

READING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

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Language experiences helps students develop the understanding of reading and writing. A constructivist approach to teaching reading to students whom are severely learning disabled has been shown to help students. Teaching reading to students with disabilities can be a difficult task and when the student has a severe disability, it is more challenging. Students labeled as severely learning disabled are usually placed in self contained classrooms, where the students are isolated from other students and activities in which they should be engaging in. Research shows that mainstreaming the severely learning disabled student into a regular classroom improves their performance. This article examines students with severe reading disabilities and ways to help remediate this concern.

Learning to read for students with severe learning disabilities can be very challenging and extremely discouraging. Typical reading problems that students with severe learning disabilities include: not being able to discriminate letters or produce letter sounds to having moderate to severe reversal problems in writing letters and numbers beyond the school norm. Some have difficulties in blending letter sounds, while others could identify letters but have no concept of words (Ward 2005). Seeing that these kinds of students have an extreme disability in understanding print, they therefore have no interest in literacy activities.

Language experiences helps students develop the understanding of reading and writing. This approach helps students develop confidence in their connection to reading and motivates them to challenge themselves to reading texts. Even though reading requires phonemic awareness,

skills that severely learning disabled students don't have, those skills can be developed through the use of students language experiences.

A constructivist approach to teaching reading to students whom are severely learning disabled has been shown to help students. Helping students to remember words in which they can't remember by seeing, using pictures is a good teaching technique to use to help students to learn to read. Using "sight words" also helps students to read (Gately 2007).

Students labeled as severely learning disabled are usually placed in self contained classrooms, where the students are isolated from other students and activities in which they should be engaging in. What teachers don't realize that this does more harm than good. Research shows that by mainstreaming the severely learning disabled student into a regular classroom improves their performance in all forms

of literacy because (1) they are with less severe disabilities and disabled peers, (2) higher performance expectations of teachers, (3) use of daily routines as instructional opportunities and (4) encouragement of the use of skills in meaningful, constructive ways (Gately, 2007). In order for this technique to be successful, teachers are the ones who play the biggest role. The teachers of the students with severe disabilities need to embrace the fact that children are active, constructive learners and everyone has the ability to learn, learning disabled or not.

Another challenge a teacher may run into in the classroom may not be with a severely learning disabled student, but rather a severely autistic student. Teaching children with autism is a challenging experience. These children often can't speak, which means they can't communicate their feelings or tell you when they're feeling a specific way. You may not know when they're learning or even if they're learning. Autistic children have a very unique set of challenges that requires a parent or teacher to have a lot of patience. Sometimes they can be very cooperative, but for the most part, autistic children have significant problems with attention span, lack any type of motivation to learn to read, and have problems with figuring out the rules of reading and grammar when compared to children who do not have autism. Like students with severe learning disabilities, severe autistic children learn in pictures as well. They better relate words to pictures, then just using words in general. When teaching the severely autistic student to read, it may be difficult for the educator to know that they are learning as

they don't have good communication skills. If the child is able to match the printed word to the correct picture, object, or person, he or she has both recognized the word and comprehends its meaning (Broun, 2004). Reading to the child on a regular bases and choosing books a couple years below their level will help the student to better comprehend the context in which the reading is about.

Teaching reading to students with disabilities can be a difficult task, when the student has a severe disability, it is more challenging. The articles being reviewed involve students with severe reading disabilities, severe dyslexia, and severe autism.

Denton (2006) examined 27 students with severe reading difficulties and disabilities over a 16- week intervention. The two types of intervention were decoding and fluency. The decoding intervention was based on the Phono-Graphix program and was conducted 2 hours per day for 8 weeks. The fluency intervention was based on the Read Naturally program and was conducted 1 hour of daily instruction for 8 weeks. After 16 weeks, there was significant improvement in reading decoding, fluency, and comprehension, and 12 of the 27 students showed a significant response to these interventions. The result demonstrated that even students with persistent, severe reading difficulties can benefit from intensive reading intervention.

A case study conducted by Cooke (2002) focused on a student who has severe dyslexia and entered college with no reading and writing skills. The student could only recognize few words, had difficulty with spelling simple words, and had poor

handwriting. The student started the process of learning to read just like younger children do and followed a structured phonetic progression, including onset and rime. The aim was to develop the phonemic and phonological skills through word writing. Exercises and drills were used to gain that automatic response. Handwriting was introduced to the student when she decided to overcome it. The student began to master whole word pronunciation and was able to read simple sentences.

Children with severe disabilities have a hard time learning how to read, but there are ways that teachers can help them. One way of helping them is getting non-readers to use symbols to recognize words. The effective use of symbols in recognizing words was compared to just the word alone recognition. The children had a much easier time recognizing the word with a picture than they did just seeing a word and being able to say it. Figure three in the article shows the number of words recognized at each session. There are three different bars being compared.

Many researchers attempted to find remediation techniques and ways to prevent severe reading disabilities. Results indicated that students in the phonological awareness and synthetic phonics group had the most improvement over a two and a half year period. Basil and Reyes (2003) stated, "Many students with autism, intellectual impairment, and multiple impairments experience difficulties in acquiring literacy skills. An intervention program based on the multimedia software Delta Messages and a scaffolding approach was used with severely disabled children. They showed significant gains in sentence

production through a whole-word selection strategy, which was targeted in the program, and in the ability to synthesis and spell words, tasks that were not targeted in the reading instruction. This suggests that massed practice of self-initiated and meaningful literacy activities can promote the acquisition of literacy by students with severe disabilities and limited written language skills".

According to Blischak, Shah, Lombardino, and Chiarella (2004), children need to be able to read and write to not only communicate but to be accepted socially and to succeed in life. In their study, they focused on the effects of phonemic awareness instruction on children with severe speech impairments (SSI). Phonemic awareness is the ability to be aware of the sound structure of language and allows readers to manipulate phonemes. Children with SSI often use phonemic awareness skills to decode words but not to spell them. The results of the study showed that instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondence and phonemic segmentation and manipulation can increase the encoding skills of children with SSI. The study further showed that methods used to help children without SSI develop encoding skills could help children with SSI as well.

Coleman-Martin, Heller, Cihak, and Irvine (2005) also focused on students with severe speech impairments as well as students with autism. Focus was placed on these disabilities because they are especially at risk of academic failure due to their lack of speech skills. Because these students cannot speak, they need to learn to internally speak phonological codes to decode and encode words. This has moti-

vated the participants to learn because they were required to use a computer, but also allowed them to learn target words with repetitive practice.

Devault and Joseph (2004) focused their study on high school students with severe reading delays. They emphasized that one of the most important goals of reading instruction is helping students to identify words effortlessly because without this skill they will read too slowly to comprehend a text. Two methods to help students identify words effortlessly are repeated readings and word boxes. Repeated readings can help with fluency and comprehension, while word boxes, a technique used in reading recovery, can help children make letter-sound correspondences and help them identify letter-sound sequence patterns. With word boxes, a rectangle drawn on paper is divided into sections according to the number of sounds in a word. As the child speaks sounds, they push letters into the appropriate sections. Both techniques have had success with elementary level students, but neither has been used with high school students to increase their reading abilities.

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