Supports for Success: Moderate to Severe Autism and Distance Learning

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The Problem

To engage during virtual instructional time, students with moderate to severe autism are struggling now more than ever. They are particularly struggling to maintain healthy behaviors, receive meaningful instruction, and continue to make significant progress toward their functional goals, most of which is happening due to a lack of engagement during “distance learning”. Students with moderate to severe autism are exhibiting academic and functional plateaus or overall regression due to Covid-19 school closures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover which evidence-based practices best assist students with moderate to severe autism and support meaningful learning in an online setting. Without a clear decision on when classrooms will be completely reopened and instruction forced to be held virtually, it is imperative to understand which supports are necessary to facilitate meaningful learning to students with moderate to severe autism.

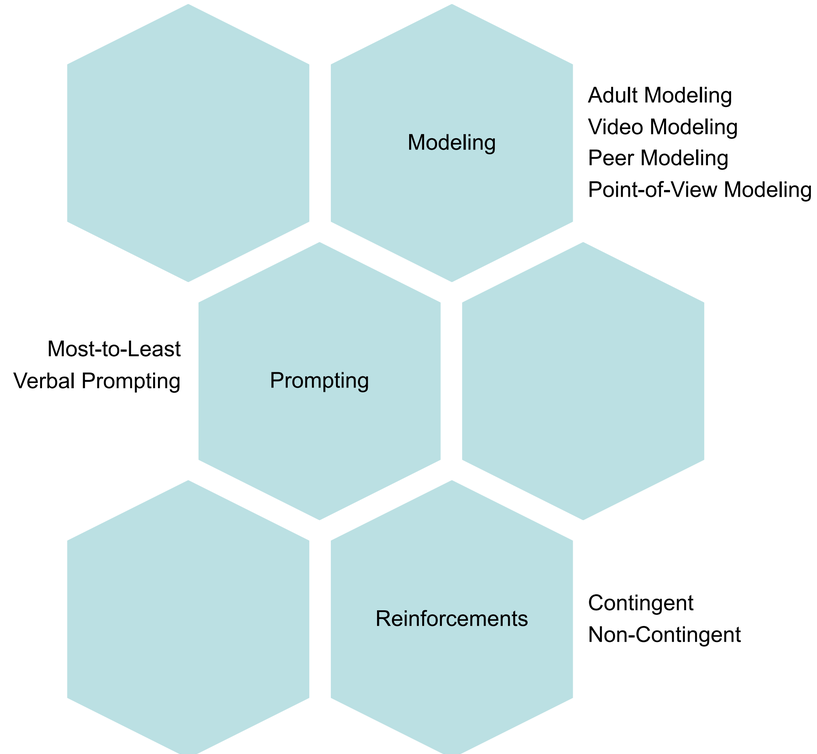
Methodology

This qualitative study aims to reveal what evidence-based practices best assist students with moderate to severe autism. Results can answer the question of which evidence-based practices can be used to best support meaningful learning in an online setting. Five moderate to severe special education teachers from a district located in Southern California participated in this study. Each participant was given twelve survey questions about their use of modeling, prompting, and reinforcements and experiences of each while in an online platform. This survey was provided by email to ensure Covid-19 safety protocols were held. Data collected will be analyzed using inductive analysis. This system will identify different themes and provide a structure in which like ideas and evidence can be gathered together.

Results

Participants provided their responses virtually and anonymously. 100% of participants reported that they utilized modeling, prompting and reinforcements in their virtual classrooms.

- The most effective modeling strategy was Adult-Modeling (explicit teaching), which was found to also benefit teaching staff and parents.
- The most effective use of prompting was verbal prompting, but this method was contingent on the student and their emotional state.
- All participants agreed that non-contingent reinforcements were the most challenging method of support, but overall the most effective for their students with autism.



Implications

The implications of this study can lead educators and educating staff to understand how to best support students with moderate to severe autism in an online setting, especially during distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study can also bring more light to how each evidence-based practice can be utilized in a classroom setting to support each individual student with autism. By breaking down what each evidence-based practice entails and how students respond, educators can better individualize material for meaningful learning.