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Reading and Students with Intellectual Disabilities:

Using the Readers Workshop Model to Provide
Balanced Literacy Instruction

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Reading and Students with Intellectual Disabilities:

Using the Readers Workshop Model to Provide Balanced Literacy

Instruction

Writing in the online Library Journal, Peters (2009) predicted that “sustained reading for learning, for work, and for pleasure” may disappear until “only at living history farms will we see people reading.” We can now hear novels on our phones, find our way with oral GPS instructions, and use voice-activated software to write our thoughts. Assistive technologies, including computer software that reads text, speech recognition software, talking calculators, and advanced spell check software are common (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). Why then does anyone, including students with intellectual disabilities, need to read?

The purpose of this paper is to explain how reading skills benefit students with intellectual disabilities in multiple areas of their lives and to propose that Readers Workshop, a model used in many educational settings, may also be used in literacy instruction for students with intellectual disabilities. The major topics that will be addressed include the importance of reading for students with intellectual disabilities, historical approaches to teaching reading to students with intellectual disabilities, and an overview of reading instructional methods. Readers Workshop is described as it is commonly used in general education classrooms and benefits of using this model to improve literacy instruction for students with intellectual disabilities are suggested. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the author’s experiences in a classroom using the Readers Workshop model with students with intellectual disabilities and

recommendations for additional research needed to design comprehensive programs for literacy instruction for all students.

Importance of Reading for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

In an online essay addressing students who question the need to learn to read, Mackay (2007) listed many valid reasons that reading is important; these include getting a license and driving a car, going on a trip, ordering food at a restaurant, buying something on time, getting a job, going to a doctor, and reading instructions on medicine bottles. Adults who cannot read have trouble living independently and successfully. Nationally, about 14% of adults have below basic literacy skills, unable to perform simple, daily tasks that may require reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

While not specifically referring to students with intellectual difficulties, Calkins and Tolan (2010) noted that the demands of current technologies require all students to develop greater literacy skills than previously. A lack of reading limits one's quality of life (Bradford, Shippen, Alberto, Houschins, & Flores, 2006) and yet only 1 in 5 students with intellectual disabilities reaches minimal literacy levels (Katims, 2001). Slow development of reading skills may affect more than just one academic subject but may also delay language acquisition, general knowledge, vocabulary, and even social acceptance.

The development of literacy skills in elementary school can also have long-term effects. Thus, successful early readers usually succeed academically while those who fail to learn to read in elementary school frequently have lifelong difficulties in learning new information (Matthew

effect: education, 2013). Educators have called this the Matthew effect, a term based on the Biblical message found in Matthew 25:29 and paraphrased as “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (Matthew effect: education, 2013).

While assistive technology may become more prevalent in everyone’s world, reading will continue to be an essential part of school, work, and community life. Educators working with students with intellectual disabilities have many reasons to include literacy instruction in their classrooms. Reading and literacy skills are the key to accessing knowledge, gaining independence, and making choices (Houston & Torgeson, 2004). Also, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 (PL 105), most recently amended in 2004, is a federal law requiring all students to have access to the general education curriculum. Since reading is part of that curriculum it should also be part of the curriculum for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Houston & Torgeson, 2004).

Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (PL 107-110) requires that all students, including those with disabilities, achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in grade level standards. Although progress in meeting standards may be determined through alternative assessments such as the Virginia Alternative Assessment Program (VAAP), reading is required for all students (Erickson, Mathes, Champlin, & Cheatham, 2009). Indeed, reading is an essential component of success in most academic subjects and functional literacy is needed for students with intellectual disabilities to achieve independence (Polloway, Patton, Serna, & Bailey, 2013).

Hatch (2009) questioned whether what most persons consider a functional curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities actually helps them read with comprehension or

understanding. However, a survey of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities and visual impairments found that although most teachers were interested in learning more about literacy, fewer than half of the teachers felt that reading or literacy instruction was important for all students (Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, & Spooner, 2009). Mims et al. (2009) suggested that all students should have the opportunities to learn through literacy or reading, even if they do not all become literate.

Historical Approaches to Reading Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

A review of reading studies focusing on students with intellectual disabilities noted that although reading itself requires mastery of several related skills, most reading instruction with intellectually disabled students focused on subskills of reading (Allor, Champlin, Gifford, & Mathes, 2010). Historically the subskill taught to students with intellectual disabilities has been sight words with emphasis on functional words used in the home, community, or at work such as danger, poison, men, women, stop, and walk. Reading instruction was sometimes divided into two parts, with one focus on literacy skills and one on sight words, presumably as a safe-guard in case the student did not learn to read (Erickson et al., 2009).

