Meaningful Literacy for Students with Multisensory Needs: Thinking Beyond Just Reading & Writing

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January 30, 2021

Common perceptions of literacy
A traditional definition of literacy:
“Literacy generally refers to the ability to read and write. Reading and writing are symbolic systems that allow people to receive and send information across distances of time and space.” (Barbara Miles, 2005)

Question: Who might this definition of literacy exclude?

Barbara Miles wrote in 2005,
“Reading and writing are especially crucial for one whose world is narrowed because of vision and hearing losses. Literacy can enable such a person to exchange information and ideas, and develop relationships that would otherwise be out of reach.”

Literacy provides access
• The essential importance of promoting literacy for all lies in the access to information it provides us about our world as well as access to the people in it.
• For emergent communicators with limited vision and hearing this requires bringing print and language from the page to their bodies using multiple senses.

Barriers to promoting literacy skills for some students
• View of the individual and their interest and abilities.
• Student does not demonstrate understanding of symbolic representation.
• Lack of knowledge of what to teach and how to teach literacy to students who do not understand symbols have meaning.
• Lack of access to appropriate materials or curriculum for these students.
• Difficulty identifying times to teach emergent literacy skills.

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“If we think that literacy is only demonstrated through skills in reading and responding to print or braille text, then we are denying access to literacy instruction to countless children and youth.”

• (Hatlen, 2004; 2010).

7 Reasons to promote literacy skills
• Provide access to missing information.
• Develop communication skills.
• Provide student with a means to make choices, offer comments, respond to curriculum.
• Complete tasks of daily life.
• Build relationships through positive rituals and routines.
• Enjoy a pleasurable activity.

8 Literacy rests upon communication

“Literacy in its most basic form is the ability both to understand and to express one’s feelings, desires and experiences to others – a system of communication.” - Perkins Panda Resource Guide

Emergent literacy is a process that involves the development of language and concepts and begins at birth with simple expression and comprehension of ideas and feelings.

9 Literacy in Education

“Literacy has traditionally been thought of as reading and writing. ... Alberta Education defines literacy as the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living.”
10 Expanded notion of literacy
• Literacy is a *form of communication*. It serves as a means to share ideas, information, opinions, and feelings.
• Literacy can promote connections with others.
• Emergent literacy skills help students to understand that objects, photos, and pictures convey meaning and can be used to gather or share information.

11 Literacy and communication
• Students with multisensory needs require educators to think about literacy and their curriculum in a fundamentally different way—specifically linking emergent literacy instruction to communication.
• To adopt an expanded notion of literacy that is meaningful to students with emerging communication skills, we need to realize and accept that *communication* takes many forms beyond spoken language.

12 Emergent literacy
Where does *emergent literacy* fit into the day of child who is deafblind and communicating at a pre-symbolic level?
• Established routines
• Participation in enhanced environment
• Concept development
• Calendar systems
• Social connections through shared experiences

13 Routines
• Occur regularly and provide lots of opportunities for practice of new skills.
• Build symbolic understanding.
• Concepts of sequencing, order, time.
• Promotes independence and communicative initiations from child.
• Provides structure and security and decreases stress for child.

14  “Nature Walk” from Paths to Literacy website

One of the things an O&M instructor of mine used to do is to take students on a "nature walk". She would put masking tape on the student’s wrist sticky side out. As the students walked, if they found something interesting, they would pick it up and attach it to their tape bracelet. After they finished their walk, they’d bring the bracelet to me where I would then work with the student to create a story based on their walk and what they found.

By Liz Egan

15  Participation in enhanced environments

• Goal: Promote EXPOSURE to literacy skills.
• Make the classroom or home environment rich with language.
• Label things in the environment.
• Books and writing materials available.
• Accessible class or home library.
• Model literacy skills you use in daily routines.
• Add literacy skill development to a routine, such as using a calendar system, creating an experience book, use of home-school remnant book.

16  Concept Development

Concepts can be learned through:
• Consistent and repeated exposure.
• Opportunities to explore.
• Instruction in natural contexts.
• Interactions with materials using multiple senses.
• Connections to child’s personal experiences.

17  Literacy links to concept development

• Matching vocabulary and concepts included in story or lesson to student’s level of conceptual understanding.
• Connect information to direct experiences in child’s life.
• Repeated exposure and practice builds understanding.
• Repeated literacy experiences embedded in daily routines, theme for
Repeated literacy experiences embedded in daily routines, theme for the week or month.

18 **Literacy activities that can teach concepts**
- Calendar systems
- Experience books
- Story boxes or bags
- Journals made of object collages
- Tactile name cards with large photos
- Choosing book for story time everyday
- Recognition of favorite characters
- Recognizing text and symbols in the community

19 **Adapting books and activities**
- Children and youth who are deafblind need books and writing materials that are adapted to their unique vision, hearing, and physical needs.
- They also require learning activities that connect objects, pictures, letters, and words to what they already know and understand.

