



# Opening Pages: Creating Inclusive Literacy Spaces for Unique Learners!

Charting the Cs  
Conference 2025:  
*To Literacy and  
Beyond*

Cooperation  
Communication  
Collaboration

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# Introductions

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# Learner Objectives

**By the end of our time together, you will...**

- Demonstrate an understanding of the challenges faced by students with low-incidence disabilities in accessing phonics-based literacy instruction.
- Share evidence-based, practical strategies for adapting literacy materials to be accessible for students with complex learning needs.
- Identify key elements of an inclusive literacy environment designed for students with low-incidence disabilities.
- Confidently collaborate with teams to adapt reading instruction for students with the greatest learning challenges, ensuring a universally designed system that works for all students.

# Literacy Instruction is a Right

## Literacy Bill of Rights

“All persons, regardless of the extent or severity of their disabilities, have the basic right to use print.”

- **Literacy is a Human Right:** Every individual, regardless of ability, deserves access to literacy instruction and tools.
- **Inclusive Literacy for All:** Complex communicators and those with low-incidence disabilities can and should be taught to read and write.
- **Support Individual Expression:** Literacy ensures everyone can share their unique voice, ideas, and needs in ways that are accessible and understood by all.

# Definition of Key Terms

- **Low-incidence disabilities:** typically, a prevalence rate of ~1% visual, hearing, traumatic brain injury, deaf/blind, orthopedic/physical impairments (spina bifida, cerebral palsy, etc)
- **Phonics-based literacy instruction:** Phonics is foundational knowledge of the alphabetic code - how sounds connect to letters, the skills to manipulate them, and the rules that shape written language. It must be explicitly taught to all to ensure equitable access to literacy and empower every learner to engage with the world.
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** A framework that uses flexible methods, materials, and assessments to ensure instruction is accessible, inclusive, and aligned with each learner's strengths and individual needs.

# Misunderstanding about Phonics for Unique Learners

- Too many children with complex needs are not given the opportunity to learn phonics, leading to a focus on whole word or sight word memorization.
  - Whole word memorization: stored in visual memory, with limited capacity.
  - Phonics-based learning: stored in phonological memory, offering much greater capacity and the potential for unlimited word learning.
- The memorization of sight words does not provide individuals with the flexibility to use what they already know about words to read unfamiliar or new words.

# Challenges in Accessing Phonics-Based Literacy Instruction

## Barriers Faced by Students

- Physical, sensory, and cognitive challenges
- Limited availability of adapted materials
- Misconceptions about capability
- Assumptions that phonics is too complex
- Majority of curriculum and programs are designed for mainstream learners

# Case Study

# Evidence-Based Strategies for Adapting Literacy Materials

- ★ The question we must focus on is not “what do we teach”  
it is “how do we make it accessible”

# Evidence-Based Strategies for Adapting Literacy Materials, cont. 1

## 1. AAC Devices

- Add phonics keyboard to the AAC device
- Include vowel teams, digraphs, and other phonics elements- not just the alphabet letters.

## 2. Visual Place Marker (VPM):

- Use colored dots to anchor auditory information.
- Requires a communication partner to assign meaning to each dot.
- Always include a "something else" option for flexibility.
- Introduce the term "thinking voice" for internal processing.

# Evidence-Based Strategies for Adapting Literacy Materials, cont. 2

## 3. Moveable Alphabet

- Provide manipulatives with letters, digraphs, and vowel teams.

## 4. Physical Needs:

- Consider tools like the "Eye Transfer Frame" (Ann Sullivan) to support physical access.
- Explore different versions to match individual needs.

# Evidence-Based Strategies for Adapting Literacy Materials, cont. 3

## 5. Sensory Needs:

- Use semi-formal delivery of instruction to match sensory preferences.
- Incorporate visuals to enhance understanding and engagement.

# Teaching Approaches

- Multisensory approaches
  - Support executive functioning skills (attention, focus, memory)
  - “A Place to Read” (Sullivan)
- Systematic and explicit instruction
  - Exposure to phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, language structures, fluency, comprehension, and writing (Erickson)

# “A Place To Read” - video



# Systematic, Explicit Instructional Routine Examples

- Shared Reading
- Alphabet & Phonological Awareness During Word Identification and Decoding
- Predictable Chart Writing
- Self-Selected Reading
- Structured and Independent Writing

# Creating Inclusive Learning Spaces

## Visual Supports

- “Thinking voice” symbol
- Access to VPM
- Big Oops!

## Access to Communication

- Wide range of AAC supports
- Lanyard visuals
- Staff training and support

# Creating (More) Inclusive Learning Spaces

## Books, Books, Books

- Alternative access
- Increase durability
- Modify text

## Alternative Pencils

- Anything that provides access to all 26 letters of the alphabet
- No pre-requisites!
- Support the cognitive aspect of writing by reducing the motor demand

# References

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- Sullivan, A. (2023). *Access to Phonics*.



## Questions?

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