Sight Word/Vocabulary Instruction

In a review of 128 studies of reading interventions with one or more students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, most interventions were found to focus on sight words, with about 33% using picture identification tasks (Browder, Wakeman, Ahlbrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006). Less than one third included any comprehension skills. Interventions that taught fluency, phonics or phonemic awareness were uncommon. Different methods of sight word instruction have been used, including time delay, picture integration, and picture fading. Time delay, which

calls for a period of time to pass before the student is prompted to say the word, was found more effective than the other two, in which a picture cue for the sight word is faded as the letters of the word simultaneously become more dominant or the pictures fade but the word itself stays at the same intensity. However, sight word instruction has not been found to help with decoding new words and requires direct instruction on each word taught, limiting it as a reading strategy (Bradford et al., 2006).

Barudin and Hourcade (1990) compared three methods of teaching sight words which included using sight word cards only, a picture fading technique, or a kinesthetic letter-tracing technique, and found no differences between them but also noted that any technique was better than no instruction. The picture fading and letter-tracing techniques did show greater delayed word response, so words were remembered longer (Barudin & Hourcade, 1990). Singh and Singh (1985, 1988) had students sound out sight words that they missed, and so included elements of phonics with positive results in both short- and long-term retention of the words.

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction

As educators realized the limits of sight word methods only for students in general education, special educators experimented with yet another subskill in reading for students with intellectual disabilities, and some phonics instruction was introduced. Ideally, phonics instruction includes both phonemic awareness (sounds in words) and phonics (how sounds are represented by letters and combinations of letters). Again, several comprehensive literature reviews have been published looking at the results of phonics instruction, with most showing that explicit, systematic phonics instruction is successful in improving some aspects of reading but skills are not generalized to new words (Erickson et al., 2009).

Some success has been shown when picture cues that show the shape and the sound are embedded within the letters to help students associate sounds with letters. Thus a snake in the shape of the letter *s* would be helpful while an alligator as the letter *a* might not be (Erickson et al., 2009). A few studies have used larger units of words and asked students to read new words based on these larger units with inconsistent results; word sorts use this method (Erickson et al., 2009).

In one small group of students in special education, eight labeled as MR or intellectually disabled with a mean IQ of 69.50, all became able to sort the words into categories but only some of them could generalize this skill to identify and spell unknown words (Joseph & McCachran, 2003). However, Erickson et al. (2009) found greater emphasis placed on word identification in the research on students with significant intellectual disabilities.

Reading Comprehension Instruction

Reading has come to be seen as more than several subskills, but as readers interacting with writing to gain meaning (Snow, 2002). Because writing is more permanent and can be referred to frequently, being able to actually read may help students with intellectual disabilities who have trouble keeping track of oral information (Randi, Newman, & Grigorenko, 2010). Bruner (1985) suggested that understanding written stories, which often deal with real life situations that may happen in a student's life, can help students deal with events in their own lives. Few studies, however, appear in literature that look at teaching comprehension to students with intellectual disabilities and Erickson et al. (2009) found no studies looking at the effectiveness of teaching specific comprehension strategies recommended for readers who are not disabled.

Erickson et al. (2009) noted that most research on reading comprehension among students with intellectual disabilities have been with children with Down syndrome. A relationship was found between their ability to understand oral language and reading comprehension skills but not with their skills in sight words, decoding and spelling. Using context cues and world knowledge appeared to help their oral comprehension of stories, while skills such as letter-naming and word-attack did not. Presenting stories both orally and visually improved comprehension in this population as shown by their ability to retell a story (Erickson et al., 2009).

Overview of Reading Instruction

It is helpful to quickly review the past sixty years of mainstream reading instruction in the United States before looking at current best practices for general education and extending those methods to students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Reading Instruction Methods in General Education Classrooms

From the 1930s to the 1960s many schools depended on the “look-say” method of reading, or “sight word” reading used so often with intellectually disabled students. In regular classrooms across the country Dick and Jane Readers with their highly repetitive language were used, and by the end of second grade Dick, Jane, Sally and their pets Spot and Puff were well known to most children (Barry, 2008). There was no need to construct meaning from the words in their stories; after all, “Work, Dick, work, work” and “Oh, oh, oh. See little Puff run” (Gray et al., 1951, p. 4 & 26) can only be interpreted one way.

