



## Inclusive Literacy

**Penny Lacey**



Penny Lacey is a Senior Lecturer in Education, The University of Birmingham, School of Education, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK. The research was carried out by Lyn Layton, Penny Lacey, Carol Miller, Juliet Goldbart and Hazel Lawson.

### Summary

This essay focuses on pupils with profound learning disabilities in a study of how schools approach teaching literacy to children with severe learning difficulties. The researchers invite us to expand our understanding of the word *literacy* beyond the conventional and to use the concept of *inclusive literacy* to include a wide range of activities – many of which use no text.

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Researchers from the Universities of Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan and Plymouth studied the way schools approach teaching literacy to children with severe learning difficulties. Although not the main focus of the study, pupils with profound learning disabilities featured in the information we collected. This article is an attempt to share some of what we found.

The study took about 18 months to complete and during that time, we carried out five different activities:

1. Desk-based research using books, journals, magazines and web-sites.

2. Observations in classrooms, in both literacy lessons and others lessons where literacy skills might be being used.
3. Interviews of the teachers who taught those lessons.
4. Focus groups of teachers to discuss our results.
5. Interviews of 'expert witnesses' (people who are well-known for developing aspects of literacy with children with SLD (severe learning disabilities) / PMLD (profound multiple and learning disabilities)).

## **Conventional Literacy**

Most definitions of the word 'literacy' contain reference to reading and writing text and the reality in schools (special or mainstream) is that Literacy on the timetable is about learning to read and write or to engage in activities that are eventually meant to lead to reading printed or written text as well as generating written text and writing. The original National Literacy Strategy material (DfEE, 1998) answers its own question of 'what is literacy?' with 'Literacy unites the important skills of reading and writing'. It does go on to include speaking and listening as important, but the rest of the materials are about reading and writing. Speaking and listening are hardly mentioned again.

This position has changed with the new Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006), where speaking and listening are much more prominent under the literacy heading, with 4 of the 12 strands relating to 1. speaking, 2. listening and responding, 3. group discussion and interaction and 4. drama. The other 8 all relate specifically to reading and writing, with the emphasis at an early stage on learning through 'synthetic phonics', where children need sophisticated knowledge about the segmental nature of spoken language and to be able to match speech-sounds and letters.

I have dwelt on conventional views of literacy because when we went to schools for pupils with SLD/ PMLD, we found that most of them were taking a conventional approach to teaching literacy, at least to pupils with SLD. Children were being taught words and phonics, how to get information from books and other kinds of text, and lessons we observed looked very similar to those that can be seen in mainstream classrooms all round the country. There was a greater variation for pupils with profound learning disabilities, but even so, many lessons looked, in essence similar to the prescription for the Literacy Hour.

## **Observations**

Typically, a class of children with severe and profound learning disabilities were seen sitting in a semi-circle around a teacher holding a big book. The book was read or a story told using the pictures and staff engaged the pupils in the story through pictures and objects. Following the story, again typically, the class divided into smaller groups for work related in some way to the book but pitched at a level that was right for the individuals in that group. Usually, the whole class met again for a plenary session at the close of the lesson where pupils' work was recalled and celebrated.

The work we observed that was specifically designed for pupils with profound learning disabilities was often sensory in nature. It was usually centred around a story or a book, but

access to the activity was often through objects to touch and activate or odours to smell, things to look at and listen to or even food to taste. We saw stories being told through a range of sensory experiences, such as the Bag book 'Gran's Visit'.

There were also examples of what might be called 'pure communication', rather than anything specifically related to conventional literacy or pre-literacy skills. These were variations on Intensive Interaction (Nind and Hewett, 2000) and usually began from the child him or herself, rather than from a book or a story. The intention appeared to be to engage the child and achieve even minimal social interaction using little games associated with typically developing infants and caregivers. One game observed involved the adult having a conversation of 'ahs', following the lead of the child's vocalisations. It is not known whether the adult thought that what was happening was part of literacy but it was happening in a Literacy lesson.

