

## TEACHING STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES TO READ: THE NEED FOR RECONCILING CONSTRUCTIVISM

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### Abstract

*This article addresses the issues of helping students with severe disabilities to acquire literacy skills and how the conventional wisdom of teaching such students through the applied behavioral techniques should be reconsidered. It suggests that those who advocate for students with severe disabilities must reconcile the constructivist position and use it to refine the pedagogy that will be used to help students with severe disabilities to become literate.*

In the 1997 reauthorization of the federal special education law (IDEA-97) literacy access for all students was ensured. In the 2004 reauthorization, Congress reiterated its intention that all students have access and show adequate yearly progress in learning to read and write. Yet, despite the law, students with severe disabilities remain at high risk of experiencing substandard literacy experiences in their schools. Their special education teachers are not typically trained in understanding literacy development, often have lower literacy expectations for their students, and do not spend adequate time in the classroom exposing children to and teaching literacy skills. Programs for students with severe disabilities are often based on paired associate learning tasks or skill-based phonics programs, with little attention paid to comprehension and helping students to construct a real understanding of the big ideas of reading. This article will address the issues of helping students with severe disabilities to acquire literacy skills and how conventional wisdom of teaching such students through the applied behavioral techniques should be reconsidered.

While research abounds on best practices for literacy instruction for students with learning disabilities and students at-risk, there is a paucity of evidence documenting best practices in literacy instruction for students with more intensive special needs. Browder and Xin (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of the research on sight word teaching practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities and found that procedures to teach sight words to these students included rote, table-top approaches and did not evaluate the functional use of learned words. Instead, the authors suggested, they used a "train and hope" approach. Conventional wisdom has suggested that students with severe disabilities could only learn through the use of behavioral techniques, including many hours of applied behavioral analysis. However, more current research suggests that integrated constructivist approaches, rather than reductionist interventions may promote learning in this population of students (Katims, 2000a).

Although the practice of inclusion has opened classroom doors to students with more severe disabilities, there is evidence that many of them are not being "invited to join the literacy curriculum" in their classrooms (Kliewer, 1998). Discouraged with the seeming lack of progress to develop early literacy skills, practitioners who work with students with more intensive special needs often move away from the more traditional "general" education curriculum after the primary grades (Katims, 1991). They spend more time on vocational and life-centered learning curriculums. When they do continue to work on literacy skills, the time allocated to instruction generally does not match that given to students with

less significant disabilities (Erikson, 2002) and practices used tend to rely on principles of applied behavioral analysis (Katims, 2000a). As a result, many students with intensive special needs often do not experience the intensive literacy instruction that is necessary for them to become literate (Katims, 1991).

In this article I suggest that embracing the concepts and principles of constructivists' approaches to learning may help teachers of students with severe disabilities to improve the literacy skills of their students. Constructivism holds the view that students create or construct their notion of the world, through their experiences; each experience building on existing schema. As experiences change and grow, as students re-experience, they develop powerful networks that connect these experiences, enlarging their schema. Abbott and Ryan (1999) suggest that the human brain searches for meaning; making a "living web of understanding" that allows children to make sense of the world, become problem solvers and develop creative ideas. New learning is created from the interaction of new experiences and old experiences (Poplin, 1988). Poplin argues that the best predictor of what students will learn is what they already know and what interests them. She suggests that learning does not occur in sequential steps, within a set scope and sequence and that too much "form" will actually result in dysfluency in learning. Constructivists also believe that learners control their learning in individual ways (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Ryndak, Morrison, and Sommerstein (1999) reported the case of the student with severe disabilities who spent the first ten years of her academic career in a self contained classroom. Concerned with lack of progress academically and regression in her behavior, the student was subsequently placed in a more integrated setting, which resulted in marked improvement in all literacy areas. This progress was attributed to: 1) inclusion with less severe disabilities and non-disabled peers; 2) higher performance expectations of teachers; 3) use of daily routines as instructional opportunities; 4) and encouragement of the use of skills in meaningful, constructive ways. The authors suggested that immersion in a literacy rich environment and an immersion in opportunities to use literacy skills in meaningful contexts may be effective practices for students with severe disabilities. The need for students with severe disabilities to be immersed in literacy contexts has been demonstrated and promoted by a number of researchers in the field (Koppenhaver, Pierce, Steelman & Yoder, 1995; Saint-Laurent, Giasson & Couture, 1997; Stratton, (1996). As these researchers suggest, teachers of students with severe disabilities need to embrace the notion that all children are active, constructing learners who seek to make some sense of what they perceive in their environment.

