

A Special Educators Point of View on Literacy

By: Danielle De Roos

Reading in the Content Area

There is one student that stands out. We'll call him "Patrick". This 8th grade autistic boy was the best checkers player I have ever encountered. He could barely read at a kindergarten grade level but he played a mean checkers. I realized that I could use this to my advantage. I made checker boards with reading challenges on each square. For example, read the first page of this book or give me a word with a short "a" sound. Before he could make a move he had to perform the task or answer the question. After two years "Patrick" could read a third grade level.

Another student that stands out is a little girl with PKU, "Beth", who was dressed in hand-me-downs and stubborn as all get out couldn't read. She didn't want to work with anyone and rarely answered questions people asked her. The school social worker said, "You're in for quite a challenge. She's missed too many days of school because she's moving from place to place, often times living on the street. How is she going to learn?" One day, "Beth" picked up a book called "The Carrot Seed" and started looking at the pictures. It interested her so much that I thought she deserved to have it for herself. So I handed her the book. "It's yours, Annie," I said handing it to her, "yours to keep." "Mine?" she asked, as if she'd received the Holy Grail. Never having owned any book before "Beth" was very excited.

When tutoring Jason, a third grader, he made it clear he was not happy to be part of the tutoring program. He did not participate in group activities, spoke as little as possible, and found every excuse he could to leave the classroom. Jason was worked with each day. Within a week, his attitude improved and he arrived for tutoring with a

smile on his face. His mother reported that Jason had told her tutoring was “just like school, only funner!” In 7 weeks, Jason improved his reading score by a full grade level.

Between stories one, two, and three there are many similarities. All of the students in these stories struggle with reading. Also the teachers invested in these students. They found the interests, the time, and the strategies to impact each kid realizing that everyone learns differently. Every child is an individual. Patrick reads differently than Beth and Beth has a different life than Jason. Autism is different than PKU which is different than a behavioral disorder.

When you look at reading in the field of Special Education, especially as teachers, you have to remember that you are going to run into so many individuals that struggle with so many different things and are at so many different levels of reading. You have to continually ask yourself questions like, what can I do to help that student? Or how can I be the best educator that I can be?

Reading is important in the field of Special Education and it should be important in the life of special educators. Not only should reading mean variety it should mean continued learning. We should want to learn and read so we are able to help all of our students learn. It’s definitely something that we should value and deem important. If we model our love for reading, our students will be more apt to love reading.

Often times those individuals that struggle with reading have troubles because they don’t want to read or because they don’t know where to start reading. It’s easy to say that as special educators it is our responsibility to aide those struggling readers in finding success and joy in reading. The question is how we do that.

You could have books available for students just to borrow or pick up and read or you could teach reading throughout every discipline. It could be through modifications and accommodations addressed in the students IEP's or through teaching students that reading to learn is better than learning to read. It could be through teachers modeling the importance of reading in their lives or using strategies and interventions to address the individuality of each student. There are so many ways; it's all about finding the one that works for each of your students.

Ronald Dahl writes in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, "So please, oh PLEASE, we beg, we pray, go throw your TV set away, And in its place you can install, a lovely bookshelf on the wall." When books are available for students and especially when they are presented in an interesting manner students are going to be more apt to read. One way teachers can make reading available is by having a classroom library. Focusing on the test results of nine-year-olds, Froese found that students in classrooms with access to classroom libraries achieve higher reading scores than those who do not have such access. Also it is found that students who have lots of books in their homes achieve at higher levels than those who have fewer books. (Krashen, 1993).

"Research carried out by Krashen has shown that free voluntary reading has a positive impact on reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling ability, grammar usage and writing style, and that children who read more typically have higher literacy development." (Krashen, 1993) It makes a lot of sense. The more students are engaged in reading the better they will be.

As special educators, it is our responsibility to find ways to engage our students in reading. You can have book talks before class where you have the opportunity to introduce several genres of good reading material that may interest a variety of students or you could play off of your student's interests by finding books dealing with the things they are involved in. For example, if your student is interested in trains finding a nonfiction book about how trains work could be of interest to them. When you find one book they are interested in, it is very possible they will ask for another or maybe look for another similar to it on their own.

Gee says in his book "What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy" that, "Embodiment is when the reader becomes personally involved in a story, when the reader is so involved in the book that he or she almost feels a part of the story." (Gee, 2007) It's important that the reader, our students, relate to what their reading. As teachers we can only help our students discover their interests.

Special education is not necessarily a discipline in education. In fact, when you are a special educator you get to teach all of the disciplines. Your students get to learn history, science, and math; among other things. According to the Journal of Learning Disabilities, "Difficulty in learning to read has been perhaps the most prominent manifestation of the learning difficulties that occupy the attention of those in the field of special education." Since so many students struggle with reading it is so important to include it across all of the things we're teaching our students.

