

Lauren 00:12

Welcome to our LDA month mini-series of The LDA Podcast, where we're bringing you conversations about support, education and advocacy, LDA's main missions. Today we're talking to Dr. Vincent Alfonso about science-based interventions and practices for students with LD, the science to practice gap, and recommendations for schools during the pandemic.

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 00:35

I'm Vincent C. Alfonso, I am a professor in the School of Education at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. Recently, I completed an interim deanship one year at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology at Yeshiva University and I'm the former Dean of Education at Gonzaga University. I also serve on the Learning Disabilities Association of America board. And delighted to be here today to provide some information on this podcast.

Lauren 01:11

Thank you. So this is the Education Week of Learning Disabilities Awareness Month, and so we were going to cover some of the science based practices in education. So my first question is, what is the importance of a science based intervention for students with learning disabilities?

01:27

Great question and also somewhat difficult to answer, but I'm going to do my best. Science-based interventions or SPIs, for students with learning disabilities are very important, as our SPI is for other developmental disabilities and disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety disorder, and depression. We know the most about the efficacy of basic reading SPIs, as reading disability or dyslexia, is the most frequently classified learning disability, and the most studied. Phonological processing, phonemic awareness, and orthographic processing are some of the skills that can be taught. And there are several good to excellent remedial programs for young students with reading disabilities or difficulties. When we move beyond basic reading, however, to reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing, there aren't many SPIs, especially for students in middle school and high school. We simply do not have many efficacious interventions for these areas. Even though we are making advances in the science of instruction for reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing, I believe as a former associate dean and dean of two schools of education that when we prepare general education and special education teachers in the science of reading, writing, and math, we will have fewer students exhibiting learning difficulties that will give teachers more time to intervene with those students who are struggling academically. One website to search for SPIs is the What Works Clearinghouse that reviews the existing research on different programs, products, practices, and policies in education. Unfortunately, there are increasing numbers of researchers and practitioners who believe that doing nothing for students may be better than trying yet to be SPIs, or they engage in hyper criticism of the interventions we have. In other words, until there was ample evidence they promulgated that it is better to do nothing or to have a glass half empty attitude. In addition, these professionals rarely, if ever, offer anything useful for students, teachers, or parents. I have a brief true story that I'd like to tell here. And it's a little bit self disclosure and makes my point a little bit better about helping students and families. So I was doing a presentation many years ago at a national conference. And my presentation was primarily geared on the topic or towards the topic of autism and interventions for autism. And one of my sources was a book on pseudoscience and there was a chapter in there on

treatments for autism. And one of the treatments that the editors discussed or the authors discussed, was something called dolphin-assisted therapy. And this was taking place, at least at that time, in Florida, and families were paying a lot of money to travel to Florida and stay in hotels, and to engage in this dolphin-assisted therapy. And, you know, being a native New Yorker, a Brooklyn kid, I sarcastically scoffed at the idea of dolphin-assisted therapy. And someone in the audience, one of the participants raised his hand, and, and said, you know, that it may be true that dolphin-assisted therapy has no evidence, there's no research base, and so on, so forth. But parents and families are really struggling, and they are in dire need of whatever can help their child and their family. And even if dolphin-assisted therapy is a hoax, or is something that has no efficacy behind it, they are desperate for help and desperate for possible assistance. And while I still don't believe that dolphin-assisted therapy has a research base and evidence behind it, you know, that question or the statement by the person in the audience really made me think and made me really reflect on that parents and teachers, and the children themselves, are really looking for for help. And just because a particular intervention doesn't have a strong research base yet, or even a research base that doesn't support it, doesn't mean that we shouldn't try different interventions and really try and help as long as we try to keep in the front of our minds that we're not going to do any harm and that our intentions are genuine, that we really do want to help. I think because there are so many students struggling who need help ,need interventions, I think that the first level of intervention has to be research-based or scientifically-based interventions. But because we don't have many of them, and certainly, we don't have many for reading comprehension, math, and writing for middle school students and high school students, I do think that most of the time, it's better to do something than to do nothing.

