

Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?”

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Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?” is a bridge to disseminate research into the classroom. A research informed instructor is an up-to-date instructor! In this feature, a research article from the Gerontology discipline of Family and Consumer Sciences is examined. A quick review of the article is followed by real and practical applications that can be incorporated into the classroom.

Article citation:

Berlau, D.J., Corrada, M.M., & Kawas, C. (2009). The prevalence of disability in the oldest-old is high and continues to increase with age: Findings from the 90+ study. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 24, 1217-1225.

Quick review of the research study:

This article presented findings on the growing numbers of disabled members of the oldest-old population (90+). Researchers sampled 697 participants from The 90+ study (a longitudinal study on residents of Leisure World in Southern California on aging and dementia). Their primary measurement, in line with definitions of disability, was Activities of Daily Living (ADL) difficulty and dependency. While there is disagreement on exact definitions of disability, general consensus is that a disability is present when a person has difficulty performing ADLs. The disagreement arises with discussions about much difficulty is required for a person to be “disabled”.

The measurements of disability (ADL difficulty and dependency) were created from information garnered from a questionnaire. ADL difficulty = difficulty with one or more ADL (feeding, dressing, bathing, toileting, transferring, and walking indoors). ADL dependency = needing help from another person to perform one or more ADL. Some respondents were categorized as having both ADL difficulty and dependency. Researchers used these two variables to look at effects of age, gender, education, and institutionalization status.

Results found high incidences of ADL difficulty and dependence. Mobility issues were the highest reported problem, though a minority were dependent for walking (possibly due to assistive devices). The ADL which caused the most dependency was bathing.

The 90+ group had a very high incidence of disability (perhaps not a surprise). Of the 90-94 age group, 71% had difficulty with one ADL. However, approximately, 82% of centenarians had difficulty with 5-6 ADLs, nearly 100% of centenarians had difficulty with one or more ADLs. In terms of ADL dependency, only 44% of the 90-94 age group were considered disabled. In general, women were more likely to have a disability than men. In this study, there was no relationship between education and disability (though other studies have reported a relationship).

Authors concluded by noting that the 10th decade of one's life, according to this study, may not be "golden". They discuss the need for critical health care and interventions, as possible (i.e. diet and exercise). They suggest a need for programs to address the oldest-old group to increase ADL functioning.

Practice or "So What!?"... how can I apply this in my classroom?:

With the ever-growing older adult population under constant discussion, it stands to reason that the oldest-old among that group may have particular characteristics that are of note to study and understand. While this study looked at the oldest-old population, the reality is that the disabled population is the largest minority group in the United States. This is largely because disability can affect any age, race, ethnic or gender group. Currently, while the numbers are difficult to gather, approximately 20% of the over 300 million citizens in the U.S. are disabled according to UN (2007) and Census estimates (2010).

Understanding this population is important to students who will be working for, caring for, and/or serving this population. It affects all aspects of the Family and Consumer Sciences discipline, without exception. Specific attention from health related fields is needed as the population ages and lives longer. Incorporating activities about a variety of disabilities into the classroom will generate empathy and a better understanding of the disabled population. Below are some activities that simulate disabilities which students will enjoy and relate to:

Inside the classroom in pairs or small groups:

- a) Simulate physical disability: Use crutches to walk around the classroom to see how easy or difficult it is. Try to go into a bathroom stall; how easy or difficult is it? How can they use this in their day-to-day life? How would they feel if they were in need of crutches?
- b) Simulate physical disability: Use a wheelchair (or rolling office chair if a wheelchair is not available) to go between desks and in and out of the classroom door. Can students open the door while being seated in the wheelchair? Is there space between desk rows for a wheelchair? Have them go into a bathroom stall. How easy or difficulty is it? Without the use of their legs, how would they transfer to a toilet seat?
- c) Simulate blindness or vision impairment: Put a thin layer of petroleum jelly on a pair of goggles or sun glasses. Try to read a label or a book. Can students make out the letters? Ask them to discuss how this affects people with vision issues. How could they assist in some way?
- d) Simulate hearing impairment: Have students put earplugs in their ears and have a conversation with each other. How much of the conversation can they repeat back? How did they feel not being able to understand what was being said to them?
- e) Simulate arthritis or physical impairment: Have students put on gardening gloves and try to open their wallets or take out change from a change purse. Can they count the change? Have them put change on table or desk. Can they

pick it up? What could they do in their lives to make it easier for people who have a hard time with their hands?

- f) Simulate arthritis or physical impairment: Have students put on gardening gloves and try to open a child resistant pill bottle cap. Can they do it? Have them discuss the need for pill bottles that are not child resistant.

Outside the classroom, in pairs:

- a) Simulate blindness: take turns blindfolding each other and attempt to eat a meal without vision. Have your partner tell you if you exhibited good table manners.
- b) Simulate blindness or vision impairment: Walk across campus or in a mall with your partner while wearing blacked out glasses. See how it feels to move across multiple surfaces, etc.
- c) Simulate physical disability: Use crutches to go to a mall. Keep one foot elevated. How difficult or easy is it to walk using crutches? This exercise can also be repeated using a wheelchair.

The above exercises are just a few examples of activities that can be easily incorporated into a variety of classroom settings. They provide a “peek” into the world of a disabled person. Ask students for their ideas about other disabilities that can be done in the classroom. They might think of some good projects. Another approach to understanding disability is to have students interview a person with a disability to develop a better understanding of that disability. Any of the above activities could be followed up with a paper to be turned in and graded.

Reflections on this topic are important because it is highly likely the students know someone personally with a disability. Furthermore, it is likely that throughout their lifetime, a temporary or permanent disability will be experienced.

REFERENCES

United Nation’s Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2007).
www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150

U.S. & World Population Clocks. (2010). www.census.gov/main/www/popclock/html.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)
www.disability.gov%20

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