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An In-depth Analysis of Topics in Deaf Education in Early Childhood Education

Raschelle Neild, Patrick Graham, & Katie Taylor

Abstract

Despite federal mandates of the services and inclusion of students who are deaf and hard of hearing in early childhood there is more discussion and research to be done to support educators and students who are deaf and hard of hearing and their families that they serve in early education. This article is an overview of a collection of eight articles housed within the special issue covering a range of topics related to critical issues in deaf education and early childhood education. These include: literacy and language development; developing and implementing universal design for learning; autonomy, self-advocacy, and self-determination skills; curriculum concepts, theories and philosophies; and assessment of students who are deaf with additional disabilities. The article employs existing research and practices in deaf education, such as newborn hearing screening and language deprivation related to deaf education practices. The authors acknowledge the need for further discussion and research in all areas; however, note this special issue is progress towards filling in gaps in current practices in deaf education within early childhood education.

Keywords: *deaf, early education, universal design, language development*

Introduction

Most infants and young hearing children learn language, literacy, social-emotional, and communication skills through incidental opportunities and experiences at home and early childhood sites. These experiences include watching television, helping a family member bake a cake, singing songs, or playing a video game. For deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) children, these learning opportunities and experiences must be direct, intentional, and accessible. Over time, several special education laws (IDEA, 2004) have incorporated these concepts for younger children and recognize the importance of incidental learning and play. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that preschool children with disabilities receive educational services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and have access to the general education curriculum (Barton & Smith, 2015). Part C of IDEA (2004) explains that states would be supported throughout the development of early intervention planning for infants and toddlers and their families (Odom, Bysse, & Soukakou, 2011). While early childhood and disability advocates have been working for over 50 years to ensure children with disabilities have access to the services they need, this includes DHH children. Johnson, Liddell, and Erting (1989) stated that all Deaf children should have access to high-quality experiences. Despite the special education mandates' efforts, DHH infants through preschool still encounter significant barriers (Fitzpatrick & Theoharis, 2014) in their incidental learning experiences. Currently, there needs to be more research in the area of deaf education early childhood education (ECE) related curriculum, strategies, activities, materials, assessment, and interactions with deaf role models (Golos, Moses, Roemen, & Gregan, 2018).

The early years are critical for all children's long-term achievement, especially young children with disabilities and their families (Bruder, 2010). While there has been extensive research on the education of DHH (Herring & Woolsey, 2020; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006; Prinz & Strong, 1998; Johnson, 1989), there still is not enough

research on early childhood deaf education. Examples of ECE deaf education related research include: Mitchiner, Batamula, and Kite's (2018) research on the Reggio Emilia approach and Graham and Shuler-Krause's (2019) research on language assessments. One well-known article is Shantie and Hoffmeister's (2000) regarding preschool education and the hiring of deaf teachers. Though there is little research in this area, it is still evident how this research has impacted DHH children's academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, communication and language, and behavior (Golos, Moses, Roemen, & Gregan, 2018). It reinforces the significance of increasing awareness of the need to conduct rigorous research in this area, maintaining the understanding of the need and importance of early environments and (ECE). The articles in this special issue contribute to the gaps in the literature and research.

This article provides an overview and introduction to the Special Issue: Deaf Education within Early Childhood Education (ECE). This issue covers a broad range of topics with significant depth; however, it recognizes the importance of continued dialog among all stakeholders to support the needs of DHH birth through early childhood across all domains. In addition, while there were several topics covered in-depth in this special issue, there continue to be many other areas related to deaf education within ECE that continue to need to be researched and discussed.

Overview of the Articles

Within this issue, eight articles address the needs of DHH children, families, and professionals. The first article covers imperative topics related to serving DHH birth to three, ensuring their families' needs are being met by professionals prepared to guide them on their journey (Sass-Lehrer, Crace, & Neild, 2020). In "ASL Rhyme, Rhythm and Phonological Awareness for Deaf Children," Holcomb (2020) delves into the process of how young deaf children acquire phonological awareness, especially in the classroom. Language is not only a critical component of ECE but is significant to all areas of age

appropriate cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional development (Holcomb, 2020). Her study examines how teachers can work with young students to increase linguistic awareness and gain ownership of their linguistic process.

The next two articles focus on broader concepts within ECE and then narrow the focus to explicitly looking at the concepts with DHH children. The first article provides information about universal design for learning (UDL), specifically in early childhood environments. This article discusses the impact of the implications of UDL for DHH children focusing on creating a more inclusive educational environment for all children with and without disabilities (Taylor, Neild, & Fitzpatrick, 2020). Following that, "Will You Help Me with my Homework; An Example of Visual Methodologies in Research with (deaf) Children," (Hensley 2020) encourages the concept of ownership and pride in the work process. The concept of agency in one's learning is paramount and how deaf children at early ages can be taught to depend on their own autonomy. The concepts of autonomy, self-advocacy, and self-determination should begin to be addressed by educators and families in the early years (Algozzine, Browder, & Karvoien, 2001).

There are three articles focused on curriculum concepts, strategies, and philosophies. The first article in this series, "The Importance of Early Number Concepts for Learning Mathematics in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children," focuses on how it is critical for DHH children to have a strong foundation in language when it comes to numeracy and concepts of mathematics (Langdon, Coppola, & Kurz, 2020). In the next article in this series, "Educational Strategies for Deaf Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)," authors Shield, Graham, and Neild provide strategies that can support language development for educational achievement. This article is a combination of analysis and application, which will support educators when they have students on the autism spectrum. The third article is focused on conducting project-based learning with DHH children. "Can a Snowball Have More Than Three Snowballs," by Batamura, Mitchener, and Kite shares how

project-based learning can have beneficial outcomes for DHH early childhood education. This project is one of two known studies that examine the benefits of a project-based approach with DHH children.

