A Family Style Lunch Program to Aid Social Development of Autistic Youth

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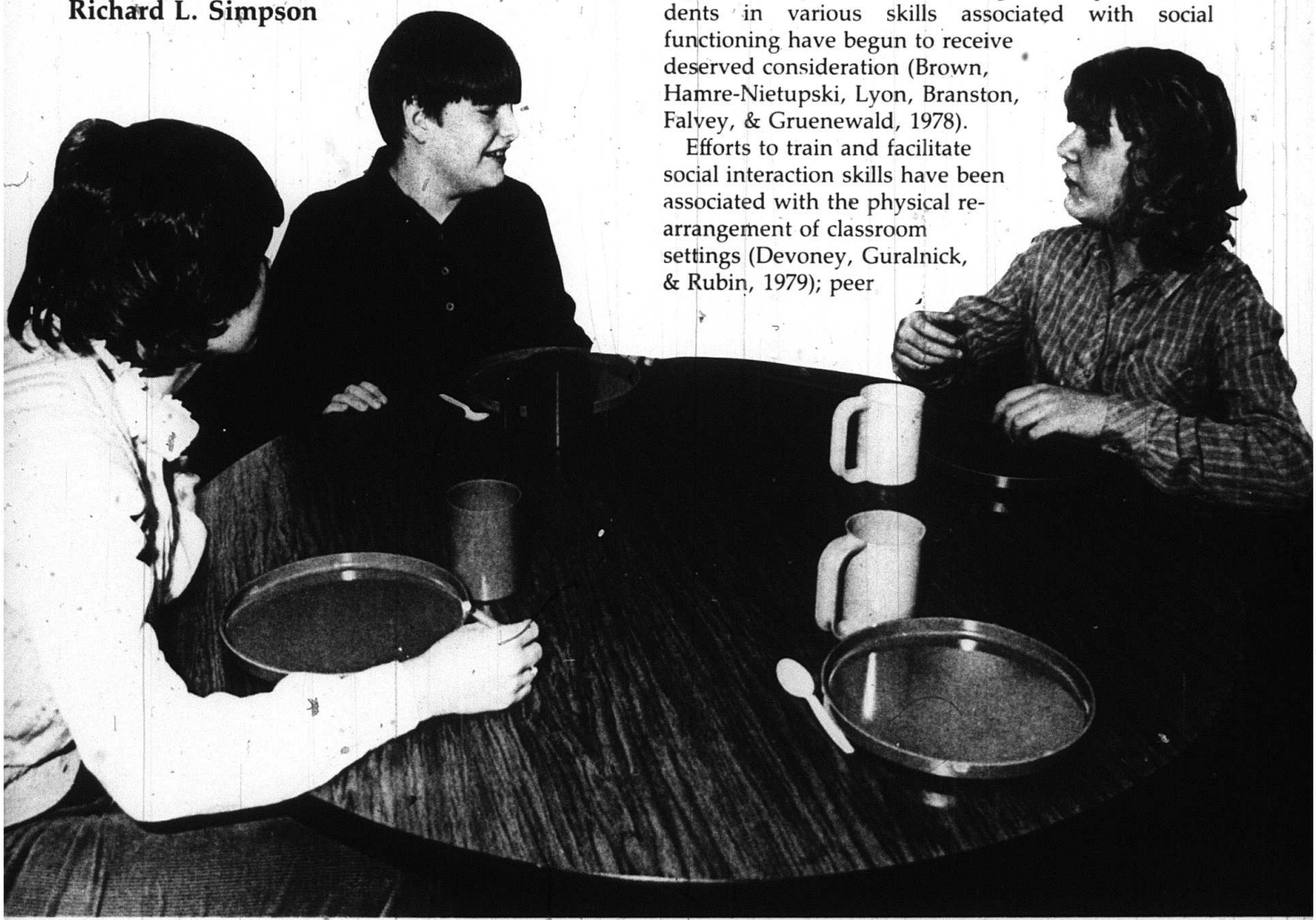
With increasing frequency, educators are recognizing the need to develop appropriate social behavior in severely handicapped students (Strain, Cooke, & Apolloni, 1976). While primary emphasis was once placed on procedures and technology for decelerating aberrant responses, more attention is currently being paid to the use of curricula and methodology for training appropriate social skills (Stainback & Stainback, 1978; Trower, Bryant, & Argyle, 1978).