When teachers implement reading strategies in their math lesson or their science lab they are just reiterating the importance of it. It is also important to find ways to find

ways to show your students how reading is important in their everyday lives. We read the newspaper, restaurant menus, and street signs. People who grow up illiterate have such a difficult time adapting to society. We need to stress the importance of literacy to our students.

Writing annual goals for students IEP's has become a task that all special education teachers have become accustomed to. The annual goals in the IEP are statements that describe what a child with a disability can reasonably be expected to accomplish within a twelve-month period in the child's special education program according to their present level. An example of an annual goal could be, "Given randomly selected passages at the third-grade level, J. R. will read aloud 115 words correct per minute, by the end of the year (or in 35 weeks), as measured by a valid curriculum-based measurement."

Goals and objectives are the areas that are worked on throughout the year in the classroom. They have to be monitored and measured. Monitoring can be through completion of tasks or teacher observation. The measurement can be through grades, standardized tests or mastery of tasks. Goals can be related to academics, self-help skills, or behavior. As special educators we need to remember that IEP goals should not be the only goals we have for our students. We want them to love reading and feel accomplished in the strides they are making and those kinds of goals do not get written on a legal document.

A question I asked Professor Pete Post in an interview I gave him was what goals he has for his students to read effectively. He went on to say that he just wants his

students to gain an appreciation in reading. Post said, “I want my students to get the broad picture without highlighting and gain empathy for what they are reading.”

Professor Post thinks that you don’t always have to read for an answer. Big books don’t always have to be so intimidating. A lot of students wonder how they are going to get through it. But Professor Post wants students to not have those long novels scare them away from reading. Post would rather want his kids to read them slowly and get a lot out of them instead of giving up and growing frustrated.

As special educators, we are constantly coming up with goals and objectives for our students, whether it is for their IEP or just because we want them to succeed. We try to see our student’s strengths and weaknesses and attempt to help their weaknesses become successes. It’s not always a fast process and that is why patience is such an important quality in the lives of special education teachers.

As teachers how do we help our students reach their goals when they struggle so much with reading. By using modifications, accommodations, interventions, and different strategies you are able to aide students in learning better. As special educators it is our responsibility to meet each of our students where they are in reading. There are so many strategies, programs, interventions, and creative ideas to teach individuals in special education and as teachers we need to find the one that best fits each student.

Professor of Special Education Pete Post comments that, “When you look at Special Education, you need to remember that every person has a different story and everyone is going to relate to reading differently. So as a teacher, you need to be prepared

with a variety reading materials and tools so you can help every student; every disability.”

Graphic organizers are great tools in helping struggling readers. Burke’s book “Reading Reminders” addresses a lot of different strategies for teachers to use in their classroom. One is the KWL chart which stands for what the students know, want to know, and learned. These types of charts do an excellent job in helping readers record what they know before reading, what they learned from reading the material, and what information is still missing when they’re done. Another type of graphic organizer is Cornell notes where students are able to draw connections by the notes they took when reading.

There are other ways you can aide students in becoming better readers. For example you can use strategies like reciprocal teaching or the Jigsaw method. In reciprocal teaching students are allowed to become the teacher in the subject they are studying. Students can lead discussion groups where they can predict, question, clarify, and summarize.

Similarly, the Jigsaw method allows students to become experts on what they read and then reiterate it to their classmates who have become experts on another piece of reading. Both of these strategies allow students to be engaged in their readings. Students will comprehend more than if they were attempting to learn any other way because of these strategies.

Another thing that teachers can do is incorporate teacher model reading. As any teacher it is important to create a positive reading environment and a great way to do that

is by modeling active reading in the classroom and in your life. If you have a book on you and practice reading your students will probably see the value in it more than if you just tell them to read and don't practice it yourself.

Also as often as you can, incorporate things like book commercials and read alouds. When a teacher reads trade books or other material rich in vocabulary and description students are going to start to be intrigued by some of the genres you've read. When they find they're interests they'll begin to read more. The purpose of reading aloud is to build vocabulary, improve listening skills, reading comprehension abilities, and attitudes during reading. "During read aloud, students are exposed to vocabulary and written language syntax that they are unlikely to encounter in their daily oral language." (Office of Literacy, 2004)

You can also use reading during transitions in the classroom. Having breaks and structured transitions is very important for students with special needs. Facilitating time for reading or actually reading aloud during these transitions is a great way to incorporate reading in the classroom and keep students on task. Studies done by looking at trends in the Chicago Public School system concluded that, "Students in classrooms that are expected to be successful readers and writers who talk, read, and write, tend to outperform students in the classrooms where these environmental features are less prevalent." (Roskos, 2002) Setting a positive classroom reading centered environment is so important. As the teacher, it is your responsibility to engage students in reading.

