TEC Podcast #9 "10 Research Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disability," Chris Lemons, *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 49*(1), pp. 18–30.

Lorraine:	Welcome to this *TEACHING Exceptional Children* podcast. I'm Lorraine Sobson, Publications Manager for the Council for Exceptional Children. Today I'm talking with Chris Lemons, an assistant professor at Peabody College, Vanderbilt. Chris is the author—along with Jill Allor, Stephanie Al Otaiba, and Lauren LeJeune—of a recent article in TEC entitled "10 Research-Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disability." Chris, thanks for joining me!
Chris:	Thank you very much for having me, Lorraine.
Lorraine:	I'd like to start by setting the stage a little bit for our listeners. How have academic and life-skill expectations changed in recent decades for individuals with intellectual disability?
Chris:	Lorraine, really in the last 20 years, expectations have changed in that we now expect individuals with intellectual disability—I'm going to refer to them as individuals with ID through the rest of this podcast—we expect those students to be taught and to learn academic content in reading, mathematics, writing, to a much greater level than we had before. This is reflected in the fact that students with ID are explicitly included in our accountability systems, and alternate assessments have been developed for this population of learners. These assessments are more rigorous and include more academic content than ever before.
	Related to this, there are a growing number of postsecondary education opportunities, including many programs at universities of higher education, … for students with ID. This is yet another example of really how societal expectations have drastically increased around academics for this group of learners.
Lorraine:	How does literacy instruction play into these changed expectations?
Chris:	As expectations have increased for individuals with ID, so has the need to provide teachers and parents with information on the most efficient and effective ways to teach academics, including reading, to this group of students. Much of the work on teaching children to read—what we would call evidence-based reading instruction—is summarized nicely in the National Reading Panel report. Most of that research explicitly excluded students with ID.
	Teachers have, primarily over time, relied on targeting functional sideward instruction for this group of learners. We know through a lot of research that's being conducted that children and adolescents with ID can learn to read through a sight-word approach. However, outcomes with this type of instruction can be very limited because students

are really only able to read words they've been directly taught. That's a very limited type of reading. More recently, teams of researchers have explored phonics-based approaches. This is really changing how teachers are approaching literacy instruction for this group of learners.

Lorraine: Your article outlines 10 tips for teaching students with ID how to read. Let's start with tip number one, "big-picture goals." Why should teachers look behind the coming or current school year when setting goals for students?

Chris: Tip 1, I guess that's a good place to start. I think there are at least two reasons that big-picture planning is really important. First, without some reflection on the progress that was made in the past year or two, and without looking forward at goals for the next year or two, I think too often schools can really limit the expectations for learning that will occur within that given year.

For example, it isn't uncommon for us whenever we review individualized education programs, or IEPs, for students that are participating in our research studies to see the same exact literacy goal repeated over multiple years. For example, this year, a student will learn to read the first 50 … sight words. If that goal gets repeated over time, it really decreases the amount of progress that's expected. Considering the broader context can really help make sure that high-quality, relevant learning goals are developed within that year.

Second, I also think it's really important, particularly as students enter middle or high school, to start considering postsecondary outcome goals. As we described in this article, determining priorities related to increasing students' skills as independent readers is very important, but that needs to be balanced with increasing functional independence to align with postsecondary goals. That's a discussion that the IEP team really needs to have early and frequently. Thinking in this bigger picture context than just what we want to accomplish this year … can really facilitate this type of discussion.

Lorraine: You just mentioned both academic goals and … functional goals, and leading to positive postsecondary outcomes. I really like all those points. When you mentioned goals—one of your tips relates to setting meaningful and measurable goals. You cite Diane Browder's model. How can that help teachers in this area?

Chris: I really think that the model that Diane and her colleagues developed is incredibly useful in planning literacy instruction for students with ID. Related to setting goals, I think that it can help teachers and IEP team members consider additional areas of focus beyond the big five areas of reading instructions. Traditionally, we focus on phonological awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Diane's model also emphasizes providing students with opportunities to access literature, to focus instruction to help students access literature, and to have a focus providing opportunities for students to apply and generalize reading skills. I think this broader consideration of what should be addressed in literacy instruction can ensure that students are making meaningful improvements in their reading skill that can help them as they transition into these postsecondary settings.

Lorraine: Speaking of literacy instruction, in your article, you emphasize that literacy instruction must be explicit and systematic. Can you recommend any specific programs, and tell us why they might be particularly appropriate for students with ID?