Lauren 07:56

That's a very good point. So again, there's no one size fits all for each individual. It's very different can vary. But could you go over some of the science-based practices that are often used in either the classroom inside or outside to help students with LD?

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 08:16

Yes, I believe I have responded to this question, in part in my response to the first question, but let me add some more information here. It is true that there is no one size fits all when it comes to parent or educational practices for students with learning disabilities, I would say that there's no one size fits all for, for most individuals with a variety of difficulties or disabilities. You know, whether that's ADHD or as I said earlier, anxiety and depression, there's multimodal therapies or interventions. For students with learning disabilities, I would say that there are maybe three major generic practices or interventions, and I call these behavioral parent training, homeschool collaboration, and time on task. There's a large research base for these generic practices or interventions, indicating that they prepare students with disabilities to learn and give them the adult support they need to feel more positive about learning school in general, and their progress. When specific practices or interventions are needed, I recommend the What Works Clearinghouse as I stated earlier, reading the critical reviews of and satisfaction data on programs that are popular, because they tend to garner the most web traffic, and consulting with the students, teachers. In my opinion, nothing is more effective on an individual level for a student with a learning disability than a competent, caring, and encouraging teacher.

Lauren 10:17

So again, you said that there wasn't a whole lot of research on best practices for learning disabilities at this moment. It's mostly dyslexia focused for younger individuals. But for the research that does exist, is there any sort of gap in between those practices and what we see in classrooms?

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 10:38

Yes, there is. As I stated earlier, there is limited research on learning disabilities other than basic reading, or dyslexia. And far more research is conducted with younger students than older students. In general, the earlier we intervene, the more intense we intervene. And the longer we intervene, the better. We know this from the most successful education program in the United States called Head Start. Head Start began in the mid 60s, and continues today. And it is clearly the most successful education program that we've engaged in in this country. And we have a large database about the effectiveness of Head Start, which is really an early intervention program. So that's why I said the earlier we intervene, the more intense and the longer we intervene, the better. As with many skills, and academic skill, acquisition, and mastery, are more difficult as we age as we become older. So take for example, learning a second language. Most younger students learn a second language more efficiently than older students, or adults. I've been trying to learn other languages for years as an adult, but with great difficulty. However, I learned Spanish and Italian in my younger years, with less difficulty. So we have a lot of evidence, if you will, that the younger or earlier we learn basic skill acquisition, and if we encounter difficulties when we're learning those basic skills, when we intervene early, there's a greater probability of success. Speaking of adults, there are many adults with learning disabilities. And for a fair percentage of them, they were not classified, if you will, as having a learning disability in their K-12 school years. They continue to struggle as adults, and they face several challenges at work, at home, and other settings. I would say in the past 20 years, however, we are becoming better at meeting the needs of college students, college students with learning disabilities. This is a very positive change, and would be great if we could do this in the workplace as well, especially during this pandemic, where many people are working at home now, it's less likely that they'll reach out for assistance, it's less likely that their difficulties will be known. And it's more likely that they'll continue to have struggles and work in isolation. Is there any sort of gap between the results of research and what's actually practiced? In the classroom, I would say that the science to practice gap is alive and well. And however, that's kind of unfortunate. But, so too, is the practice to science gap. And what I mean here is that there needs to be a reciprocal relationship between science and practice. And that just does not exist. At least not yet. The Learning Disabilities Association of America is taking a leading role in decreasing the science to practice gap by presenting a Science to Practice Virtual Conference strand from January 21 to 24th 2021. There are going to be 32 hour presentations by leading researchers and scholars over four days for continuing education credits. In future conferences or strands, LDA will consider practice to science presentations, so that researchers and scholars can engage in answering the questions most asked by practitioners in the field.

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 14:46

You asked how we can remedy that gap and that's one way, but there are others as well. For example, professional development experiences on a regular basis, free of charge, providing incentives for learning cutting-edge interventions, changing the negative narrative about education and teachers in the United States, and engaging parents as partners in the education of all students, especially those with learning disabilities. So there's a lot of work that needs to be done. But seeing the glass half full,

being positive, being optimistic, and that old saying, turning lemons into lemonade or, you know, challenges into opportunities, is really the way that we've got, I think that we have to engage students, engage educators, engage families.

