# Inspiring Literacy: Using Balanced, Comprehensive Reading and Writing Instruction within an Inclusive Environment to Support Braille-Reading Students

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*There are many little ways to enlarge your child’s world. Love of books is the best of all*

*Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*

*More than at any other time, when I hold a beloved book in my hand my limitations fall from me, my spirit is free.*

*Helen Keller*

In social gatherings it is not unusual to hear someone say “I love to read,” and a discussion inevitably ensues that includes shared reading experiences and requests for book recommendations. These discussions often involve people from very diverse backgrounds with no limitations related to how the reader accesses the books (print, braille, hard copy book, electronic version). The declaration “I love to read” in these discussions reflects a love for story, curiosity about different life experiences, exploration of far-off lands, and playfulness within written language.

Somewhat related, but quite different, is a sentiment that is heard frequently from people who know braille, and that sentiment is often expressed as “I love braille,” which refers to a love for the usefulness, elegance, logic, and history of the six-dot cell. Love of braille is a reflection of respect for the way that braille represents English (and other languages). Love of braille also results in discussions among like-minded people about rules and characteristics of braille (favorite contractions could be discussed) and how braille was learned.

The difference between “I love to read” and “I love braille” is subtle but important when considering literacy instruction for young braille readers. Parents and teachers want children to develop foundational skills that support the acts of reading and writing braille and are also concerned with inspiring a love of reading.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of an approach to teaching braille reading and writing that provides a balance across complex instructional goals resulting in highly skilled readers and writers and also individuals who love, enjoy, and participate in literacy activities. While reading and writing skills provide a critical foundation for literacy, the way that these skills are fashioned into an individual love of reading and writing builds richness and power into the role literacy plays in the social, emotional, and employment aspects of students with visual impairments as they become adults. This paper will address the instructional needs and some strategies for developing reading and writing skills and a love of literacy. In order to be as specific as possible, an existing literacy program, *Building on Patterns,* will provide an example of a resource that assists educational teams address the instructional needs of young children to help them grow into mature readers and writers.

*Building on Patterns*, developed and published by the American Printing House for the Blind, is a systematic, comprehensive, balanced literacy program that provides support for teachers of students with visual impairments to teach reading and writing to students, aged approximately 4–7, who are learning to read and write using braille (Senft-Graves et al., 2018). It is incorrect to characterize this as a program to “teach braille,” because learning the dot configurations and rules governing braille is positioned in the bigger context of learning to read and write. Most teachers and transcribers learn braille as an adult, one who is a mature print reader and writer. This is not the experience of children who are beginning braille users.

*Building on Patterns,* originally called *Patterns,* was first published in the early 1980s and has been revised, level by level, since about the year 2000. *Building on Patterns* consists of prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade levels, and aligns with literacy curricula used in public and private schools in the United States and beyond. One of the most important strengths of this program is that it has been written by qualified, highly experienced teachers of students with visual impairments who embrace the value of reading and writing for students who will use braille.

Schools often place primary importance on a student’s ability to decode text and verbally relay what is written on a page. This is especially true for students who are blind or visually impaired, perhaps because of challenges to provide sufficient instructional time caused by choice of service delivery system, large teacher caseloads, and limited time to devote to direct instruction. It is very important, when planning literacy instruction, to attend carefully to both foundational skills and to motivation for reading and writing (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016).

## Guiding Principles for Developing a Braille Literacy Program

Balancing foundational skills and motivation requires deliberate planning that can be supported by adherence to guiding principles (Ferrell et al., 2018). These principles help educational teams make informed decisions that can allow sufficient attention to literacy instruction. The following principles may help support the development of a program that enhances overall literacy for braille readers.

It is helpful to understand that the service delivery systems used with students who are blind are diverse. While limitations of service delivery should not dictate instructional planning, individualized and general education program components should maximize both the child’s foundational skills and motivation. Some teachers may benefit from a more scripted instructional program that also includes strong encouragement for teacher creativity and eclectic instructional strategies. The braille literacy program can be used in collaboration with literacy instruction in the general education classroom and can either be the primary source of instruction or a supplement to another program.

Planning a systematic, comprehensive, balanced braille literacy program requires that educational teams have a clear understanding of their beliefs regarding the initial instruction of literacy including braille contractions. A carefully controlled introduction to contractions within the program from the beginning of instruction should be considered (Wall Emerson, Holbrook, & D’Andrea, 2009).

Systematic, comprehensive instruction requires careful attention to the level of support available including daily, consistent, direct literacy instruction by a qualified teacher of students with visual impairments. There is a benefit to a diagnostic approach to literacy instruction where assessment and instruction are closely tied. Teachers should gather ongoing data about student progress and use their expertise to apply results of assessment to instruction. As much as possible, literacy instruction for children who are blind should be evidence-grounded, and ongoing research should be conducted on the effectiveness of the instruction.

