
in the expanded core curriculum in the area of compensatory skills. In my view, reading and writing is clearly a part of the core curriculum for all students, and I think that separating “communication modes” from reading and writing is part of what has led to the practice of seeing braille instruction as somehow separate from reading instruction. I believe that teachers of students with visual impairments should be closely and directly involved in all areas of the core curriculum and the expanded core curriculum, and that these teachers should be directly responsible for certain curriculum regardless of whether or not it fits in the expanded core curriculum. Considering braille as a “communication mode” that fits in the category of compensatory skills might work for students who have print reading skills and are learning braille as a “compensation” for vision loss, but it does not fit into this catchall category for young children who are learning to read and write for the first time in braille. I think it is time for us to revisit the expanded core curriculum and make sure that the line between the core curriculum and the expanded core curriculum is a little less well defined.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS?

I alluded to responsibility of administrators in the opening paragraph of this essay. I cannot feel comfortable closing this perspective without pointing out that regardless of the qualifications of teachers (both teachers of students with visual impairments and classroom teachers), we will not be able to effectively teach reading to students with visual impairments if we do not have the appropriate administrative support. Universities could do a beautiful job of incorporating teaching reading in their preparation programs and graduate hundreds of qualified teachers of students with visual impairments each year, but if case-loads continue to be too high and geographically inaccessible so that teachers cannot provide ongoing, consistent, direct instruc-

tion, the “job” of teaching reading to these students will continue to present enormous challenges.

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Reflections on Teaching Reading in Braille

Anna M. Swenson

A five-year-old’s tiny fingers move hesitantly across a line of braille characters, searching for the first letter of her name Four years later, these same fingers race across page 500 of a Harry Potter novel in an all-consuming effort to discover whether her hero lives or dies.

Such are the intangible rewards of teaching. During my three decades as a teacher of students who are visually impaired, nothing has given me greater pleasure and fulfillment than teaching reading to young children who use braille. All of us who interact with these students—teachers of students with visual impairments, classroom teachers, parents, orientation and mobility instructors, and others—have a role to play in their literacy development. However, it is my belief that the teacher of visually impaired students is initially responsible for laying the foundation of literacy skills that will create strong, motivated readers. Quite simply, teaching braille to a young child means teaching reading. The two are inseparable.

Preliminary results from the ABC Braille Study indicate only about half of the students followed from kindergarten through third or fourth grade during the study remained on grade level in reading (Barclay, D’Andrea, Erin, Hannan, Holbrook, Sacks, & Wormsley, 2007). This is a finding of great concern, given the importance of reading for educational and vocational success. The problem

appears to be broader and more complex than whether students were taught in contracted or uncontracted braille. Even before more detailed analyses are completed, these results point to the importance of the involvement of teachers of visually impaired students in all aspects of their students' literacy development—from teaching beginning reading skills and the braille code to promoting fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension skills. In advocating for appropriate services for all students, Phil Hatlen recently wrote, "We cannot continue to sacrifice literacy for inclusion" (2007). Although I suspect he was referring to the role of residential schools in the continuum of services for students with visual impairments, his words carry a message for those of us in the public schools. Beginning braille readers require significant one-on-one time with teachers of students with visual impairments in the first years of their literacy learning. Although, because of this one-on-one instruction, they may miss inclusion in some mainstream language arts activities, literacy needs to be the first priority of teachers of visually impaired students. Braille readers have a much greater chance of participating fully in mainstream literacy instruction during the remainder of their schooling if they develop solid literacy skills and a positive attitude toward reading and writing in their first few years of school.

IS A SEPARATE CURRICULUM NECESSARY?

People sometimes ask me to recommend a braille curriculum. On the surface, this sounds like the perfect solution for teaching braille—a preset sequence of letters and contractions with ready-made drills, activities, and assessments. However, I believe separating instruction in the braille code from other literacy instruction wastes valuable time when students could be learning the code using the meaningful, motivating materials that are currently available. This assertion does not mean that teachers of visually im-

paired students do not use teacher-made or commercially available materials to focus on specific aspects of the braille code; our goal, though, is to insert these isolated skills quickly into broader literacy instruction. Rather than relying on a single approach or program for teaching reading to braille students, we can strive to "thoughtfully adapt" (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999) a variety of methods and materials to match students' individual needs and interests. Motivation is the key to success in literacy instruction. By demonstrating genuine enthusiasm for a child's interests and integrating them into instruction, we can provide the student with authentic reasons for persevering and achieving.