It has been increasingly recognized that the mere reduction of deviant responses does not necessarily result in appropriate behavior, and that adaptive skills are prerequisites for placement of handicapped individuals in normalized settings (Simpson, 1980; Stainback, Stainback, & Jaben, 1981; Wilson, 1970). Accordingly, development and training of exceptional students in various skills associated with social functioning have begun to receive deserved consideration (Brown, Hamre-Nietupski, Lyon, Branston, Falvey, & Gruenewald, 1978).

Efforts to train and facilitate social interaction skills have been associated with the physical rearrangement of classroom settings (Devoney, Guralnick, & Rubin, 1979); peer



Students were encouraged to communicate with each other during lunch and received praise from the teacher when they did so.

imitation and modeling (Keller & Carlson, 1974); and social reinforcement (Gable, Henrickson, & Strain, 1978). Strain and Hill (1979) noted that peer social interaction, social reinforcement, and modeling could be successfully employed to facilitate the development of social skills in handicapped students, while Williams, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, McDaniel-Marx, and Wheeler (1978) suggested that manual guidance, modeling, verbal direction, object proximity, and curricula be used to develop such skills.

Yet, in spite of the current focus on methodology for facilitating social-skill development, there is limited information on practical procedures suitable for classroom use, particularly with adolescent autistic and autistic-like students. Accordingly, educators remain in need of efficient and realistic strategies for training social skills in severely emotionally disturbed pupils.

THE STUDENTS

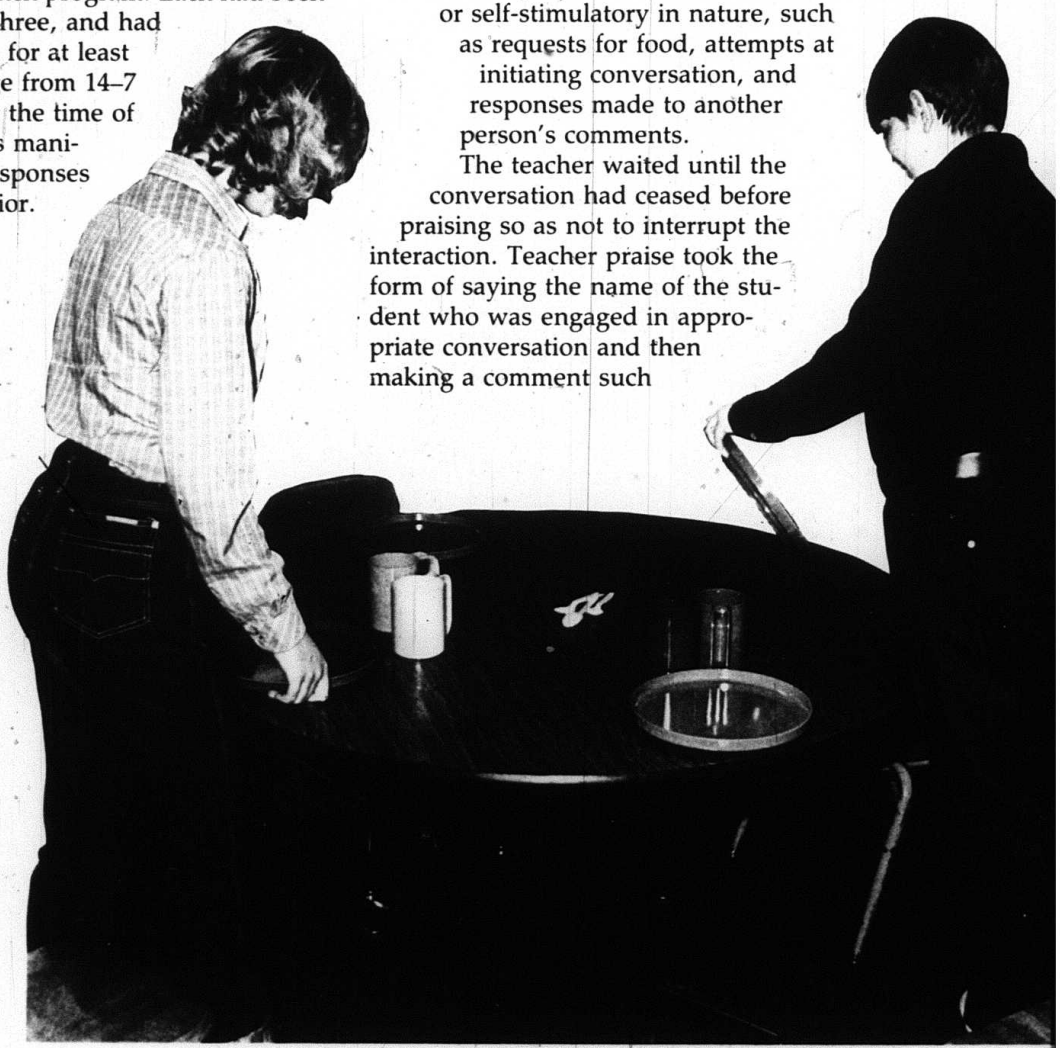
An entire class, consisting of four adolescents who had been diagnosed as autistic or autistic-like and assigned to a public school program for autistic students, participated in a family-style lunch program. Each had been diagnosed by the age of three, and had been enrolled in the class for at least one year. Their ages range from 14–7 and 17–3 (mean 15–9). At the time of the study, each pupil was manifesting self-stimulatory responses and other aberrant behavior. In addition, their social skills were delayed. Specifically, they rarely initiated or responded appropriately to their teacher or peers. While their verbal abilities varied, each was capable of communicating orally.

