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a national model?

Curriculum from Diane Browder Shows Promise for Teaching Non-Verbal Children to Read

Once, educators might have doubted that seven-year-old Nicholas Funderburk could ever learn to understand a book on his own. Nick is autistic. Though he can speak, he is just beginning to initiate conversations.

But this year, his teacher introduced him to a new experimental reading curriculum for kids with significant cognitive disabilities. He has graduated from the initial curriculum of 25 lessons, learning how to take apart and blend the sounds in words and understand new vocabulary words. In short, he's beginning to read.

"I am absolutely amazed. He just picked this up and it was like somebody opened his eyes and said, 'Ah! These letters have meaning!'" says Kimberly Starke, a teacher for children with autism

at McAlpine Elementary in Charlotte. "It was a gift to him. It was a gift to me."

That gift came from Diane Browder and colleagues with Project RAISE, a national center on reading for children with disabilities, based at the UNC Charlotte College of Education. Browder, the Lake I. and Edward Snyder Distinguished Professor in Special Education, received a \$2.5 million grant over five years from the U.S. Department of Education to create the center.

The Early Literacy Skills Builder curriculum, designed for children who can't speak or have serious difficulties with language, is one of the main's center projects. UNC Charlotte professor Bob Algozzine is co-investigator; UNC Charlotte's Susan Gibbs and other curriculum specialists and

researchers are developing the lessons and helping to assess their success. Research centers at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and Georgia State University in Atlanta are also part of the collaboration, though they focus on students with milder cognitive impairments. Browder is charged with analyzing the data from all three centers.

So far, there has been no national research to suggest that seriously impaired children, often with IQs lower than 60, can learn to read. "There's nothing in the research literature to support it," Browder says. "An individual teacher might use a lot of creativity to teach a child how to read, but then others don't know how to replicate it. We're looking to develop a curriculum for widespread use."

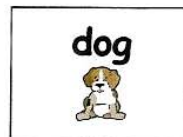
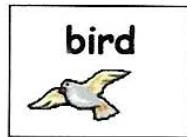


Nick Funderburk, a child with autism, takes in all the fun of this book about animals and their misadventures, read by teacher Kimberly Starke. In the past, some educators doubted that autistic children could learn to read.

But... I really want a dog! 

I could get a bird ¹⁰

But....I really want a dog !" ¹¹



For years, non-verbal children have been taught primarily words used in daily living, such as “stop” on a stop sign or “men’s” on a bathroom door. What’s changed, Browder explains, is new research on how to teach the sounds of words. “That research,” Browder says, “has opened up the possibility that more children can learn to read.”

Making the Connections

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools launched the curriculum this fall with 12 students, in partnership with LifeSpan, a statewide agency that assists people with severe disabilities. To qualify, children must be able to make a response to a question. The response could be pointing, grabbing or gazing at the answer. New readers may indicate they understand by pointing to words that someone else reads aloud, or using pictures to show comprehension.

Several dozen students were initially nominated for the program, but some could not respond to questions clearly enough. “We’ve spent this year working with teachers to get those students ready to join us,” says project researcher Lynn Ahlgrim-Delzell. About 25 students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools are slated to be part of

the program for 2006-2007.

This research is only the latest of Browder’s achievements in a 25-year career devoted to seeing how much of the academic curriculum can be taught to children with disabilities. Her passion for the field began when she taught public school in the very early days of special education. Browder joined UNC Charlotte in 1998, recruited from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

It was Mary Lynne Calhoun, dean of the College of Education, who asked Browder about the gap between sight word learners, who recognize only basic words for daily living, and those who learn to read. “She said, ‘I’ve wondered what the bridge is and how can they learn to cross it.’ I didn’t have an answer for her then, eight years ago. But I hope to have one in three years, at least for some of the kids,” Browder says.

The Early Literacy curriculum is only one of Browder’s enterprises. She has researched how children can use picture symbols embedded in stories to understand books on their grade level. In a follow-up study, middle school teachers are using similarly adapted books to teach their students *Call of the Wild* and other middle-school classics.

College of Education Professor Diane Browder has researched how children with disabilities can use picture symbols embedded in stories to understand books on their grade level.

Browder is looking at how stories can be used to teach math concepts and is working with a Ph.D. candidate on teaching science to this population. “That’s an area where there is no research at all. Her dissertation may be the first study,” Browder says. Along with all that, Browder coordinates the university’s Ph.D. in Special Education.

In three years when the grant is completed, Browder hopes some of the children will have learned to read. Those who don’t will still likely gain literacy skills that will open up the joy of shared stories. They’ll know what a story is, enjoy having a story read to them, and understand how to follow key words and pictures. Someday, schools across the nation may be using the curriculum that UNC Charlotte started.



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