In the 1970s, phonics instruction using basal readers was emphasized more in schools (Barry, 2008) but during the so-called Reading Wars of the 1980s some teacher education programs and

school districts adopted the Whole Language approach that was then popular in Australia and New Zealand. Some teachers gave up phonics instruction totally and immersed their students in reading and writing, assuming that sooner or later it would all make sense and the students would learn to read. The success of this approach assumed rich language environments at home and in the classroom which may often not be available (Polloway et al., 2013).

While this approach worked for some students not everyone learned to read easily, and a subgroup of struggling readers was left behind during the Whole Language movement. The English language is notably difficult due to the many foreign influences in common words, and in the early 1990s education reform, with an emphasis on reading, became a national focus. In 1997 Congress established the National Reading Panel (NRP) to review research and determine the most effective ways to teach children to read. Working in conjunction with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), their report advocated not only instruction that included all of the processes that help children become readers but also called for evaluation of reading progress by looking at decoding skills, interest and enjoyment of reading, and comprehension of text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000). Thus, they recognized the need to address several subskills of reading to effectively help children become literate.

In what appears to be another swing of the pendulum, school districts struggling to improve reading scores have added phonics-based reading programs that first teach a sequence of skills that only later transfer to meaning. Teaching strategies may include practicing lists of nonsense syllables and words and measuring progress by timed assessments that penalize students for all errors, whether they change the meaning of the text or not. The decodable books used in such programs struggle to create sentences using the particular skill that is being emphasized, leading

to students being asked to make sense of sentences such as “In a field near the sea there lived a wee bee. She lived near a wee lean flea” (Ryan, 2013, p. 3).

Using phonics to decode an unknown word is a complex operation, involving four processes. These are orthography (recognizing the visual shape of the word), phonology (matching the letters in the word to sounds), meaning (sorting through possible meanings for the word), and context (selecting the meaning of the word as it is used) (Erickson et al., 2009). Phonics then should not be taught in a vacuum, especially to students with intellectual disabilities who may not have adequate skills in all four areas. In an interesting finding, the NRP found that phonics instruction was most useful for younger students and that for older students with below average intelligence phonics instruction was not helpful (NICHD, 2000). The phonics instruction that they received was synthetic, which means the sounds were taught individually and without built-in meanings, and results showed that although these older students learned phonics, their reading did not improve as a result of phonics instruction (Erickson et al., 2009).

Components of Effective Literacy Instruction

The components of reading named by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) included: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension. While most of these components are thoroughly described in current literature about reading instruction, a few points should be explained. First, phonemic awareness is not the same as phonics instruction nor is it simply auditory discrimination between sounds, but it is focusing on and manipulating units of sounds (Erickson et al., 2009). Second, phonics instruction can be systematic or incidental. Incidental instruction occurs when a reader struggles with a word, needs to know a phonics rule for that particular word, and then is able to generalize that rule to

other similar words. This usually does not happen for students with intellectual disabilities and phonics instruction for them needs to be explicit and systematic, building on previously learned skills (Erickson et al., 2009). Systematic phonics instruction, which teaches how the alphabetic system works, eventually helps readers develop larger sight vocabularies as the words they decode become familiar (NICHD, 2000).

Third, fluency, or reading orally with speed, accuracy and expression, enables students to understand what they read. While independent reading is motivational and many studies show that good readers read a lot, the studies show correlation and not causation. Studies have not found that sustained, silent reading with little or no feedback increases comprehension. Guided oral reading practice is recommended to achieve fluency. Fourth, vocabulary comprehension includes two kinds of words – those seen in print and those heard orally – and basically the more words a student knows, whether written or spoken, the more he will comprehend. It is important to remember that sight word instruction is not vocabulary instruction. Finally, text comprehension, or understanding how narrative and expository text works, aids overall comprehension (Erickson, et al., 2009).

Thus, for the general education classroom, reading instruction has become more than a subskill and is frequently referred to by the more comprehensive, useful terminology of literacy instruction or a balanced literacy approach. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) defines literacy as both skill-based and task-based. Literacy is both having the knowledge and skills to use printed and written information and being able to use this information to function in society (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2013).