THE PROGRAM

A family-style lunch program was initiated to augment the group social-interaction curriculum. Prior to beginning the program, the students were eating their lunches from individual aluminum trays they received from the school cafeteria. Although they were required to eat together at a large table in their classroom, no attempts were made to promote interactions. Thus, while students were given the opportunity to interact, their propensity for social withdrawal made social isolation a readily available alternative.

In the first phase of the program, the students continued to eat their lunch together at a table in the center of the classroom. Rather than eating from individual trays, however, a family-style pattern was followed. On a rotating basis, students were responsible for setting the group table, obtaining the lunch trays from the cafeteria, placing the food in family-style bowls (e.g., individual salads were placed in one large bowl), cleaning the table following the meal, and washing, drying, and putting away the dishes and utensils. At the beginning of each lunch period the students were told to ask for the food they wanted. However, they were not otherwise required to engage in conversation.

During the next phase of the program, students were praised by their teacher for engaging in appropriate conversational behavior during the meal. This included any functional verbal response directed at another person which was not echolalic or self-stimulatory in nature, such as requests for food, attempts at initiating conversation, and responses made to another person's comments. The teacher waited until the conversation had ceased before praising so as not to interrupt the interaction. Teacher praise took the form of saying the name of the student who was engaged in appropriate conversation and then making a comment such



as, "Good talking," "I liked the way you answered," etc.

RELATED INSTRUCTION

In an effort to train appropriate social responses, students were provided modeled imitation-interaction training 30 minutes daily for 12 consecutive days. In these sessions, which occurred during a regular academic period, student instruction was provided in (a) making eye contact with the person whom they were addressing; (b) saying the person's name; and (c) asking or responding to a question.

Initially, prompt cards were used with students whose verbal ability was low. These cards provided written cues for facilitating conversation, such as "How are you?", "Please," or "I would like to talk to you." High verbal-ability students were encouraged to interact with the low verbal-ability youth by asking questions to which the latter had been trained to respond. In addition, the higher verbal-ability students were given suggestions for appropriate conversational topics such as field trips, favorite TV programs, hobbies, and home and school activities. A teacher and teacher's aide modeled appropriate conversational interactions as a part of all training activities.

RESULTS

The program produced social interaction increases for each of the students. In particular, increases were observed in social initiations, social responses, total words spoken per lunch period, and the mean number of words per comment. The social initiation mean increased from 2.6 during the individual lunch phase to 13.0 during modeled imitation interaction training. Social responses increased from 0 to 3.6; mean number of total words spoken per session changed from 24.68 to 74.6; and the mean number of words per comment improved from 2.18 during the individual lunch phase to 4.1 words following modeled imitation instruction. While the informal research design of this applied program does not allow definitive statistical conclusions to be drawn, there is every indication that the program caused desired changes in social behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Educators of autistic and autistic-like children and youth are increasingly recognizing the need to involve their students in a variety of socialization experiences and to provide training in social skills. While structure and control strategies must obviously be provided, so must training in those social responses necessary for survival in normalized settings. These considerations are particularly significant for autistic and autistic-like youth and young adults, groups distinguished by their socialization defects and pecularities.

The procedures described in this program were associated with improvements in the social skills of an entire class of autistic-like youth. The methodology proved particularly well suited for adolescents and young adults. While many researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the need for procedures applicable with "older" populations, the majority of socialization training programs have been conducted with preschool and elementary age children (e.g., Tremblay, Strain, Hendrickson, & Shores, 1981). In particular, this program was found to be functional because (a) it did not interfere with other activities, including academics; (b) it was carried out in a public school by a teacher and aide; and (c) it relied on such proven techniques as social reciprocity, social reinforcement, and modeling.

