Introduction to the Special Issue: Supports and Support Needs

James R. Thompson, Guest Editor

A social-ecological conceptualization of intellectual and related developmental disabilities (ID/DD) focuses attention on the extra supports people need to fully participate in community life and culturally valued activities. It is in contrast to more traditional understandings of disability where attention is paid to deficits that set people apart from the general population. Although the usefulness of paying attention to supports that are needed for full participation in school and society may appear to be self-evident, the process of identifying support needs and arranging personalized supports is challenging work. Fortunately, the number of planning teams that seek to use systematic approaches to measure support needs and arrange systems of support for individuals is growing day by day. The five articles in this special issue are a testament to the steady progress that is being made.

In the first article, Bob Schalock, John Agosta, Lilia Teninty, Jon Fortune, and I discuss how a greater focus on support needs has influenced professional work and public policies in the field of ID/DD. Human services, particularly those targeted to adults with disabilities, are undergoing a fundamental transformation due to greater alignment in work of professionals at the individual, organizational, and jurisdictional levels.

In the second article, Karrie Shogren, Michael L. Wehmeyer, Tec Chapman, Marc J. Tassé, Colleen A. McLaughlin, and I report on three investigations regarding the psychometric properties of Part 2 of the SIS-A, the Protection and Advocacy Supplemental Scale (i.e., P&A Scale). Findings from all three studies strongly suggest that the P&A Scale is every bit as psychometrically robust a measure of support needs as are the subscales that produced standard scores in the SIS-A. These findings have significant implications for future revisions of the SIS-A.

The third and fourth articles address ways in which children and adults can be supported in their everyday lives. In the third article, Linda Bailey and Yvonne Miller Nixon share how a large provider organization embraced the prospect of understanding people with disabilities through a social-ecological lens, and how this philosophical shift resulted in enhanced personal outcomes for people with ID/DD.

In the fourth article, Virginia Walker, Stephanie DeSpain, Carolyn Hughes, and I share how a prepublication version of the Supports Intensity Scale–Children’s Version (SIS-C) was used to inform the work of special education planning teams. Case studies illustrate how educators sharpened their focus on developing both the talents of children to more competently navigate their school environment (including people in the environment) as well as the capacity of the environment (i.e., settings and activities) to be more accessible and welcoming to children with diverse support needs.

Progress in any field is usually tied to progress in measuring critical constructs of interest. The final article provides psychometric findings on the Supports Intensity Scale–Children’s Version (SIS-C). In that article, Michael L. Wehmeyer, Carolyn Hughes, Karrie Shogren, Susan B. Palmer, Hyojeong Seo and I share preliminary findings from a national field test of the SIS-C. Our data show that this new scale offers reliable and valid information regarding the intensity of support needed by children with ID/DD.

I’m deeply grateful to all of the authors who contributed their time and talents to this special issue. I believe these articles will inspire all of us who are interested in research and practice in the area of support needs assessment and planning to reach new heights in our collective work.