Lauren 15:45

So I guess that leads into my next question, which is during the pandemic, do you have any recommendations that you would give for helping students during this time?

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 15:54

Yes, so, as we know, teaching and learning have changed dramatically because of COVID 19. And students with learning disabilities are perhaps more at risk for learning loss, becoming frustrated, anxious, perhaps depressed, engaging in non-learning behaviors and experiencing interpersonal difficulties than students without disabilities. In a recent publication by the American Psychological Association, the following tips or recommendations for teaching and learning during COVID were offered. So regarding social emotional learning, integrating social emotional learning, motivation and engagement, promoting a healthy school climate and resiliency training throughout all areas of the curricula, and ensuring that these can be delivered in the event of a transition to hybrid or abbreviated school days or virtual schooling. Educators, specified school personnel, and parents need to develop knowledge and skills required to understand and respond to the social, emotional and personal development of students. This would include how to develop meaningful online learning experiences, create effective school and classroom climates reduce stress, and build students skills such as resiliency and agency when it comes to online or distance learning, support social emotional well being and learning by using technology to connect students to their schools, providing access to online social, emotional and mental health services, having daily SEL, social emotional learning, and academic activities developed by classroom teachers, providing links to create appropriate external learning resources and sharing resources with parents on how to support students learning remotely, while also ensuring that culturally and linguistically responsive educational principles are embedded in expectations for all teaching and learning standards. This would include safe and supportive environments and school climate for all students. Regarding trauma informed practices for teaching and learning, the APA mentions providing resources for schools to train educators and other school staff on the impact of adverse childhood experiences, or what are sometimes called ACEs, and traumatic experiences on children's health and development and to implement trauma informed practices. Training on ACEs for school personnel, including school resource officers and CIT and security staff would include the behavioral indicators of trauma, racial biases and how experiences of racism can be traumatic for students, and trauma informed non punitive approaches to addressing challenging behaviors discipline and deescalation, culturally developmentally and linguistically appropriate services and resources for children and their parents or caregivers to prevent trauma and respond to reported adverse circumstances and unmet needs. And then for professional development for teachers to ensure that learning continues, in person and in virtual settings. Schools and school districts and states should institute more effective professional development, working with teachers, administrators, and institutions of higher education in identifying the competencies that educators are lacking and build sustainable program wide systems of professional learning and teaching. These provide opportunities for ongoing, timely on demand training on a variety of topics, including SEL, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, developing healthy school climate, trauma informed teaching, ACEs prevention,

and response and supporting unique learners family engagement, implicit bias and integrating technology. Finally, the APA recommends that states and school districts should provide educators with ongoing professional development on how to conduct online learning, including pre-service instructional training opportunities on how to use various technologies, tools and platforms to build a sense of community support, social and emotional needs, and reinforce student agency and creativity.

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 20:51

Incorporating best practices for using technology for active learning, providing specialized instruction, including personalized learning experiences and accommodations, modifications and technical support as appropriate for diverse learners, such as students with special needs, that is learning disabilities, and students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. And this international, or worldwide pandemic does not seem to be going away anytime soon. It's already changed our lives in multiple ways. And we have to continue to find effective ways of instructing students, teaching our students, especially those with disabilities, those whose first language is not English, or they have multicultural backgrounds, whose families really need help, because they may not have the prerequisite technology skills and other skillsets to help their children learn, especially at home. So it's, it's a very auspicious time right now. And, you know, organizations such as LDA, and other national organizations really need to step up to the plate, and to have myriad of resources available to parents and families, and teachers so that we continue to educate our students in the best ways possible, and ensure that they lead healthy, safe, productive lives and eventually become citizens of the world and contributors to society. So I'm really very optimistic that we'll be able to do that. Especially after the first few months where we've learned much we have a lot more to learn. But, I think that we're on the right track. And I just hope that we will continue to do what we said we would do, which is to educate students.

Lauren 23:00

That's a great note to end on. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Vincent Alfonso 23:04

You're very welcome, my pleasure.

Lauren 23:17

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. Learn more about Learning Disabilities Awareness Month by following us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. And for more learning disabilities resources, visit lda.org