20 **Build upon experiences & current skills**
- Teachers must identify a child's current level of knowledge about their lived experiences and to provide learning experiences that expand these concepts.
- Requires in-depth knowledge of child’s receptive and expressive communication skills and predictable and consistent interactions with the child that help him or her process new information.
(Source: *Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss* website)

21 **Resource:** *Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss*

**EMPHASIS on EXPECTATIONS and OPPORTUNITIES**
• All children can learn and should be expected to do so.
• All children can become and are becoming literate.
• Literacy development is founded on experiences and concepts beginning very early in life.
• Literacy instruction must include a strong emphasis on communication and socialization.
• Literacy exists along a continuum from emergent literacy to independent literacy.

22 □ Readiness factors
Preparation of the right activities and materials rests upon a good match between the learner’s current skills and interest levels related to literacy and the planned activities and prepared materials.
• Determining current skill levels:
  • All Children Can Read: Literacy Skills Checklist (Purvis & Steele, 2016). This easy-to-use checklist will give you a snapshot of student’s skills, which can then be paired with these Steps to Literacy (Deaf-Blind Network Literacy Work Group, 2014).
• Determining interests:
  • Observation, conversations with family and former teachers, trial and error

23 □ Elements of Experience Books
• It tells a story.
• Artifacts are specific to the individual’s experiences and/or interests.
• Focused on individual’s experience and what is most meaningful to them.
• Text and/or braille included to promote literacy skills and provide reference for reading partner.
• Vocabulary & text are simple and meaningful.
• Sturdy construction.

24 □ Include the child or youth
• The experience book can be even more meaningful if the child helps in creating the book.
• Help gather and select materials for book.
• Help glue or adhere objects or photos to pages.
• Choose order of the story.
• Choose or select words or text to tell the story.

25 □ **How to use experience books:**
• Find a regular time to read together.
• Allow your child to choose which book to read.
• Practice early literacy skills of turning pages, looking or “touching” pictures and text or braille.
• Book can used to prepare for a weekly activity such as trip to the park or store.
• Child can connect and share with other family members by looking at book together.
• Book can be used as memory book to recall and converse about a past event, e.g. trip to zoo or a visit to grandparents.

26 □ **Creating adapted tactile books (1)**
• Select an age-appropriate book/story with clear visual images if child has some functional vision.
• Select book/story with a repeated line(s)
• Identify a salient tactile feature for key character, setting, event that are easily identifiable by child.
• Identify salient tactile feature for repeated line in story.

27 □ **Creating adapted tactile books (2)**
• Make sure pages of book are sturdy.
• Include text presented in large print or Braille or combination as needed.
• Binding should allow book to lie flat and encourage turning pages easily.
• If there is a sound feature, make sure it is clear and loud enough for child to hear.

28 □ **Story Box or Bag**
• Select age-appropriate book perhaps on a high-interest topic.
• Select items that specific part of the story.
• Can introduce vocabulary, concepts, prediction, sequencing, comprehension.
• Allow time for child to explore items and use repetition to build
association between items and story.
• Goal is not to identify letters or read, but to engage in and respond to the story with another person.

29  □ Shared Reading (1)
• First, have fun and don’t rush.
• Let child choose book when possible.
• Introduce elements of the book.
• Encourage book handling, page turning.
• Follow and comment on student’s interests.

30  □ Shared Reading (2)
• Vary your reading to suit the story—soft and slow, fast, high or low and try using character voices.
• Encourage the child to join in on repeated lines.
• Make comments about the story and pictures and connect parts of the story to your child’s experiences.
• Encourage questions/comments from the child.

31  □ Resource:
This website is the result of a joint project between Perkins School for the Blind and Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) to assist educators and families in the quest to provide literacy experiences for children who are blind or visually impaired or deafblind.

This site is an online hub for information related to literacy for students who are blind or visually impaired, including those with additional disabilities or deafblindness. It includes original content, as well as links to other sites and resources available on the web. (Source: Paths to Literacy website)

32  □ Considerations for learners with CVI
• Planning and creating literacy activities and lessons requires accurate assessment of CVI range level of learner.
• Common adaptations to reduce visual complexity:
  • One to two primary colors on dark background
  • Reduce visual & auditory clutter
  • Illuminate page or object
  • Use of shiny materials or tactile material with salient features
• Identify and highlight salient features
• Plenty of processing time

33 □ Literacy Resources for students with CVI
• Little Bear Sees
• Paths to Literacy
• Strategy to See
• Pinterest: Literacy Resources for CVI
• Roman Word Bubbling app

34 □ Questions? Comments?
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35 □ References
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