The special issue concludes with an article that discusses the literature on the assessments of common co-occurring disabilities in young children, including intellectual disability, specific learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and emotional and behavioral disorders (Dale & Neild, 2020). Educational assessments are essential during the early childhood years. They are needed to monitor progress, develop educational programs, and identify children for special education services (Pizzo & Chilvers, 2019). The lack of qualified individuals to administer the assessments and the lack of appropriate assessment information can cause DHH children to receive early intervention services that are not meeting their needs for a variety of reasons (Graham & Shuler-Kraus, 2019).

Background Information

Each of the articles within the Special Issue: Deaf Education within Early Childhood Education (ECE) provides essential background information about the history, philosophies, and important concepts of providing services to young children in early childhood environments who are DHH. These topics include newborn hearing screenings and language deprivation related to the articles within the special issue.

Newborn Hearing Screening. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommended hearing screenings for all newborns before being discharged from the hospital in 1993. All 50 states and the territories have currently created their own position statement regarding Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) (Eiten & Simmons, 2016). Many of the states have chosen to follow the statement of the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing (JCIH) (2007). The JCIH recommended that all infants receive a hearing screening before one month of age. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013) reported

there had been a success with the initial infants screened at one month of age (97.9% of all infants); however, there has been less success with those infants who did not pass the newborn screening completing the recommended follow-up test (76.1% completed of those who did not pass). Despite the improvements newborn hearing screenings have made in earlier diagnosis, for many infants and their families, numerous challenges remain (Eilen & Simmons, 2016). Before delving into professional competencies for providers who work with young children who are DHH and their families, Sass-Lehrer, Crace, and Neild describe the importance of newborn hearing screening, the challenges, and the initial reactions of the families. Early identification for DHH children is a critical first step to ensuring optimal outcomes (Sass-Lehrer, Crace, & Neild, 2020).

Language Deprivation. Statistics have indicated that most DHH children are born to hearing parents (more than 90%) (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). With the best intentions, they are often overwhelmed with all of the information provided to them when they find out that their child is DHH (Sass-Leher, Crace, & Neild, 2020; Batamula, Mitchener, & Kite, 2020). Early on, they learn they do not have all of the information and resources needed to provide a language-rich environment that is accessible to all information from birth (Lederberg, Shick, & Spencer, 2013). Due to these variables and others, language deprivation is a significant problem for DHH children (Hall, Hall, & Spencer, 2019). Even when a family decides to learn sign language and incorporate it into the home environment, the DHH child misses out on significant language learning opportunities, incidental learning within the environment, and vocabulary experiences (Batamula, Mitchener, & Kite, 2020). Additionally, Holcomb's article encourages readers to understand the importance of phonology in sign language. Being exposed to ASL phonology in the early years provides the child with language learning (Andrews & Baker, 2019)

Curriculum for DHH. Most early childhood specialists would agree that a well-designed curriculum ensures an environment where learning is evident. These same specialists do not have one clear

definition of the *curriculum* (Carotta, 2016). Many experts agree it should guide to instruction, support a caring learning environment, contain scope and sequence of content, include interesting and meaningful activities, use strategies to support access to instruction, and incorporate engagement of ongoing assessment to determine effectiveness and progress (DEC, 2007). The incorporation of these numerous components into an early childhood curriculum is complex. Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, and Pretti-Frontezak (2005), proposed the term curriculum framework to represent the concept that a curriculum is not a single element, resource, or feature. However, it is a way of organizing many components and processes involved when developing learning experiences and opportunities for young children in a variety of environments. Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, and Pretti-Frontezak recognize that all of their environments are learning environments for young children, and these environments include coexistence with adults. Each environment needs to be activated, assessed, and aligned to the child's needs, developmental level, and interest by the family member, educator, or service provider. Early childhood educators should be versed in foundational concepts of development, learning, curriculum, and theories as they collaborate with families.

Evidence-based research lacks the best pedagogical strategies and methodologies to be used with DHH children during the early childhood years (Carotta, 2016). While the research is scarce in DHH literature, there is a wealth of early childhood literature that can be implemented with this specific group of children (Carotta, 2016). Theorists and researchers have long observed, analyzed, and engaged in multiple dialogues about the nature of childhood development. In fact, these theories (e.g., Montessori, Lock, Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Reggio Emilia) can be seen in early educational settings that support all children's learning needs, including DHH children.

Conclusion

EC environments that align with a cultural perspective can provide educators an environment and experiences that promote

necessary language and skills across all domains at the child's developmental levels (Golos, Moses, Roeman & Gregan, 2018). This special issue helps bring together critical topics in deaf education ECE to encourage dialog about the current state and future of the field. Teachers need more exposure to different instructional methods, assessment strategies, and evaluation data to assist students who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families to succeed in mainstream environments. This special edition adds to the body of research in early childhood deaf education, especially in the application of skills. Even with the federal mandates of the IDEA, there continue to be gaps in the knowledge and skills of educators of DHH students in early education in language development, implementation of curriculum, and inclusion. There is a need for research and discussion on deaf education topics within early childhood education.

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