### **Inclusive Literacy**

One of the central concepts that developed through the study was the idea of 'inclusive literacy'. Conventional literacy is clearly not open to children (or adults) with profound learning disabilities as they are not going to learn to read and write. However, if we conceive of literacy as 'inclusive', there may be ways in which even the most profoundly disabled can take part. So what did we mean by 'inclusive literacy'? We identified a range of activities for learners with SLD that we want to argue could legitimately be identified as 'inclusive literacy' even if there was no use of text at all, and many of these can include those with profound learning disabilities. We identified:

- Objects of reference
- Life quilts and life history boxes
- Personal storytelling
- Sensory stories & multimedia stories
- Cause and effect software
- Photo albums and scrap books
- Picture books & stories
- Graphic facilitation
- Reading icons and symbols
- Talking books
- Early conventional reading skills
- Simple conventional books
- Drama and role play
- Simple software for computer
- Television and films
- Navigating websites (eg: Eastenders)
- Creating websites
- Still photography to create books
- Film-making

The list includes some activities that definitely do not fit into conventional literacy relating to letters, words and text. Some can be seen as 'new literacies' belonging to the media age of television, ipods and computers (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003) and others are seen as, perhaps simplifications of, or substitutions for, the whole business of traditional text-based literacy, such as objects of reference, life quilts and sensory stories.

### **Objects of Reference**

The first few in the list seem to have the greatest potential for learners with profound learning disabilities. Objects of reference (Ockelford, 2002), for example could be seen as the first real step into learning about symbols, which in conventional literacy might lead to more and more abstract symbols and eventually into letters, words and text. In the absence of this kind of progression, learning to use objects of reference can be seen as an early and important form of literacy in its own right for those learners who are unable to progress further down the conventional literacy or even the new literacies route.

### **Life Quilts and Life Boxes**

Life quilts (Grove, 1996) or life history boxes can be seen as akin to books about a person. A life quilt is literally a quilt made from sewing together pieces of material from the clothes, curtains, cushions, duvet covers that have meaning for that person from early childhood through to adulthood. There can also be objects sewn into the quilt: anything that might spark familiarity. If this started at an early age and continually added to and enjoyed, it can become an important 'book'. Alternatively or in addition, a box can be used to collect important objects such as slippers, a personal cup, a toy or birthday candles. These can be used regularly to 'tell the story' of the person's life.

### **Sensory Stories and Multimedia Activities**

There are many examples of sensory stories in schools and colleges: published and home-made, although perhaps fewer multimedia stories. If you haven't already found Pete Well's disgusting stories, you might try them especially with teenagers or young adults. Go to <http://www.portland-school.co.uk/Petes-stuff/PetesStuff.htm>. Two other special school websites that offers interesting activities for learners with profound learning disabilities are Priory Woods School [www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk/](http://www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk/) and Meldreth Manor School <http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/meldreth/textandinfo/Powerp/Media2.html>.

### **Pictures and Moving Pictures**

The activities on our list that are related to pictures (still or moving) may or may not be meaningful to an individual with profound learning disabilities. Learning to understand and 'read' pictures is an important skills for learners with SLD and the first rungs of that ladder may be relevant to someone with profound disabilities, especially recognising themselves, their family and friends on video. For some people, attaching the camera to the television and watching themselves in real time can be motivating and interesting.

## Film-making and Drama

There are some other activities on our list above within which learners with profound disabilities could be included, for example film making or drama. Nicola Grove and Keith Park have many suggestions for how this can be achieved and if you haven't come across their work, you might start with their book 'Odyssey Now' (Grove and Park, 1996) or 'Macbeth in Mind' (Grove and Park, 2001) or find Keith's many articles published in SLD Experience. Keith's work can also be seen on Teacher's TV online in a programme called 'Special Schools: Access the Curriculum' <http://www.teachers.tv/video/1403>.

## Conclusions

From our research we were able to see examples of activities that we called 'inclusive literacy'. We recognise, as did the teachers in the study, that literacy for learners who don't learn to read and write is not conventional. It includes a wider view of communication than might typically be seen as literacy, as well as some of the new literacies that are more often associated with creative, performance or media studies or information and communications technology. For the most profoundly disabled learners, to be inclusive, literacy must also embrace the use of objects as a kind of text and perhaps even see someone learning to anticipate a favourite activity as learning to 'read' what is happening. I don't want to stretch literacy to a ridiculous degree but there is definitely more to it than the conventional reading and writing of text.

Hopefully, the inclusive literacy activities that have been briefly discussed in this article will inspire you to be as creative as you can in providing experiences for learners with profound learning disabilities. Although joining in a conventional literacy hour with more able peers is one activity, there are lots more that appear to us as legitimate responses to teaching literacy to learners who are not going to learn to read and write. Have fun in Literacy!

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