Having the students set the table themselves was part of the family style program designed to foster social interaction and skills.

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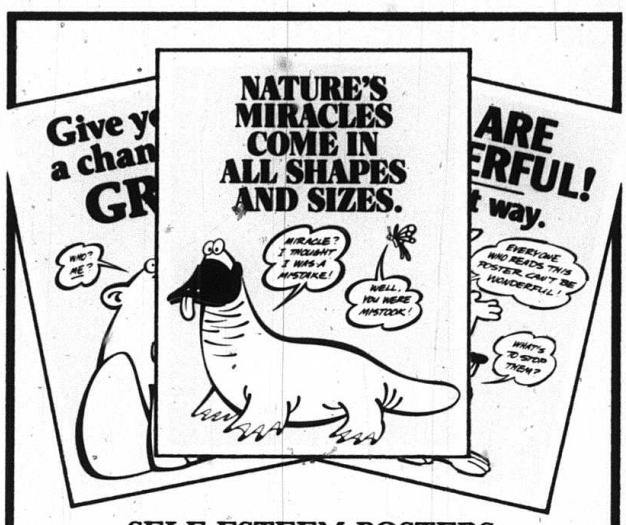

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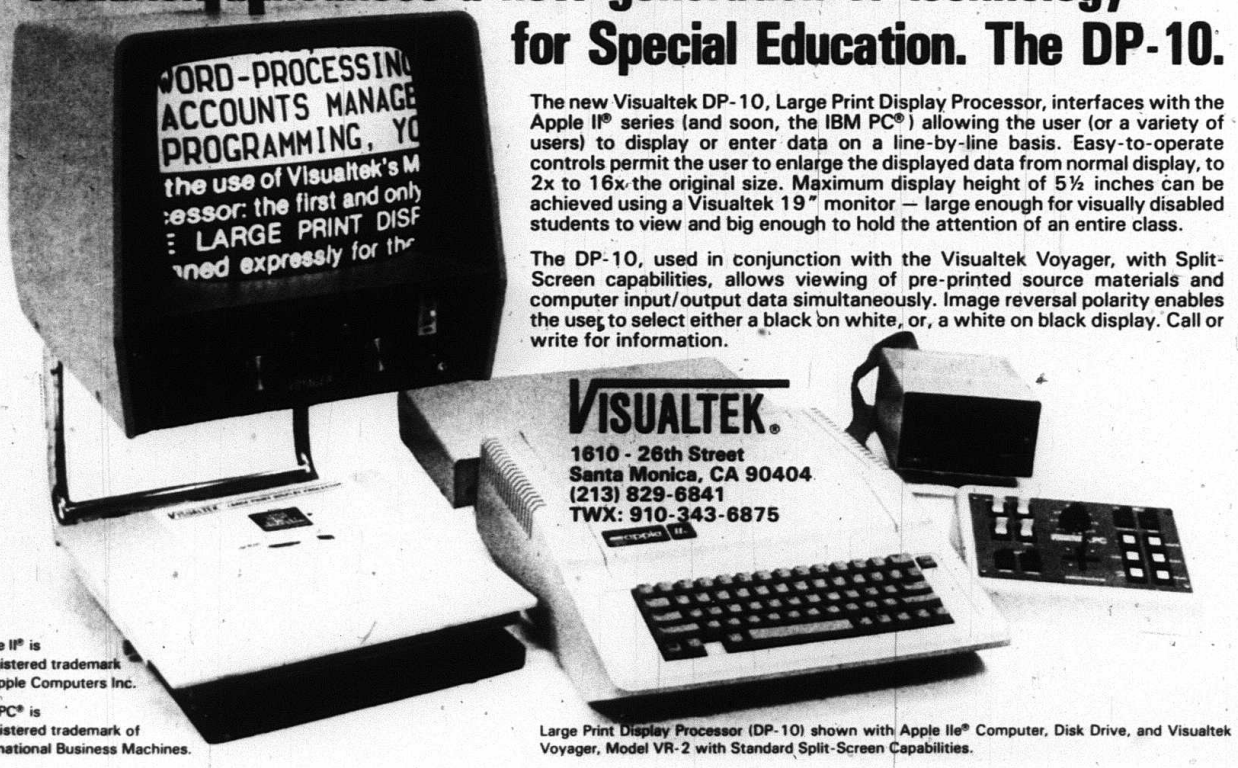

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