Promoting Literacy for All: Thinking Beyond Just Reading & Writing
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“Each person who is deaf-blind—whatever her sensory, mental, and physical abilities—deserves the opportunity to become literate in all the ways of which she is capable. 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.”
~Barbara Miles (2005)

Abstract: This article shares information about the importance emergent literacy development for those children and youth who are deafblind and not yet proficient communicators and/or learned that symbols have meaning. In addition to discussing the purpose of emergent literacy instruction for all learners, suggestions for when and how to plan and provide meaningful literacy instruction both at school and home will be offered. The article also includes links to multiple literacy resources available on the internet.

There are few things I enjoy in life as much as spending time reading a good book or article in a favorite magazine. A smile crosses my face whenever I happen across a child reading or listening to someone read. I still clearly remember the sound of my mother’s voice as she read books to me before I could do it myself and reading books with my own children was one of sweetest parts of my day when they were young. When I begin to think of all of the times and ways we use literacy skills each day to complete a myriad of tasks and chores at work and home, as well as, to share our thoughts, opinions, ideas and feelings with others through texts, social media posts, notes and letters, the list seems never-ending. It’s no wonder that literacy remains such an important targeted focus in areas of child development, education, and career preparation.

I believe that literacy development should be a targeted focus for all children, including those who don’t demonstrate a discernible interest or the prerequisite skills for reading and writing, and it is a constant focus in my work supporting school teams and families. In my work I find that the topic of literacy and children and youth with deafblindness, especially those with additional disabilities, usually brings up many questions and reveals many assumptions about the relevance of literacy development for ALL children. These questions and assumptions are understandable given the unique learning profiles, skills, interests, and needs of these learners. Some of the questions I hear relate to ways of providing relevant access to similar literacy activities as same-age peers. Others focus on identifying meaningful access points and opportunities for practice. Finally, many center on how to practice communication skills and build social connections through literacy development. This topic and these questions have been pondered and discussed in depth and with great clarity and creativity by Barbara Miles (2005), and Phil Hatlen (2004; 2010) and I encourage you to read their classic articles. (Links to both articles appear at the end of this article)
In this article I’d like to share my own thoughts and some suggestions for meaningful ways to promote literacy skill development, both at home and school, for children and youth with additional disabilities who need direct experience within the context of meaningful routines to develop a stronger understanding of symbolic communication. There are many wonderful, helpful resources related to this topic on the internet (articles, videos, webcasts, checklists, photo examples) and it’s my hope this article will steer you towards some of them.

**How do we define literacy?** In 2005 Barbra Miles shared this definition: “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.” In my mind it’s important realize that at its base, literacy is a form of communication. It serves as means to share ideas, information, opinions, and feelings. In fact, research has demonstrated a strong correlation between the development of literacy and communication skills especially for learners who use augmentative or alternative systems of communication (Downing, 2005). Miles (2005) also pointed out that the educational research field is equally interested in emergent literacy, which recognizes that literacy development is a process, typically occurring in childhood, that involves cognitive, social, psychological, and linguistic processes (Bloom & Green, 1984). Emergent literacy allows you to understand that even a learner who doesn’t yet understand symbols have meaning can participate in carefully planned literacy-based activities that will promote the development of symbolic representation in both literacy and communication and provide meaningful contexts for the development of social relationships.

Phil Hatlen explained in his article *Literacy According to Phil* (2010), that media literacy – instruction in interpreting the images and sounds of our multi-media world – is also a highly relevant educational practice due to the ever-increasing use of digital media and image-based printed information children and youth are exposed to today. When one considers literacy from the viewpoint of both emergent literacy and media literacy, it is much easier to recognize that putting together a daily schedule of tactile objects or photos, or sharing a remnant or souvenir from a weekend activity in memory book, or exploring and categorizing objects covered in different textures is evidence of meaningful literacy skill development.

**Why is literacy important for children who are deafblind with additional disabilities?**

Miles (2005) explained beautifully in her article, *Literacy for Persons Who are Deaf-blind*, the need to adopt an expanded notion of literacy beyond simply reading and writing when instructing these learners. Emergent literacy focuses on the social, psychological and linguistic benefits of literacy instruction which can help families and educators to connect various literacy activities to the unique, and likely, multiple modes of communication of a child. I agree with Miles that promoting literacy is essentially important as an issue of access to information about our world as well as access to the people in it. Helping students to understand that objects, photos, and pictures convey meaning and can be used to gather or share information is extremely powerful and certainly fits into an expanded definition of literacy. This wider umbrella of literacy allows you to better understand why literacy goals and activities should be included in every child’s daily home routine and school program.
How will I know a child is ready for literacy instruction and experiences?