While interviewing both Professor Post and Trinity Special Education graduate, Bethany VandeHey I noticed that professionals in special education are concentrating on

reading to learn as opposed to learning to read, continued education whether it be in school or in reading resources, and the individuality of each student.

Professor Post is currently going to graduate school. So he understands the concept of reading professionally verses fun. He talked about two websites that he particularly uses for his field of special education. Both the exceptional children website and teaching exceptional children website are great resources for information and articles. He mentioned this however; Exceptional Children is mostly for facts and figures and it is definitely for his professional work and research. It is not a website that is enjoyable for him to read.

In research I discovered that, Exceptional Children is filled with insightful, pioneering research, topical issues, and broad perspectives by leaders in the field for more than 65 years have made Exceptional Children the most respected scholarly journal in special education according to many educators in the field. This peer review journal publishes original research on the education and development of toddlers, infants, children, and youth with exceptionalities and articles on professional issues of concern to special educators.

Professor Post mentioned that he gets way more excited to read Teaching Exceptional Children because it is more applicable to his daily life in the field. It is an official publication of the Council for Exceptional Children and is published specifically for teachers and administrators of children with disabilities and children who are gifted. It features practical articles that present methods and materials for classroom use as well as current issues in special education teaching and learning.

TEC also brings its readers the latest data on technology, assistive technology, and procedures and techniques with applications to students with exceptionalities. Taking a look at the January issue there was an article that even relates to reading in special education. The article was called, “Boosting Fluency and Comprehension to Improve Reading Achievement” and has a brief overview of the interventions and details how teachers can combine them into a supplemental reading strategy. It seems this peer reviewed journal is an excellent resource for special educators.

Post also commented when distinguishing between reading professionally and fun, “If I’m highlighting, I’m not reading for fun!” He also said when he reads for fun he also reads for betterment of himself. Post is always asking the question, “What can I learn to help certain disabilities and/or situations?”

Two books that Professor Post is reading right now are from his graduate class. They are both textbooks and when asked Post said that one was far better than the other. One of the books, *Learning Theories for Teachers* was filled with an assortment of technical jargon and it was just one of those books that you need to get through. He commented that the book was one that wasn’t fun but good for you.

The other book that he is currently reading for his course was *Principles of Instructional Design*. It offered an easier read because it adequately used white space and really big print. “It even had pictures,” Post comments. “Pictures are so neat!!” He said. What’s funny is after he explained these things I asked him, “Was that first text book actually good for you?” After much hesitation he said, “Well, I don’t think I’ve

learned all that much from it.” You can tell that that textbook would never be his first choice.

I asked Post what an expert in Special Education reads and the first thing he said was, “Funny, I don’t really consider myself an expert.” He is reading this book called *Reading David* and he talked about how this mom telling the story has her PH-D in special education and was considered an expert. But once this mom had a child with special needs she felt lost and confused. She didn’t know what to do. In the same way, teachers cannot come in and give expert opinions and suggestions to parents always because it’s easier said than done. “I may have studied Special Education for a long time,” Post commented. “But I am not an expert on my students; their parents are their best expert. You need to remember that in special education.

Even though we are not always experts in our students we can strive for excellence in our field. Professional development is so important in special education. Strategies, laws, and students change so it is important that once we’re in the field we continue education. ASCA says that, “The importance of professional development can't be overemphasized, especially in a field as vital as education. Only by continually arming yourself with the latest research, techniques and knowledge in the profession can you hope to stay effective in your career.” (ASCA, 2006)

Dr Seuss said that, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn the more places you'll go.” We’ve discussed the importance of our students reading and the importance of teacher modeling in reading. Reading is treated differently throughout all the disciplines and that doesn’t change in special education.

Professional development, teacher modeling, IEP's, modifications, accommodations, and the concentration of individuality in reading show the unique way of reading in the field of special education. Special education students and teachers approach reading so much differently than every other discipline. As professor Post said, "When you look at Special Education, you need to remember that every person has a different story and everyone is going to relate to reading differently. So as a teacher, you need to be prepared with a variety reading materials and tools so you can help every student; every disability."

Works Cited

- ASCA, (2006). *Professional Development*. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=129>
- Burke, J. (2000). *Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krashen, T. (1993). *Report on the Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement*. Retrieved December 1, 2008, from Australian School Library Association: http://www.asla.org.au/research/reading_literacy.htm
- Office of literacy (2004). Observation Guide Handbook k-3. Chicago Public Schools.
- Post, Pete. Personal interview. 11 Sept. 2008.
- Roskos, K., & Neuman, S. (2002). Environment and its early influences for early literacy teaching and learning. *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp.26-33). New York: The Guilford Press.