

NEWS RELEASE

Media Contacts: Dr. Jason Osborne, 919/515-1714 or jason_osborne@ncsu.edu
Anna Turnage, College of Education, 919/513-0034 or
anna_turnage@ncsu.edu

Dec. 14, 2004

Educational Psychology Students Test Jigsaw Method to Help Integrate Autistic Children into the Classroom

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Educational psychology students at North Carolina State University's College of Education took a teaching technique designed to integrate diverse students into the classroom and applied it in a new way to test whether it would help autistic children better integrate into mainstream classrooms.

Dr. Jason Osborne's Educational Psychology 304 class developed a curriculum using the jigsaw learning technique and applied the curriculum in a class at Fred Olds Elementary School in Raleigh. The goal was to find out whether the system would better integrate mainstreamed autistic students into the class learning process.

"One of the biggest hurdles is that these children are often academically on the same level or more advanced than their peers but have severe social and communication delays," said Lauren Pierce, a first-year doctoral student and teaching assistant leading the project. "So we had the idea of using jigsaw learning as a way of socially including these children as well."

The jigsaw classroom was first introduced in 1971 in Austin, Texas, as a way to help integrate students in schools that recently had been desegregated. Like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece, or each student's part, is essential for the completion and full understanding of the final product. If each student's part is essential, then each student is essential.

"This gives each child a sense of individualization, that they're actually contributing something to the group," Pierce says. "And by working in a smaller group it's easier for an autistic child to participate because he or she doesn't have to struggle with such a large group. And by having the children work one-on-one, it reduces the social isolation that goes along with autism."

With more and more autistic children being integrated into the classroom, it's important to look for new ways to make the transition easier for all the children in the class, she says.

- more -

“From the teachers that I know who teach elementary school, there’s an increasing chance that they will have an autistic child in their classroom, and unfortunately along with that there’s a lack of education for the teachers on how to work with these children,” Pierce said. “There are a lot of behavioral problems and a lot of social problems and communication delays that accompany autism. Coming up with new ways to deal with these problems can help the classroom as a whole.”

Cortney McKnight, a teacher at Fred Olds Elementary, said she felt the technique was helpful to the autistic child in her class, as well as the other students.

“The autistic child did very well with this activity,” McKnight said. “She really enjoyed being involved in hands-on projects. The jigsaw learning approach was particularly helpful by exposing her to more social interactions with her classmates and giving her concrete objectives to complete in one lesson.”

Amerique Sileno, one of the EDP 304 students involved in planning the curriculum, said the other children also responded well to the technique.

“It gave the kids a better understanding of what it’s like to work with the autistic student, and they began to feel more comfortable with her,” Sileno said. “It allows her to be one-on-one with the other kids, who take on a big brother or big sister role, taking her by the hand and walking her through the task.”

Osborne and Pierce say they want to continue studying how this technique can help integrate autistic children. By exposing his students to the possibilities, Osborne hopes they will continue to implement it in classrooms with autistic children when the opportunity arises.

“This is something that in the broader picture can help teachers come to grips with having mainstreamed children in their classroom,” Osborne said. “The exciting thing about this project is that we have 180 potential teachers who have been exposed to the idea and may eventually take it out into the schools to see if it works. If we had infinite time and infinite resources we could take this to every school in the state and I think most teachers would latch onto it. Since we can’t do that, this is a very good way to start.”