1 or lower. If it is not economically feasible to do this on a full day basis, a half day might be beneficial.



4. Teachers of mainstream classrooms should be trained to employ techniques related to intense instruction, for example, feedback to students, maintaining on task behavior, and individualizing instruction.
5. Continuous instruction should be provided, i.e., summer school remedial programs should be held during the period of time in which the student is progressing toward a performance level which would enhance his/her participation in a regular classroom situation.
6. Peer-tutor programs could occur in the mainstreamed classrooms. The peers could be given some responsibility for the management of instruction for their handicapped peers.
7. Increased attention should be given to the development of post secondary and extended secondary programs to allow students to attain needed academic and vocational skills.

### Summary

While mildly handicapped adolescents share a number of common behavioral and learning characteristics they vary significantly in their instructional needs. In comparing the developmental history of programs for the mildly mentally retarded and learning disabled adolescent, the authors offer the observation that there is a trend toward application of functional oriented curriculum for both groups. The position is expressed that an applied approach is acceptable for some mildly handicapped youth, but that there is a significant number who as adolescents could still profit from intense remediation. The rationale for this argument stems from the perspective that throughout their educational histories many if not most mildly handicapped students

have not been subjected to intense instruction although the recipient of special educational services. Therefore, they have attained their current level of functioning without a major investment of learning effort and given exposure to intense instruction may be responsive. The necessity to assess the functional performance of the mildly handicapped adolescent from the perspective of their educational histories is emphasized. The authors caution those responsible for the education of the mildly handicapped adolescent not to be too quick in moving to an application oriented curriculum and to recognize that continuing the education of the mildly handicapped adolescent into young adulthood may not only be desirable but essential.

## References

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