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Using Read-Alouds of Grade-Level Social Studies Text and Systematic Prompting to Promote Comprehension for Students with Severe Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Learning social studies content is important for *all* students, including those with severe disabilities. However, there is a limited amount of research that specifically examines teaching social studies to this population of students. Therefore, educators must look to research-based practices in other academic areas (e.g., English language arts) to determine new strategies to teach this important content. Using a multiple probe across participants design, three fifth-grade students with severe disabilities were taught to answer comprehension questions during read-alouds of social studies text using a modified system of least prompts and graphic organizer. Findings indicate all students improved on the correct number of comprehension questions answered independently. Implications for practice and ideas for future research to teach social studies to students with severe disabilities are discussed.

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In 1975, Public Law 94–142, (now the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act \[IDEA\], 2004](#)), became the first law passed guaranteeing the right of all students to receive a public education ([Browder & Spooner, 2011](#)). This marked the first time most students with severe disabilities were promised the chance to attend public school ([Brown, McDonnell, & Snell, 2016](#)). The term *severe disabilities* is often used in reference to individuals who have moderate to severe intellectual disability. Individuals with severe disabilities have an intellectual disability (IQ of 55 or below) and also may have another disability such as autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, or hearing impairment ([Browder & Spooner, 2011](#)). Students with severe disabilities have complex needs in areas of adaptive behavior that include: (a) conceptual skills (e.g., literacy and mathematics); (b) social skills (e.g., interpersonal skills, social problem solving, ability to follow rules); and (c) practical skills (e.g., activities of daily living, occupational skills, safety; [AAIDD, 2013](#)). Students with severe disabilities are a widely heterogeneous group ([Brown et al., 2016](#)).

There has been an evolution of curricular expectations for students with severe disabilities over the last 40 years. When the first public school programs were developed for students with severe disabilities in the 1970s, educators adapted early childhood or infant curricula and focused educational planning around a student's "mental age." A focus on functional life skills (e.g., making purchases) prevailed in the 1980s. The 1990s saw a continued focus on functional skills combined with self-determination (e.g., goal setting and choice making) and social inclusion ([Browder & Spooner, 2011](#)). Academic skills taught were those seen to have an immediate effect on a student's ability to participate successfully in home, community,

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and school settings (e.g., sight words, money, time; Brown et al., 2016). Following the 1997 amendments to IDEA, the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, and the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, educators must ensure students with severe disabilities have access to and make progress in the general curriculum, as well as be assessed on grade-level academic standards (Copeland & Cosby, 2008). The federal mandates to include students with severe disabilities in state assessments in academic areas have compelled teachers to provide academic instruction and researchers to support this instruction by identifying evidence-based practices (Ahlgrim-Delzell & Rivera, 2015). Since the 2000s, researchers have established that students with severe disabilities can learn much more grade-level academic content than was previously thought possible (Browder & Spooner, 2014). However, a majority of this research focuses on English language arts, mathematics, and science, with very little emphasis on the content area of social studies.

Learning social studies content is important for all students, including those with severe disabilities. Prominent researchers in the area of academic instruction for students with severe disabilities have suggested the main reasons to provide social studies instruction for this population of students is students will be able to learn about their history, government, and the world; students may increase self-awareness about their cultural backgrounds and gain respect for other cultures; and students may also gain self-advocacy skills for participating in government processes (Browder & Spooner, 2011). However, only two studies have specifically examined teaching social studies content to students with severe disabilities. Schenning, Knight, and Spooner (2013) taught social studies content (economics, geographic relationships, historical perspectives, government and active citizenship) to middle school students with severe disabilities using a structured inquiry process (i.e., a script and task analysis). The teacher used a model-lead-test procedure to help the students identify historical problems and solutions and place the answer in a graphic organizer. When structured inquiry using the model-lead-test procedure and the graphic organizer was introduced, all three students improved their comprehension of social studies content. Students were able to generalize their problem-solving skills to real-world situations and maintained the skills over time.

Wood, Browder, and Flynn (2015) taught fifth-grade students with severe disabilities to generate and answer comprehension questions relating to fifth-grade social studies content in a special education resource setting. The students were taught using a modified system of least prompts and a WH question word (i.e., who, what, where, when) graphic organizer. All three students improved the number of questions generated and answered accurately from baseline to intervention. Furthermore, the question generating and answering skills carried over to whole-group instruction in the general education classroom.

Since social studies is the least understood area in the research of teaching academics to students with severe disabilities, educators must look to research-based practices in other academic content areas (e.g., English language arts) to determine new strategies to teach this content (Browder & Spooner, 2011). Hudson and Test (2011) reviewed six studies to determine the level of evidence for using interactive read-alouds (also called shared stories) to teach grade-level literacy comprehension to students with severe disabilities. Read-alouds involve reading a story aloud to a student and providing support so the student can interact with the story using repeated story lines, picture symbols paired with words, attention getters, repeated readings, and summarized text (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007). Hudson and Test (2011) found a moderate level of evidence for using read-alouds to promote literacy skills of students with severe disabilities.

Learning to comprehend text is a critical skill and without it, students are unable to understand the meaning of what they read or hear (Wood et al., 2015). Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, and Spooner (2009) used the system of least prompts (i.e., providing increasingly intrusive levels of prompts in a set hierarchy following an incorrect response until the student provides the correct answer) to teach two elementary school students with severe disabilities and a visual impairment to answer comprehension questions after listening to a read-aloud. Both students increased the number of comprehension questions answered correctly across multiple books and one student was able to generalize responses and maintain results. Browder, Hudson, and Wood (2013) used a modified system of least prompts to teach three middle school students with severe disabilities to comprehend chapter summaries of grade-level novels adapted for a beginning reading level. In addition, a time delay procedure with a graphic organizer was used to teach “Wh” question word definitions. All three students increased their accuracy for answering comprehension questions and pairing “Wh” words and definitions. Mims, Hudson, and Browder (2012) taught four middle school students with severe disabilities and autism to answer comprehension questions during read-alouds of adapted grade-level biographies (e.g., Harriet Tubman, John Brown). The researchers used the system of least prompts modified by inserting a rule for answer “Wh” questions (e.g., “Who—Listen for a name.”) and referring to a graphic organizer along with reading sections of the text again. All four students increased the number of comprehension questions answered correctly after intervention and were able to maintain the skill two weeks after intervention. Furthermore, three students were able to generalize skills to new biographies.

The use of read-alouds, the system of least prompts, and graphic organizers are research-based practices identified to teach academic content to students with severe disabilities and can be applied to teach social studies content to this population of students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a modified system of least prompts with a graphic organizer used during read-alouds of an adapted grade-level nonfiction text on the ability of elementary school students with severe disabilities to answer comprehension questions related to the branches of government. We employed a single case research design (SCRD) that is commonly used for demonstrating intervention effectiveness with individuals with severe disabilities. Though SCRDs generally involve a small number of participants and require further replication to enhance external validity, they do offer researchers a method of evaluation with strong internal validity that can be used for small samples of participants with unique characteristics (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 1999).

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