In my experience working with teachers and service providers who support learners with more complex support needs who do not effectively use a symbolic communication system, it often seems that “readiness” appears to be a criteria for considering literacy activities. I personally find this is a very limiting view. I always encourage school teams to identify multiple ways to promote interest in literacy for these students and to think of ALL of the possibilities to promote literacy skills. Hatlen expressed in 2004, “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). This seems to me a very dangerous path to follow and instead we need to assume these learners can find enjoyment and develop skills in literacy, even at an emerging level, that will enhance their understanding of their world and connect them to the people, places and things in their world.

So, when is a child ready? As soon as you have engaging activities and materials prepared to share with them. Preparing 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. A good place to start with determining those skills and interest levels is the All Children Can Read: Literacy Skills Checklist (B. Purvis & N. Steele, 2016) found on the Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss website. This easy-to-use checklist will give you a snapshot of their skills, which can then be paired with these Steps to Literacy (Deaf-Blind Network Literacy Work Group, 2014) to identify potential learning targets and literacy activities. This website is a goldmine for educators and families looking for ideas for activities and additional links to resources specific to the child’s literacy skill level.

When should I plan literacy instruction?

Barbara Miles (2005) reminded us of the simple fact that literacy is a social endeavor when she wrote, “We know literacy goes far beyond the reading and writing done in class. Each of us engages in and practices meaningful literacy in a variety of pragmatic ways everyday, many of them for social reasons.” For a child who is deafblind literacy activities will most often be shared with another partner. Some activities naturally necessitate a partner such as a bedtime story routine, story time in school, or buddy reading. At other times engaging in a “conversation” about a prior shared experience creates a literacy experience that also promotes communication and social skills practice. Examples of these conversations include: creating and then exploring an experience book together; or joining the child’s in assembling their schedule using objects or photos or pictures at the beginning of the day.
There are many pragmatic functions of literacy that all children are introduced to and practice each day. As you plan your literacy instruction and activities for the day, ask yourself “How can I offer a learner who is deafblind, especially one who has not yet developed a symbolic level of communication, similar meaningful opportunities?” Start with listing all the daily routines of your class or family, and which of these routines include potential literacy activities; then look for specific tasks or roles in which the child could participate, such as turning pages of a book or pushing switch that says “turn the page”; feeling a tactile marker on each student’s name card during attendance; using tactile objects to make choice or offer response during reading center or at when reading at home; collecting leaves and acorns on walk to create journal entry or collage. Many teachers and families wisely focus on goals that promote a child’s independence and participation in daily life activities. Here again there are multiple opportunities to practice literacy skills. Some examples include: using a tactile or photo checklist or guide to complete a class activity or routine at home or shopping trip to the store; helping complete their home-school journals; or following a recipe card of photos or objects to make a simple snack or meal.

How should I adapt my instruction and materials to ensure accessibility?

This is probably the most essential question to ask yourself when planning your class activities for the day or home routines for a learner who is deafblind. A good first step is consider employing universal design for learning (UDL) principles: representation (the “what” in learning); action and expression (the “how” in learning); and engagement (the “why” in learning). I can’t think of better resource for explaining and illustrating the use of UDL than Elizabeth Hartmann’s brief, informative article Universal Design for Learning (2011) and accompanying webcast from the Perkins e-Learning site.

Another resource I often share with teachers, service providers, and families is the Paths to Literacy website and listserv. This website holds a treasure trove of ideas and personal stories — many that provide specific directions and with photos for creating and using materials, activities and games. New stories, activities, resource ideas are updated constantly and as parent or teacher of a child who is deafblind this would be high on my bookmarked list of websites.

Certainly you will consider the child’s hearing and vision losses or limitations when planning and developing adaptations, but it’s also important to match the instruction and materials to the learners’s
level of understanding and individual interests. When a child has difficulty accessing books and other print or digital materials through vision and hearing, it can be more difficult to interest the child in literacy activities. I think the best approach here is to build the literacy activities and materials around the child's interests. An example I often share with teachers and families is a wonderful video, called He Likes Wheels, not Books, created by the Washington Sensory Disabilities Project, illustrating an experience book for a little boy who loved to spin wheels on toy cars but showed no interest in books. His team created a book that included different types of spinning wheels within the pages of the book that sparked his interest and allowed them to introduce books and early literacy skills to him.

It's also important to ensure the materials, vocabulary and concepts are well matched to the child's level of conceptual understanding. This does not mean material or content need to be watered down or that you use materials designed for younger children. In fact, extra care must be taken to ensure the materials and content are age-appropriate, relevant, and as much as possible, connected to the child's real life. We need to ensure that the information shared in literacy activities has relevance for the child based on their personal direct experiences and the people, places, and things in their world. Some examples of relevant literacy activities and materials to try include: memory boxes or books; experience (or object) books; assembling journal entries through collage of objects; creating a personal dictionary; and exploring books through use of story boxes or multisensory books with that include multiple ways to interact with the material such as through touch, movement, and perhaps even smell.