Chris: Sure. We list several programs in the paper, including Early Interventions in Reading, Early Literacy Skills Builder, Mondo Bookshops Phonics, and Road to Reading. In the article, there are web links to learn more about those. All of those programs have been evaluated in research studies, including students with intellectual disability, and have found positive effects. Those are good starting places. Basically, there are many really good systematic phonics programs that are available. Many of them would be appropriate for students with ID. As we described in the article, some adaptations may be needed to make these programs really effective and appropriate for students with ID.

              Although this tool that I'm about to tell you about is not designed specifically for students with ID, a new tool came out from the Southeast Regional Education Laboratory program that I think could be very useful in helping teachers evaluate early reading programs. The report is available on the Institute of Education Sciences webpage, and it's titled "Rubric for Evaluating Reading/Language Arts Instructional Materials for Kindergarten to Grade 5." If you do an Internet search for that term and IES, or the Institute of Education Sciences, you can find the document. It really outlines a variety of factors to consider when you're selecting an explicit phonics-based program.

Lorraine: That sounds very helpful. How do students' language abilities affect their ability to learn to read?

Chris: Language abilities and reading are intertwined because reading is really just turning print into language. For students with ID, I think ensuring that language development is supported and that links are made between reading instruction and speech and language interventions can be really helpful. That's why, in the article, we recommend that speech-language pathologists play a critical role when planning and supporting reading interventions.

              We have had students in our reading invention studies whose decoding skills outpaced their language ability. They responded really well to our initial decoding instruction … in some of our early studies, we really weren't thinking deeply about also enhancing language. In other words, these students could read text that was well beyond their comprehension level. For students like these, we need to balance reading with language skills to ensure that comprehension of reading material is occurring.

Lorraine: How can teachers scaffold literacy instruction to support students with working-memory deficits?

Chris: We outline some examples of this in the paper. The idea here is to make tasks less complicated and design instruction to foster success. Some strategies are for teachers to use consistent, uncomplicated language during instruction—so, to always use the same terms to describe what you're teaching. For teachers to integrate modeling and guided

practice into their lessons is also important. For example, following an "I do, we do, you do"-type model of instruction.

We have also had success in early reading by integrating photos of fun, interesting decodable words, words like *dog*, and also by using plastic letters, plastic chips. They all come in boxes in instruction. For example, when asking a child to segment a word like *dog*, if the student is challenged to remember the word and hold that word in her head as she's also trying to break it into sounds, or segment it, it can be helpful to provide the picture of the word *dog* on the table. Perhaps give the child three plastic little chips to represents the three sounds that are in the word. By having these materials available, the child can really focus on the task of identifying the sounds instead of also having to remember the word and the number of sounds.

Lorraine: Now, another of your tips relates to scope and sequence. What steps can teachers take to be sure the scope and sequence of an instruction aligns with student ability and instructional level?

Chris: We recommend that teachers use the program's scope and sequence to guide instruction to ensure that planning is really systematic. We think this is important because in many of the classes … where we're observing instruction of students with ID, we see that teachers often access resources from the Internet. They're doing it in a very unsystematic way. Many programs include various placement tests; like Road to Reading, one of the interventions I suggested. The placement tests can help teachers figure out where in the scope and sequence—or where in the intervention—the student should be placed as a starting point. Teachers can also generate informal assessments and use the data collected from these to determine where to place the student.

For example, in several studies, we have individualized the letter sounds and words that we're teaching by creating a set of flash cards that include all the letter sounds and words that are targeted in the intervention, so, [those] listed in the scope and sequence. We've done a quick pretest to identify which words and sounds are known or unknown. Then, we teach a subset of the known letters and words, say three to five at a time, until the student's able to independently provide the sound or read the word 3 days in a row. When this happens, we consider that item mastered and move on to the next letter or word in the scope and sequence. We frequently review the previously mastered items and reteach when necessary.

A teacher can look at the scope and sequence and see it as a guide map of all the content that needs to be covered. Then, move through that map, in a sense, to ensure that all of the components are covered. By using the scope and sequence in this systematic way, it makes the instruction more cohesive, and it's more likely that the students are going to maintain the information that they've been taught.

Lorraine: You were just talking about the student mastery of different aspects of the instruction. Your article stresses the importance of progress monitoring to be sure students reach their goals. How can teachers also use data to individualize instruction?

