USING RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DIVERSE NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATION SETTINGS

ERICA S. LEMBKE AND MELISSA STORMONT

University of Missouri

The purposes of this article are to underscore the importance of using research-based practices to support the needs of all learners in general education settings and to provide teachers with strategies for obtaining research-based practices. Students with diverse learning needs require that teachers utilize more effective and efficient practices in their teaching given that many are already behind academically, socially, or both. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

As new reform movements and legislation are introduced, educators and administrators often struggle to determine how to continue to meet the needs of all students. Perhaps at no other time have school personnel been under as much pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs with respect to student performance. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), all students must meet established standards in academic areas. In addition to the challenges of meeting required performance “outcomes,” educational professionals also must be prepared to meet the needs of increasing numbers of students with diverse backgrounds. For example, the majority of students with disabilities are now integrated into the general education classroom for a significant portion of the school day (Mercer & Mercer, 2005). Furthermore, students without identified disabilities who have educational support needs also are increasing in general education (Stormont, Espinosa, Knipping, & McCathren, 2003). As a result, general educators need to increase their ability to teach a more diverse group of students. The purpose of this article is to address how general educators can meet the needs of more students by identifying and implementing practices that are supported by research.

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

Research-based practices can be defined as those strategies, interventions, programs, or curricula that are supported by rigorous substantiation of effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Educational practices that are research-based, evidence-based, promising, or proven are those that have been demonstrated to be effective for a group of students as compared to a group of students who did not get the intervention. Research-based practices have been examined in a variety in settings, replicated over time, and utilized with a variety of learners, which increases the generalizability of the practice. For example, curriculum-based measurement (Deno, 1985) is a progress-monitoring technique that has been utilized with students in all grades in a variety of subjects and with students of varying ability levels. Results of the use of curriculum-based measurement with respect to student achievement have been positive, and these results have been replicated over time. Therefore, teachers can have confidence that their students’ performance will improve using curriculum-based measurement because it is research based.

When teaching practices are examined using well-defined methodology and when the results of these studies are published in journals that have rigorous review standards, educators can have greater assurance that the strategies might work with their students. Research-based practices might be contrasted to those practices educators use that are based on instinct, hearsay, or teacher, parent, or Internet recommendation, and have not been examined using any type of formal
methodology. In psychology and education, professionals are inundated with practices that are based on the testimonials of others (Stanovich, 2001). The power of such testimonials is often overwhelming, and teachers may use practices based on such stories without considering the research base for such practices. As a result, fads and ineffective practices are prevalent in education (Meese, 2001). Teachers need to use the most effective practices available, especially for students who are already behind academically or socially.

Furthermore, there are several advantages to using research-based practices. Teachers in general education classrooms do not have a lot of extra time to implement interventions that have not been empirically tested, especially when considering the other time demands they face each day (i.e., meetings, planning, and management). In addition, when research-based practices are utilized, there are increased opportunities for greater student success in shorter periods of time. Overall, when teachers are using research- or evidence-based practices, they are using their time wisely and students are more likely to be successful; however, one barrier to utilizing more research-based practices is lack of access or information regarding how to identify a research-based practice.

**Identifying Research-Based Practices**

One of the best places to start when looking for proven practices is to read articles that are published in peer-reviewed journals. Journals that utilize a peer-review process have editorial boards that include researchers with expertise in specific areas. As a result, research methodology and practice recommendations undergo a level of public scrutiny (Stanovich, 2001). Thus, educators can have greater assurance about the quality of information obtained through a peer-reviewed source (Stanovich, 2001). Articles in peer-reviewed journals differ from popular press magazines, in which authors may write based solely on their opinions and articles may be invited or approved by a single editor. Examples of some peer-reviewed journals where educators could locate research-based practices for students with disabilities or students who are at-risk include *Behavioral Disorders, Exceptional Children, Psychology in the Schools, the Journal of Behavioral Education, the Journal of Learning Disabilities, and the Journal of Special Education*. Some of these journals can be accessed online or in local city or university libraries. Other peer-reviewed, more “practitioner friendly,” and strategy-based journals that include research support for recommended strategies include *Teaching Exceptional Children* and *Intervention in School and Clinic*. On some library search engines, it is possible to check a box to restrict a search to articles in peer-reviewed journals.

Some federally funded centers also summarize research to inform practice. One example is the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (http://www.cast.org/ncac/), which disseminates information on how students with diverse learning needs can gain greater access to the general curriculum. Consulting administrators, reading specialists, special educators, school psychologists, and school counselors is another way for general educators to potentially identify effective practices. Overall, use of research-based practices in schools could be increased through seminars and workshops, compiling research materials, and consulting with experts in specific areas.

**Summary**

For students who are already struggling in school, the precision of instruction should not be compromised by using practices that are not supported or have had a negative impact on student achievement. As a result, research-based practices can and should be utilized at every level of education for all students, and especially for those who are struggling. This special issue includes examples of how research can inform educational practices and how systematic implementation of research-based practices can be established.
References

National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum. http://www.cast.org/ncac/