Comprehensive Literacy Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Most students with intellectual disabilities are able to read simple connected text with meaning (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Jones, & Champlin, (2010). Allor, et al. (2010b) reported significant increases in several subskills of literacy, although not in reading comprehension measures, during their multi-year study of primary students with moderate ID, using a comprehensive approach. Oral language activities and modified teaching techniques were added. In the sample of 28 students, students received about 40-50 minutes daily of direct instruction, trying to target big ideas in reading and key strategies. Strands presented were concepts of print, phonological and phonemic awareness, letter knowledge and sounds, word recognition, fluency reading, reading comprehension, and read alouds for vocabulary and language development. One of the clearest results, according to the authors of the study, was improvement in phonemic awareness, but they also found improved alphabetic decoding, word recognition, oral language skills and comprehension. Generally the students with intellectual disabilities took twice as long to complete the lessons as other struggling readers (Allor et al., 2010b).

Following this study, Allor et al. (2010b) recommended that students with intellectual disabilities “need consistent, explicit, systematic teacher-led instruction over a long period of time” (p. 11). The Readers Workshop model of delivery recommended below can incorporate these suggestions easily.

Readers Workshop/Balanced Literacy Model of Instruction

In many general education classrooms, reading time is called Readers Workshop based on a format defined by Calkins (2000) in *The Art of Teaching Reading* and Fontas and Pinell (2001) in *Guiding Readers and Writers*. This format is often referred to as a Balanced Literacy

Program, encompassing all five areas of instruction suggested by the National Reading Panel. Instruction takes place in a long block of time devoted to reading and writing. Components of this block can include the following activities.

Shared reading time occurs when students and the teacher together read a selection, often a Big Book, multiple times over a week. Shared reading allows students to enjoy and learn from texts that they may not yet be able to read independently (Schnorr & Fenton, 2008) and yet it is important that these strategies be taught. They increase communication and literacy development for students with disabilities (Mims et al., 2009).

After the first reading, subsequent readings focus on a carefully selected skill. This skill may be a comprehension strategy, a phonics or grammar rule, or information about the text itself and it can become the mini-lesson for the day. Suggested comprehension strategies include comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic organizers, answering and generating questions, story structure and grammar, and summarization (Erickson et al., 2009).

Another time is set aside for guided reading when small groups of students meet with the teacher, generally focusing on applying the skill or strategy taught in the mini-lesson. The teacher carefully selects books that challenge students enough to allow growth but are not so hard they become frustrated. (Mims et al., 2009). In a regular education classroom, the teacher may schedule groups so that she meets with each one at least once a week, but guided reading groups should meet more often in a special education classroom. Best practices do not encourage simple read-alouds of text but either encourage each student in the group to read quietly while the teacher meets with each student individually or suggest more imaginative ways to be sure everyone is reading the entire time.

The purpose of self-selected or independent reading time is to help students enjoy reading and to learn and practice reading behaviors. The teacher's role is to teach and support behaviors, either during mini-lessons or individual conferences (Mims et al., 2009). To be successful in independent reading time, students must first learn to select books they are interested in and that are at a correct level for independent reading; if a student cannot read about 90-95% of the words in the book he does not actually practice reading but soon gives up, looking at the pictures or not getting meaning from the book, unless highly motivated to read the particular book. Students are often given specific things to look for during this time based on the mini-lesson to keep them accountable and structured activities may be even more important for students with intellectual disabilities. The special education teacher and staff need to be actively engaged with students during this time.

The original teachers and researchers suggesting this method of teaching wrote before today's renewed interest in phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, but both can easily be integrated into the Readers Workshop model for readers who need them. Several readily available systems of phonics instruction exist and may be adapted for use with intellectually disabled students. They often include activities such as Making Words (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999) in which students manipulate individual letters to form words, and the use of Word Walls (Cunningham et al., 1999) to practice common spellings. Some commercially available programs introduce alphabetic principles and phonics rules in sequence and it is relatively easy for teachers to adapt the methodology of Making Words to sequential phonics instruction.

Sight words and vocabulary instruction can also be incorporated into the Readers Workshop model. The flexibility of the Readers Workshop model makes it possible to address each

student's strengths and weaknesses appropriately. Ideally, the Readers Workshop Block is followed by a Writers Workshop Block which contains a similar progression of activities, including a mini-lesson, shared writing, guided writing and independent writing (Schnorr & Fenton, 2008).

Students with intellectual disabilities often struggle in many areas related to reading, including comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and more, yet they receive intensive instruction in one subskill only (Erickson, 2009). "If the ability to read, write and communicate is the ultimate goal, then we must better understand how to maximize access to the entire general curriculum in literacy and reading while providing comprehension instruction that addresses the individual needs of each student with significant intellectual disabilities" (Erickson et al., 2009, p. 128). The Readers Workshop model suggested for use in general education classrooms may also be an effective system to teach literacy skills to students with intellectual disabilities.

