# Current literacy skills, practices, and dispositions of teachers: a case study

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to address the current literacy skills, practices, and dispositions of teachers who educate students with significant disabilities. It sought to address two questions including how do teachers who educate students with significant disabilities design and implement literacy instruction, and how do teachers who educate students with significant disabilities assess instruction to track students' progress and make instructional decisions. Participants in the study included one special education teacher, five students, two paraeducators, and one speech-therapy. The study included personal observation in one special education classroom and an interview for the teacher. Result of the study indicated that designing and implementing literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities engage individualizing instructions according to students' unique abilities, practicing literacy throughout the day, and arranging literacy instruction to the state common core.

Keywords: case study, Common core, literacy, significant disability, special education teacher
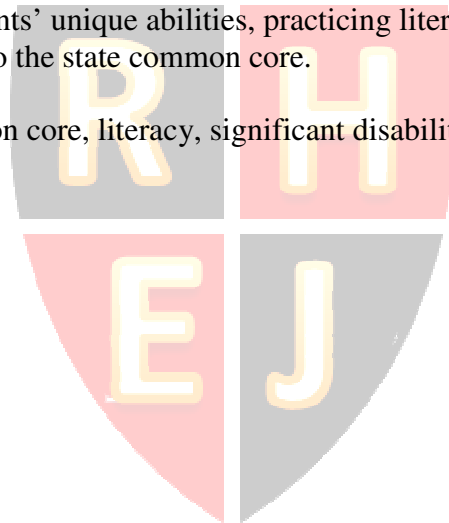
INTRODUCTION

The ways in which literacy is defined affect the classroom instruction, community services, and the literacy opportunities offered to children with significant disabilities. The belief that children with significant disabilities cannot acquire literacy skills often results in a lack of opportunity to learn these skills. The definition of literacy must be one that presume ability and therefore lead to higher expectations, increased access, and more inclusive educational opportunities for all people (Keefe & Copeland, 2011).

Recent research indicates a need to provide access to the general education literacy curriculum in meaningful ways within inclusive contexts. Children with significant disabilities must have access to literacy instruction that has meaning and utility for their lives in current and future inclusive communities (Ruppar, Dymond, & Gaffiney, 2011). For example, the Iowa Core Essential Elements (EEs) provide specific statements of knowledge and skills linked to the grade-level expectations identified in the Iowa Core Standards. These EEs build a bridge from the content in the Iowa Core Standards to academic expectations for children with significant disabilities (Iowa Core, 2013).

When educators understand current policy, evidence-based practice for academic learning for students with significant disabilities, the nature of standards, the role of general education, and the concept of alignment, they will become able to align instruction for children with significant disabilities with state's academic content standards. Educators need examples of how to teach skills that link to state standards and guidelines for how to develop instructional plans and IEPs that have this new standards-based focus (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela & Baker, 2006).

For students with significant disabilities, access to the general education curriculum is more than just placement or accessing the general education content standards. Evidence about the mandate and role of context in research-based practice showed that access to the general education curriculum involves delivering instruction on the general education content, having high expectation for students with significant disabilities, and participating in the general education accountability measures (Ryndak, Moore, & Orlando, 2008). However, a recent research showed that the current practices lacked age-appropriate materials, and that most lessons and work samples required routine and recall responses (Restorff & Abery, 2013).

The purpose of this case study research was to address the current literacy skills, practices, and dispositions of teachers who educate students with significant disabilities. It sought to address the following questions:

1- How do teachers who educate students with significant disabilities design and implement literacy instruction?
2- How do teachers who educate students with significant disabilities assess instruction to track students' progress and make instructional decisions?

METHOD

This was a single case study to explore the literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities in one special education classroom. In qualitative Inquiry, case study is the intensive study of a case that involves in-depth data collecting through participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Glesne, 2011). It is particularly appropriate for

"answering "how" and "why" questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated" (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

An explanatory design applied in the study. Explanatory case study is useful to "establish cause-and-effect relationships to determine how events occur and which ones may influence particular outcomes" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 22). The methodology looks both at the instructor's design and implementation of literacy instruction and assessing instruction to track children progress.