In order to do this, teachers must examine first their own expectations for their students. They must not allow student labels to interfere with their expectations that all students can learn. Klierer and Landis (1999) examined teacher perceptions of students with severe disabilities and found that many teachers maintained an institutionalized understanding of students, that is, these understandings were based on "laws" about mental retardation, rather than understandings based on students' behavior. The authors found that there was a positive correlation between beliefs that children can learn with richer learning experiences and a wider array of texts in both the home and the school. Institutionalized understandings narrowed students' access to literacy. One teacher interviewed in this study remarked, "We assumed he couldn't read because he had Downs" (p. 89).

Secondly, teachers must examine their own beliefs about how students learn. In recent years research has consistently suggested that while paired-associate, rote learning techniques can successfully teach students with severe disabilities to read sight words, there is little evidence that this skill development generalizes across settings. Browder and Xin (1998) found that in over 90% of the sight word literature, there were no comprehension measures used to ascertain that some functional use was derived from such learning. Teachers of students with severe disabilities must examine more recent

research that suggests that constructivist approaches to literacy development have been effective with this population of students. These would include approaches that embrace constructivist pedagogy, such as suggested by Katims (2000b) in a Council for Exceptional Children monograph of procedures for teaching students with mental retardation. These include well constructed literacy experiences derived from natural contexts and learning experiences that are student-centered, holistic, conceptual and meaningful (Reid, Kurkjian, & Carruthers, (1994). Teachers must promote conceptual development through the children's interactions with print in meaningful activities. Helping students to appreciate meaningful logos in their environment, teaching symbol/word matching of important, meaningful and useful words, creating and reading language experience stories, reading predictable books, and shared writing are some of the activities that will promote emergent literacy skills. Teaching students to "read" sight words through errorless, programmed learning materials may be misguided and misplaced instruction, in the same way that teaching phonics may be to students who have not developed the concept of phonological awareness. Teachers must ensure that learning experiences are integrated and used effectively by students. Teachers must utilize constructivist approaches to help students develop important concepts. While individual learning styles are helpful in planning for literacy instruction, it may be important to examine the student's reading/writing behaviors or their rudiments and determine students' understanding of literacy concepts in order to determine appropriate pedagogy for them.

I believe that special educators, and indeed parents, general educators, and others who advocate for students with severe disabilities must reconcile the constructivist position and use it to refine the pedagogy that will be used to help students with severe disabilities to become literate. As teachers of students with severe disabilities we have much to learn from the constructivists and their understanding of how students learn. We must believe that all students are active, searchers of meaning, regardless of their disability and secondly, we must use this understanding to examine students' concepts of literacy. Only then can we develop the most effective pedagogies to help students become literate.

As teachers of literacy, we must not only accept, but embrace the challenges that inclusive programming and No Child Left Behind offer. As special educators we must work to ensure literacy access for all students, not merely their physical presence in general education classrooms. We must help general education teachers look beyond student labels. We must empower them to apply their knowledge of literacy learning when working with students with disabilities. We must ensure that literacy learning does not become a decontextualized, stimulus-response activity, that holds little utility and meaning for its greater application and generalization in learning to read. Finally, we provide students with an enriched literacy curriculum, become keen observers of students' interaction with print, and relish the small steps in literacy growth that indicate students' understandings.

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