I hope the thoughts and suggested practices and resources I've shared have encouraged you to try to incorporate more literacy activities in your class or, if you're a parent, at home. On the following pages I've provided a list of online literacy resources specific to deafblindness that I think you'll find helpful.

I'd love to hear your thoughts, comments, or questions about this article and I'm always interested in learning about new ideas, activities, and resources for literacy development, so please contact me at jmaier@sfsu.edu to share anything you'd like.
Literacy Resources for School Teams

We’re fortunate that many knowledgeable, experienced, and dedicated educators in the field of deafblindness have been developing and sharing useful and relevant information about literacy development and instruction with others in the field for many years. The collaboration within the network of various deafblind projects across the country has also led to the development of wonderfully rich resources. Here are some of our favorite literacy resources:

Path to Literacy: “This website is a joint project between Perkins School for the Blind and Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and is intended to be 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. Some materials have been summarized, with a link to the full resource. In cases where information is available free of charge on the web, they have linked directly to articles and other resources. In cases where information is sold, they have linked to the web address or URL where more information can be found. Some of the information and photographs have also been posted with permission.” [From Paths to Literacy website]

Paths to Literacy website: http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/

Link on Paths to Literacy site regarding students with vision impairments and additional disabilities: http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/multiple-disabilities

Link on Paths to Literacy site regarding importance of routines for teaching concepts and emergent literacy through establishment of routines: http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/developing-routines

Link on Paths to Literacy site regarding creating and using story boxes for literacy development: http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/storybox-ideas-norma-drisse

Link on Paths to Literacy site regarding creation and use of tactile schedules: http://www.pathstoliteracy.org стратегии/тактического_плана-студентов-с_дефектами_объективного_посудом и дополнительно_инвалиды


**Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss:** “This site is for individuals interested in beginning or enhancing literacy instruction for children with combined vision and hearing loss. Its content is also designed to improve literacy instruction for children with multiple disabilities and other complex learning challenges. Our contributors include State Deaf-Blind Project staff as well as teachers who want to give back to the field and help more families play a role in educating children with complex learning challenges. The instructional techniques and tips provided on this site include evidence-based practices for increasing literacy skills. It is recommended that you visit the Shifting the Perspective page for an explanation of literacy from a broader view. If you are looking for resources for a particular child, completing the Literacy Skills Checklist provides guidance in determining which area of the website will be most helpful.” [From Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss website]


**Perkins e-learning Webcast: Accessible books and literacy:**

**Supporting and encouraging a love of literacy**

1 hour webinar from Perkins School by Sandy Kenrick, parent

“Sandy Kenrick is the mother of two young boys. Liam, her six-year old son, became deafblind at the age of two and a half after an illness. In this webinar, she describes how she helps develop her son’s literacy skills and his love for books through making tactile, accessible books to support his interests, concept development, IEP goals, and general love learning. Sandy shares her rich ideas about how to support literacy for the individual child and also within her whole community.” [From Perkins e-learning website]

**Washington Sensory Disabilities Services: Experience Books**
This site offers an introduction, a series of videos that explain how to make and use experience books and show unique examples of books, an FAQ page, and additional resources and links:

“Experience books differ from traditional books in that:
• Experience books are created with a specific reader in mind.
• The story is based on an experience or interest of the target reader.
• The objects included in the experience book are particular to the experience or interest of the student for whom the book is made.
• The words written (and, when appropriate, brailled) on the pages are chosen for a particular student.

There are many different ways to make experience books. Several examples appear in the videos on this page. Identifying the desired outcome (for example: communication, structured interaction, consistency of vocabulary, reinforcement of familiar routines) will help to determine the appropriate format and content.”
[From Washington Sensory Disabilities Services website]

http://www.wsdsonline.org/video-experience-books/

**Making Object Books** by MaryAnn Demchak from Nevada Dual Sensory Impairment Project Newsletter
This is a wonderful one-page article describes types of object, or experience, books and provides tips on how to make and use an object book for a child with accompanying photos examples.


**Project SALUTE: Emergent Literacy for Children Who are Deaf-blind**
This information sheet includes practical and relatable suggestions for multiple activities that include direct experiential learning to build a learner’s literacy and communication skills.

http://projectsalute.net/Learned/Learnedhtml/EmergentLit.html

**Texas Deafblind Project: Creating and Using Tactile Experience Books for Young Children with Visual Impairments**
This resource offers a detailed information about many levels of adapted books for learners with vision and hearing loss, including specific descriptions of several tactile experience books.

References:


The contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T130031. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer: Jo Ann McCann.