Learning to read is hard work for many children, both sighted and blind. There is so much to remember! As they read, children need to identify letters and contractions, match them to sounds, blend the sounds together, recognize words, and think about the meaning of the text. Background knowledge and a strong vocabulary are critical for reading comprehension—especially for our students who cannot benefit from picture clues. In braille, there is an additional layer of complexity created by the greater number of symbols compared with print, the similarities among characters (one missed dot changes the meaning entirely), and the need to develop efficient hand movements. Most braille readers require additional time to achieve automatic, fluent reading. In my experience, it can take a year or more for young students without additional disabilities to master the braille alphabet, numbers, punctuation marks, and some common contractions. However, we don't have to wait for this magic moment before children can begin "real" reading.

INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH

Beginning readers need opportunities to practice the individual components of language—letters, contractions, sounds, and words—and to read continuous text in sentences and

simple stories so that meaning remains the primary focus of instruction. There is nothing sacred about the “letter of the week,” which is an approach so commonly used in kindergarten classes, nor is it necessarily the most effective practice to introduce the letters of the alphabet in order. Rather, our youngest students may be more motivated by letters and words with which they have an emotional connection: the first letter of their name or a favorite activity (“l” for “lunch,” for example), the names of family members and friends, and common contractions, like “and” or “can,” that can be used to link known words into continuous text. Children invest in their own learning as they help select letters and words to learn, with guidance from the teacher of visually impaired students. And, as soon as they know a few of these letters and words, they can begin to read and write sentences about people, places, and activities familiar to them. Authentic literacy activities, such as reading teacher-made stories, writing letters using temporary spelling (that is, a developmental form of spelling in which young children write the letters corresponding to the sounds they hear in words), and creating student-authored books become essential aspects of their early literacy learning. Providing children with authentic reading experiences requires time—not just daily blocks of time with the students, but also time for teachers of students with visual impairments to explore general education and braille-related resources related to teaching reading. Teachers need the confidence to decide when it makes sense to adapt mainstream literacy activities and when it would be more effective to customize instruction for a beginning reader.

The intense, individualized reading approach for beginning braille readers just described may diverge significantly from the mainstream curriculum. However, as children develop braille literacy skills, they move from mainly auditory participation in the mainstream classroom to full-fledged membership

in the reading and writing community. The classroom teacher then assumes a greater role in teaching reading as braille readers join reading groups and participate in other literacy activities. The teaching of reading becomes a partnership shared by the classroom teacher, the teacher of visually impaired students, and the parents, who support daily reading at home.

Children without additional disabilities should be expected to read braille on grade level, provided they have the necessary foundation in literacy skills, appropriate braille materials, and ongoing involvement of teachers of students with visual impairments. Busy classroom teachers may assume it is normal for braille readers to lag behind their sighted peers in areas such as fluency or comprehension. As teachers of visually impaired students, we have the responsibility to advocate for our students with reading problems. This advocacy may involve consulting with specialists (could it be a learning disability?), locating resources (would a fluency program help?), and providing targeted supplemental instruction, if necessary. Braille readers with additional disabilities may require a greater proportion of their reading instruction from teachers of visually impaired students to ensure that they reach their literacy potential.

Like the zoom lens of a camera, our focus on individual students constantly shifts between the minute details of day-to-day instruction and the long-term goal of the students becoming successful readers. I have often said that there is no “right way” to teach braille reading; in fact, I set about it a little differently with each student. I do believe, however, that teachers of visually impaired students must be directly involved with reading instruction and that teaching the braille code within the broader context of literacy learning is both motivating for students and effective. Learning to read braille requires perseverance on the part of teachers and students and a belief in the inevitability of

success. By crafting a flexible approach that combines the best of individualized and mainstream instruction, teachers of visually impaired students have a good chance of instilling not only reading competencies, but also a love of reading in their students.

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