Participants

A total of one special education teacher, five students, two paraeducators, and one speech-therapy were participating in this study. The special education teacher is a first year teacher in a classroom serving five students with multiple and complex disabilities. The students were three males and two females in kindergarten, first and fourth grades. Of these students, three students use a wheelchair and all students have communication challenges. The other adults work with the teacher in stations. Each adult had a lesson plan for the day.

Data Collection

A field note and an interview were used to obtain the data. As a research team, we observe the participants during an hour and fifteen minutes literacy block in one special education classroom. Upon debrief and inter-rater reliability of the data as a team, we generated some open-end interview questions based on what we saw during the observation. Then, a follow- up interview was conducted with the special education teacher to uncover as much about her current literacy skills and practices, and how she design and implement literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities (for the interview questions, see appendix A).

Data Analysis

Glesne (1999) indicated that data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process to enable researchers to focus and shape the study as it proceeds. She claims that qualitative data analysis helps categorizing, synthesizing, searching for patterns, and interpreting the data researchers had collected. "Sorting your data into analytic files is a place to start" (Glesne, 1999, p. 132). In this study, we used simple coding schemes to classify and categorize the data we had collected, and we used a color coded system to highlight specific themes. The analysis involves the following procedural steps:

First, all researchers reviewed the observation notes for each other to narrow their focus and get a general sense of the whole and ideas presented. Next, they identified interview questions based upon what they have observed to ask the special education teacher in a follow-up interview. Then they all read through the interview transcript, looked for commons, and noted in margins. Finally, the meanings from analyzing both the observation and interview were organized into themes.

RESULTS

Addressing Different Learning Abilities

The special education teacher believes with individuality and differentiation among students with significant disabilities. She said, "It's all about differentiating. As the year goes on, you learn more about the student. You learn more what their level is and what their ability is." According to this quote, the teacher is saying that literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities should depend on each student individuality and different ability. It is also seemed that by spending more time with the students, the teacher learn more about her students' different abilities and then be able to plan her lessen depending in each student individuality.

In the classroom, much of the literacy block was spent working in reading stations. During this time the students were rotated every fifteen minutes to a different adult and that adult had a lesson plan for that day. Although the teacher used material or content from the regular education, she adapted these materials or simplified them so students could acquire the concept.

For instance, the teacher explained how she use material from the LLI and modify them to fit her students' abilities. She stated:

> One station is what we call the LLI, which is a reading curriculum that the district has. We have made modifications with those books so that the students are able to learn the vocabulary. One student is pretty confined to the wheelchair. So whit hem it is very simple, very basic. We were just teaching him to press the jelly switch button and that would active the radio. Whereas with another student maybe we can work on more alphabet stuff, forming simple words like I, a, the.

Literacy throughout the Day

Literacy was infused throughout the day. It did not jest only happened through the literacy block in the morning, but it happened across the day. Everything is tied to the reading. Even if it is a break time and the students get to use the iPad as a reward, it is still kind of learning most of the time (e.g., it was noticing during the observation that one student was doing the letters of his name during his break time.)

That also may go along with the communication using the Pragmatic Organization Dynamic Display (PODD), because it occurred across the day and that supported literacy as well. They used the PODD throughout the day with everything, not only when they are at reading stations, but also as they go to specials, recess and lunch. The teacher believed that the PODD is the students' voice. She indicated, "We do not go anywhere without our voice, so they should not go anywhere without their PODD." For example, at the end of the day, when it is time to students to get their backpacks or to go to the bathroom, they used the PODD to tell them that. They tell them, "Go get your PODD" or get it for them, depending on each one ability.

Using Common Core

> "We try to stick with the way the general education population does it the best we can. So, when the students are with me they do the Good Habits Good Readers curriculum, which is just a reading curriculum that Waterloo incorporates" stated by the teacher.

