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The Science of Reading and Students with Complex Communication Needs

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Introduction: Literacy is one of the most important skills for improving independence, functioning, access to other learning, and life outcomes for students with extensive support needs (ESN). In this presentation, we will share the findings of research examining the quality of communication and literacy goals in the individualized educational programs (IEPs) of 37 elementary students with ESN who also had complex communication needs (CCN). This research is important because prior research shows that literacy instruction varies across students with ESN, ranging from an exposure only approach to a fully integrated, comprehensive approach (Ruppar et al., 2015). In present practice, many students with ESN do not have the opportunities, instruction, and support they need to reach their full potential in learning to read, write, access text and communicate their ideas. High-quality IEP planning for language and literacy learnings can help shift practice away from a heavy reliance of worksheets and one-on-one instruction in a separate classroom (Ruppar et al., 2015) to more inclusive, comprehensive, and evidence-based literacy instruction that improves outcomes for students with extensive support needs. Many students with autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and other developmental disabilities who have ESN also have CCN. These students are unable to use natural speech to meet their daily communication needs and benefit from alternative augmentative communication (AAC), which can include gestures, manual signs, picture symbols, and speech-generating devices. High-quality literacy instruction is particularly important for these students because of the interconnectedness of language and literacy, and the ways that literacy skills can open new doors for communication and functioning (Erickson, 2017). High quality IEP goals can be the blueprint to ensure students with complex communication needs receive evidence-based literacy instruction that leads to desired outcomes.

Methods: This descriptive study involved content analysis of 37 Individualized Educational Programs of elementary students with CCN to explore issues related to IEP quality around language and literacy development. Our primary research questions addressed the quality of IEPs as it related to: (a) meeting requirements outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), (b) addressing critical components of high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction based on the science of reading and literacy research focused on students with extensive support needs (ESN), and (c) involving collaboration across the school team and with families in the development and support of language and literacy. Inclusion criteria required families had to have a child with a disability who: (a) received special education services in K-4th grade in a public school and (b) had CCN. IEPs were collected for the larger study and then used for secondary analysis in this research related to IEP quality. Quality related to IDEA was addressed by the IEP Evaluation Form, a tool with tested reliability (Ruble et al., 2010). To examine whether IEPs addressed critical components of high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction for students with ESN, we first used IEP data to determine a student's reader status as emergent (i.e., developing skills prior to reading like print concepts, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge) or as early conventional (i.e., had foundational concepts of print and some alphabet knowledge and were learning to read and write using the reading "code"). We then developed a literacy evaluation tool based on the science of reading (Report of the National Early Reading Panel, 2008; Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000; Scarborough, 2001) and research on comprehensive literacy instruction for students with ESN (e.g., Erickson, 2017). To determine reliability of coding for both aspects of quality, a second independent research team member coded 33% of IEPs (n = 13), and inter-rater reliability was calculated using point-by-point agreement. Finally, qualitative content analysis was used to address evidence of collaboration in the IEPs. Two team members used inductive analysis with multiple rounds of coding to search for evidence of collaboration and to describe the nature of it.

Results: Our findings are underway and will focus on the quality of IEPs for students with complex communication needs in terms of overall quality and specific to (a) the intertwining of language and literacy to build students' comprehensive literacy skills and (b) utilizing a collaborative approach. We will highlight both strengths and areas of need as it relates to IEP quality in each of these areas for students with complex communication needs.

Discussion: These findings are significant because they address the research to practice gap regarding the nature of literacy development in children with complex communication needs, offering a pathway for improving literacy outcomes and general education access for this important group of students. More specific implications and directions for future research will be defined when data analysis is complete.

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