Chris: Data-based individualization, or DBI, is a process that teachers can use to monitor students' response to early reading instruction and to adapt this instruction to meet [students'] needs when they are not responding. The process basically asks instructors to set measurable goals, to monitor progress on those goals, and to have a plan for when they will make changes to instruction. Many of the resources that are available on DBI are focused on students with learning disabilities, but the process that would be followed would be exactly the same for students with intellectual disability.

We published a paper in *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, called "Data-Based Individualization of Reading." The authors are myself, Devin Kearns, and Kim Davidson. That was in the March/April 2014 issue. Teachers can access that and see a real clear example of a teacher using DBI with a student. Teachers could also learn more about DBI by going to the National Center on Intensive Interventions website, that's www.IntensiveIntervention.org, or by accessing two modules on DBI from the IRIS Center (iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu).

Lorraine: Your DBI in reading article … was part of an issue that was all focused on data-based individualization. I'm glad you mentioned that, that's a great resource.

What role can families play in supporting literacy instruction for students with intellectual disability?

Chris: First, families are an important part of the IEP team. Family members should be encouraged to be involved, to ask questions, and to really advocate for the student with ID. There are some tips for how families might interact with IEP meetings that are included in Figure 2 in the paper. I think, in terms of supporting literacy instruction, the family's role should be to review skills that have been taught at school, and to expose the student to high-quality literature.

The family can play a great role in supporting language and vocabulary development, but we caution parents from thinking that they need to provide intensive direct instruction at home. We have had students in our studies whose very well-meaning parents overdid it, and this resulted in the students not wanting to participate in reading instruction at school. Reading with family members should be fun and engaging. Parents can request practice activities from teachers, but should (at least in my opinion) leave the direct instruction of new skills to the school staff.

Lorraine: In your article, you have a tool called the Literacy Instruction and Support Planning Tool. Can you tell us about it, and how it can help, and who can use it?

Chris: Definitely. We're really excited about this part of the paper. I would love to get feedback from any teachers who use this tool of how we could either improve it, or how it worked for them. The planning tool is designed to help IEP team members have discussions related to the tips provided in this paper. We align the tool with Diane's model of literacy instruction. The tool could be used by teachers, parents, or other school staff. We think it would really be probably the most beneficial if it was used by a team of people.

Our goal is for the IEP team members to read the paper, and to meet and discuss Tips 1 and 2, which are about goal setting. That's section A of the tool. Then, they complete the planning sections, that's sections C through F, related to Diane's model. For example, the team would discuss what is the current priority level for, say, improving phonemic awareness, or increasing listening comprehension? They could discuss what the current goals or priorities are for the student across all aspects of Diane's model. There's also a section on there where they bring in student interest to make sure that the student's personal interests are being considered in goal setting and planning. Then, the teams could review the remaining tips, those are 3 through 10, with the related discussion points about instructional delivery.

We think this tool could help IEP teams think more critically about goals and instruction, and will hopefully facilitate conversations that go beyond simply setting goals to really thinking about how instruction will support the student in meeting the goals. We think that the discussion points around the tips can really help IEP team members consider the multiple sources of input that are at the IEP team meetings, so making sure the parents have a voice, the individual child has a voice, and that the various school staff has a voice. I think this could be a really good tool to make IEP team meetings more meaningful.

Lorraine: Yeah, I agree with you. I think it's great. Everything's laid out in such a clear format as a checklist that they can really just go right through each step and see how the student's IEP lines up.

We've covered a lot of ground. What's the one takeaway you hope listeners will get from our discussion today?

Chris: I think that the one takeaway is that research conducted over the last decade has shown us that many children and adolescents with ID can develop literacy and reading skills that are way higher than we previously expected. I know in my studies, there are always students every year who blow our expectations out of the water. We know that reading is a critical skill for postsecondary success. I hope teachers and parents who listen to this discussion will leave excited, motivated, and inspired to keep trying, and to remember to celebrate the successes of the child or adolescent with ID that they're working with along the way.

Lorraine: Thank you so much for joining me today, Chris.

Chris: Thank you very much, always my pleasure to be here.

Lorraine: Chris's article, "10 Research-Based Tips for Enhancing Literacy Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disability," appears in Volume 49 of *TEACHING Exceptional Children*. *TEACHING Exceptional Children* is a publication of the Council for Exceptional Children. To learn more about CEC, visit cec.sped.org.