The teacher reported that she felt most confident with in regards to the students' goals that are based on the essential elements, and she felt least confident with in regards to planning and delivering instruction that is aligned with these essential elements. Even though the planning had major modifications, she mentioned that she tried to make sure that there is some sort of academic purpose to what students are doing at each station. She said, if a student is doing Play-Doh for example, he is spelling his name out or doing something where it is more meaningful.

Currently, the teacher did not go to the core when she is writing the individual station lesson plans, although she felt that she must use it to do so. She also believed that over the years as she use the core more and hearing more lesson plans on certain elements of it, she will probably get used to it and will use it in all her lesson plans.

DISCUSSION

The teacher made serious effort to differentiate instruction according to the individualized learning ability for each student. Previous study such as Ruppar, Dymond and Gaffiney (2011), has suggested that student's cognitive ability, readiness skills, and communication skills were among the factors that influencing teachers' decisions about literacy instruction and how to differentiate that literacy instruction. These factors were similar to those influenced our participant teacher. For her, differentiation meant multi-level activities based on each student level and needs. She adapted materials from the regular education based on each student's cognitive ability, readiness skills, and communication skills in order for the students to learn more efficiently.

The infused of the literacy throughout the day provide the students with a wide range of opportunities to learn, practice, and demonstrate knowledge and skills in all areas of learning. The participant teacher reported the need to have access to the literacy instruction such as having the PODD with the students everywhere to be able to use it to explain their needs and feelings. Such practice could help these students see learning as both useful and pleasant and provide a strong foundation for the students' social development.

Further, the participant teacher experienced a difficulty regarding to planning and delivering instruction that is aligned with the common core. This difficulty left the teacher feeling less confident about the efficacy of her strategies. Because our participant is a first year teacher in a classroom serving students with the multiple and complex disabilities, her teaching experience could be one factor that lead to this difficulty. The lack in providing teachers with a guideline in how to plan a lesson that link to the common core could be another factor that lead to this difficulty. Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, and Baker (2006) have indicated the need for a foundation in how to plan an educational program for students with significant disabilities with links to the state's academic content standards.

IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from this study suggest further research in needed to describe how teachers who educate students with significant disabilities monitor their progress, and describe how does progress monitoring guide teachers' instruction. How teachers determine literacy IEP goals for the students and how they implement the state alternate assessment process are more additional issues to be described in future research.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to describe how special educators design and implement literacy instruction for students with multiple and complex disabilities, and how teachers assess instruction that affect the progress of the students. The outcome of this study indicated that designing and implementing literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities involve differentiating instructions according to students individualized needs, practicing literacy throughout the day, and aligning literacy instruction to the state common core. Finally, a guideline in designing and implementing literacy instruction that aligned with the state common core for students with significant disabilities should be offered to novice special educators. Such practice will allow support for their instructional strategies and as a result, affect the progress of students with significant disabilities.

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APPENDIX A - Interview Questions

Follow-ups to the Observation
1. How are the stations organized?
2. What might be the purpose of these stations?
3. How do you make decisions about what to do during this instructional time?
4. Do you plan to support interactions between peers?
5. How does the PODD work?
   a. How have you integrated the PODD in the classroom?
   b. Do you use it in different ways depending on the students?
   c. What are the different versions of the PODD?
   d. What was the professional development regarding the PODD? What professional development topics do you need to build your instructional capacity?
   e. Do you think students have made more growth in their learning as a result of having this communication device?

   How do you organize/manage all of the supports you have? (paras, speech, etc.)

Supplemental Questions

1. What do you feel most/least confident about with regard to planning and delivering instruction that is aligned with the IA Common Core?
2. How have your instructional practices changed since you started teaching? How do you envision those practices continuing to change, given the current state of the field?
3. Can you provide an example of when you have adjusted or altered your instruction to better meet students' needs?
4. What is your preferred instructional style (whole group, small group, individual, etc.)?