When planning an instructional program, teams should consider the importance of creating a balanced approach to literacy instruction with a wide variety of literacy experiences, including early exposure to and instruction in the use of tactile graphics (e.g., pictures, charts, and maps) and use of more and more complex graphics as the child progresses. Teams should consider a balance of meaning-centered and skill-centered instruction, reading and writing instruction and activities, and literacy genres. Students are individuals with unique needs, and teachers and parents are the most important judges of how to make a literacy program meaningful to a specific child. Participation of children with visual impairments and additional disabilities as well as those for whom English is a second language in meaningful literacy activities is also an important consideration.

Educational teams should consider the value of a variety of motivating materials and involvement of important people in the child’s life, in addition to opportunities to read and write throughout the day at school and at home. The child’s participation in braille-reading activities with many people (not just the teacher of students with visual impairments), including meeting and interacting with braille-reading role models, can be very valuable. In addition, encouraging access to a variety of literature, including books that are commercially available and popular with all children, can support the child’s literacy interactions with others in real-life, meaningful reading and writing experiences.

Finally, educational teams should consider how literacy instruction connects to all areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired (Texas ECC Committee, 2016). Planning for literacy instruction and use during activities of daily living, orientation and mobility, and recreation and leisure experiences, for example, is an effective way to infuse use of reading and writing authentically and meaningfully throughout the students’ real-life experiences.

## Characteristics of Accomplished Readers

In 1997, the National Reading Panel was convened in the United States to conduct an extensive review of literature to examine the effectiveness of a variety of approaches for teaching children to read (*Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS, 2000). Members of the panel identified five key skills: phonemic awareness (the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the sounds of words), phonics (the ability to connect letter sounds with written letters and letter combinations), vocabulary development (the ability to understand the meaning of words), fluency (the ability to read connected text with appropriate speed and expression), and comprehension (the ability to understand the meaning of text). In the years following the publication of this important report, researchers and educators have incorporated each of these key skills into their focus on literacy for different populations (e.g., adolescents, students with English as a second language, and braille readers).

Subsequent to the National Reading Panel Report, it was recognized that there was a need to extend the examination of reading and writing instruction to include issues related to children birth through age five. Another panel, the National Early Literacy Panel, was commissioned to examine teaching strategies, parent involvement, and interventions that support early literacy development. The panel conducted a meta-analysis of literature and identified six literacy skills that were moderately or highly predictive of future literacy success. These six skills are alphabetic skills, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters and digits, rapid automatic naming of objects and colors, writing or writing name, and phonological memory (*Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS, 2010).

During the years following the publication of these two reports, there has been an effort to establish recognized standards for quality literacy programs that take into consideration the key findings of the National Reading Panel and the National Early Literacy Panel. The reading process for braille users includes the same key skills as those for print users. Considerations for reading and writing instruction for students who will use braille that may need special attention include the following:

* The ability to read “fast enough.” Although it is not possible to define how fast is “fast enough,” it is clear that in order to keep up with academic and later employment requirements, efficient reading and writing is important.
* The ability to read with accuracy. Recent professional discussions are questioning the assumption that braille readers translate braille contractions into print letters as they read (especially in the beginning). Researchers (Fischer-Baum & Englebretson, 2016) have suggested that, instead of representing print, braille can be considered a native writing system for those who begin to learn to read and write through braille. Regardless, it is important to provide instruction on accuracy of reading and writing using appropriate contractions.
* The ability to read with comprehension and curiosity. Without direct, explicit instruction and background experiences, braille-reading students may be at risk for challenges in fully understanding the text that they read and write with confidence.
* The ability to independently synthesize information from a variety of sources, research facts and opinions, and think critically.
* The ability to use technical skills (hand and finger movement, scanning) effectively.

Adults who are accomplished readers and writers are able to access resources easily and efficiently and move away from focusing on the foundational skills to comprehension and use of the content of the text. This process occurs gradually as children become skilled readers and writers.

## Motivation for Reading

Educators embrace the instruction of foundational literacy skills, but an additional focus on how instruction can support inspired and motivated readers is needed. People are motivated to engage in successful activities. They are motivated to engage in activities they enjoy, that they accomplish efficiently, and that others in their world embrace.

When planning a literacy program with a focus on supporting motivation and inspiration, it may be helpful to explore how adults infuse reading and writing into their lives in meaningful ways. Some ways that adults incorporate reading and writing into their lives are

* attending and participating in a book club;
* keeping a journal of personal feelings, gratitude, hopes and dreams, and future plans;
* gathering information on a hobby from a variety of sources;
* entering into discussions about current topics and books on best seller lists;
* writing a professional or personal blog;
* exploring a variety of literature genres, including those that provide an escape to other times, places, and realities.