Additionally, Calkins (2000) noted that for successful literacy programs students need teachers who love to read and who communicate enthusiasm for reading to students, time to read, explicit instruction in how to read, opportunities to think and talk about reading, meaningful assessment, read alouds, and a balanced approach to literacy which includes writing. Students with intellectual disabilities need this perhaps even more than their non-disabled peers.

In a 90 minute block of time common in elementary general education classrooms, a day in Readers Workshop can look like this:

15 minutes – read aloud and mini-lesson

15 minutes – shared reading

15 minutes – guided reading

15 minutes – independent reading

15 minutes – writing mini-lesson and shared writing

15 minutes – independent writing

Sample schedules for shorter periods of time and for different types of schools are suggested by Schnorr and Fenton (2008) who also give detailed descriptions of some of the activities.

Benefits of the Readers Workshop Model for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

A benefit of this model for students with intellectual disabilities, who need longer to master skills, is the number of opportunities to teach, reteach and reinforce a skill in one day. In one study of three students working on phoneme segmentation, one student took one year to make any progress and a few months more for mastery, although the other two students reached mastery sooner (Allor, Mathes, Champlin, & Cheatham, 2009). In a Readers Workshop model, each 15 minutes activity can focus on the same one or two skills, easily incorporating both a phonics rule and a comprehension strategy on the same day, and thus increasing time spent on each skill daily. For example, the phonics rule for the sound of “ow” as in the words “brown” and “cow” and the comprehension strategy of following a pattern in text can both be presented with activities based on the children’s book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 1996).

Since students with intellectual disabilities may not have yet developed skills to read or comprehend meaningful text independently, explicit phonics instruction and sight word

instruction are necessary and might replace some of the independent reading and writing times. However, a limited number of studies have indicated that students with intellectual disabilities are not easily able to develop phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge before they read but rather as a consequence of reading itself, and suggest that we should teach beginning reading first (Erickson et al., 2009). This includes learning and manipulating letter names and sounds, reading simple text, and writing.

Other characteristics of a Readers Workshop classroom include a classroom library of books. In a general education classroom that accommodates needs of all students, including those with intellectual disabilities, average students, and high-achieving students, some books can be organized by topics or themes, and each grouping of books can include different readability levels, such as decodable books, easier books, advanced book, and even picture books. All students then can use the same types of books, if not the same books, to discover meaning. If the mini-lesson, for example, happens to be about characterization, a student can use pictures or text to identify and make inferences about the characters and both methods can be effective and interesting (Perlstein, 2001). Students with intellectual disabilities who might otherwise try to hide their difficulties can be taught to select appropriate books and can be graded by the teacher and their peers on comprehension skill acquisition rather than on reading level.

Discussion and Recommendations

“Literacy and reading instruction for students with significant intellectual disabilities is in its infancy....there is a dearth of information regarding complete instructional programs that might help these children learn to read and write” (Erickson et al., 2009, p. 132). In 2009, the National Early Literacy Panel (National Institute for Literacy, 2009) found that phonemic awareness, phonics, and knowledge of the alphabet all improved reading success in a comprehensive literacy program. Although the report did not include studies of students with intellectual disabilities, its recommendations for non-exclusive teaching of skills hint that these students also benefit from instruction in all areas of literacy. Instead, “we have a tendency to teach them skills in isolation, one on one, with hours of repetition and practice. We also tend to break everything down into its constituent parts, à la task analysis, and teach each of those skills to mastery” (Erickson et al., 2009, p. 59).

In my experiences as a special education teacher in classrooms containing both students with mild intellectual disabilities and students with emotional or behavioral disorders, all students were able to learn from each other. They learned at different rates and they learned at different levels of complexity, but they were all excited when they understood a text and shared their understanding with the class. We need to design and assess strategies that address all areas of literacy instruction. Students are often called to memorize sounds of diphthongs and blends, use them in nonsense words, and take timed tests on their spellings and on sight words but they are not asked to comprehend and communicate during reading classes. We must not neglect any areas of literacy instruction that will help students with intellectual disabilities function successfully.

Obviously additional research is needed before we revamp literacy education for students with intellectual disabilities and as technology changes literacy requirements for everyone, their needs will change also. I suggest that we need to help them put the individual skills of literacy instruction back together so they can comprehend meaning not only in written text but from other forms of verbal and visual communication. We do need to “do it all” for these students.

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