The power and joy of reading may need to be specifically taught or encouraged for children who are beginning to learn to read and write. Even while focusing on foundational skills, a love of reading and writing can be developed through modeling, providing rich and varied literacy activities, and reinforcing a child’s own curiosity and expression.

## Using *Building on Patterns* for Literacy Instruction

Teachers of students with visual impairments can and should use a variety of strategies and techniques when providing initial reading and writing instruction for children who use braille. Some teachers work closely with general education teachers to build a literacy program for their students that is highly connected to the program used with the child’s sighted peers, while others find a more formal, specialized braille reading and writing program most helpful. This section explores the complexity and comprehensiveness of a written curriculumand describes how the *Building on Patterns* program addresses both foundational skills and builds a love of reading.

Literacy programs in reading and writing for braille readers involve ongoing, consistent, direct instruction by a qualified teacher of students with visual impairments. It is important that this instruction occurs daily or almost daily from a teacher who understands how to teach reading and writing and also understands the implications of learning to read and write through braille. *Building on Patterns* is written with the underlying assumption of direct, ongoing, consistent instruction by a qualified teacher of students with visual impairments as indicated through research (Koenig & Holbrook, 2000). Lessons are written to fit with the following instruction time recommendations for most days of the week from the Quality Literacy Instruction Study:

Pre-kindergarten (4 years old)—1/2 hour to 1 hour

Kindergarten (5 years old) through Second Grade (7 years old)—1 to 2 hours

One of the challenges in the education of children with visual impairment is the assignment of teacher duties made according to administrative convenience and budgetary issues instead of based on the specific, individual needs of the student. Any program designed to teach braille reading and writing must not compromise on quality and quantity. If these instructional recommendations are not followed, the risk of developing segmented or partial literacy skills may be greater.

The *Building on Patterns* Scope and Sequence includes all areas of instruction identified by the National Reading Panel as well as the following foundational skills: letter, word, and number recognition; braille knowledge; writing; background knowledge and concept development; listening comprehension; and spelling. Teachers are supported to provide opportunities to address these skills through a balance of activities within and across lessons.

The development of a love of reading should not be separated from the development of the foundational skills of reading and writing. *Building on Patterns* contains a wide variety of fun and engaging instructional activities that are meaningfully included in each lesson and can be used by teachers as a springboard for their own ideas. Children who participate in these types of activities are inspired by their teachers and parents to find enjoyment in reading and writing, and this enjoyment can grow through the school years into a love of reading that can last a lifetime.

Creative teachers, including the authors of *Building on Patterns,* have limitless ideas about how to inspire a love of literacy that matches the individual interests of students.The following strategies are used throughout the program at all levels to build on activities that support the child in determining their own preferences as they grow to love reading.

**Using songs and poems.** Music is universally considered to be a strategy to help engage children and adults at all levels. *Building on Patterns* includes music from the earliest lessons. Songs and poems allow students to hear words with various intonations and to explore rhyme and rhythm.

**Including high-interest, fun vocabulary words.** There has been an effort to include interesting words that help children develop an appreciation of language in the lessons of this program. For example, words such as “dawdle,” “plump,” and “skedaddle” have been chosen as vocabulary words associated with the book *The Piggy in the Puddle* by Charlotte Pomerantz.

**Including activities that connect to the primary story in each lesson.** In addition to supporting concept development and connections to the expanded core curriculum, connecting the story to activities helps show that reading is useful and has a purpose. For example, after reading the book *Plant Secrets* by Emily Goodman, the child is supported in planting a seed themselves and observing plant growth.

**Involving other people in reading activities.** Lessons often include reading to or with a peer, family member, or teacher.

**Providing a variety of books.** This program contains stories with characters who are blind and who read braille. It also values book ownership by including a variety of stories and books for students to take home.

**Encouraging experiences to inspire literacy outside the classroom.** *Building on Patterns* provides parent/homework letters with lesson-associated activities (e.g., listening and nature walks, cooking, and field trips).

**Using writing activities that engage the child’s imagination to create literacy projects.** Writing is an essential component of *Building on Patterns.* Lessons address goals related to writing, for example, through creation of storybooks, travel booklets, party invitations, and treasure hunt clues.

## Summary

Children who read and write using braille should have ample opportunities to grow into inspired, life-long readers and writers. Support for the unique needs of braille users from teachers and parents through deliberately planned instruction encourages development of both foundational skills and emotional connections to literacy. One example of a literacy program designed to address skills and motivation is *Building on Patterns*. While attending to basic reading and writing standards, it is important to create opportunities for children to develop a love of literacy.

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