

Where to Begin: Essential Knowledge for Educators About Reading Instruction and Supports for Students With IDD

by Esther R. Lindström & Jennifer Stewart

As Structured Literacy instruction and the science of reading build momentum in schools, educators may wonder about how these approaches apply to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Students with IDD may receive services under special education categories including autism, intellectual disability, developmental delay, and multiple disabilities, and they may experience a range of support needs and communication modalities. Students with IDD have historically been segregated from mainstream classrooms, excluded from effective reading instruction, and subjected to reduced quality educational supports (Keefe & Copeland, 2011).

In spite of this history, a growing number of research studies over the last two decades make a strong case for Structured Literacy instruction for students with IDD (e.g., Allor et al., 2020; Bakken et al., 2021). Although policies and curricula focused on the science of reading describe universal instruction and may mention students with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (Ward-Lonergan & Duthie, 2018), the implications for students with IDD are often less clear.

Reading methods coursework in teacher preparation programs often fails to address the needs of students with IDD (Lindström, Shelton, et al., 2024), and many teachers report feeling unprepared to teach reading to students with IDD (Conner et al., 2022). Recent research indicates that even teachers of students with IDD may benefit from strengthening their knowledge and self-efficacy pertaining to reading instruction (e.g., Conner et al., 2022; Lindström,

McFadden, et al., 2024). In this article, we outline five essential pieces of knowledge for educators looking to address the reading needs of students with IDD: content, delivery, adaptations, presumption of learner competence, and collaboration.

Essential Knowledge for Educators

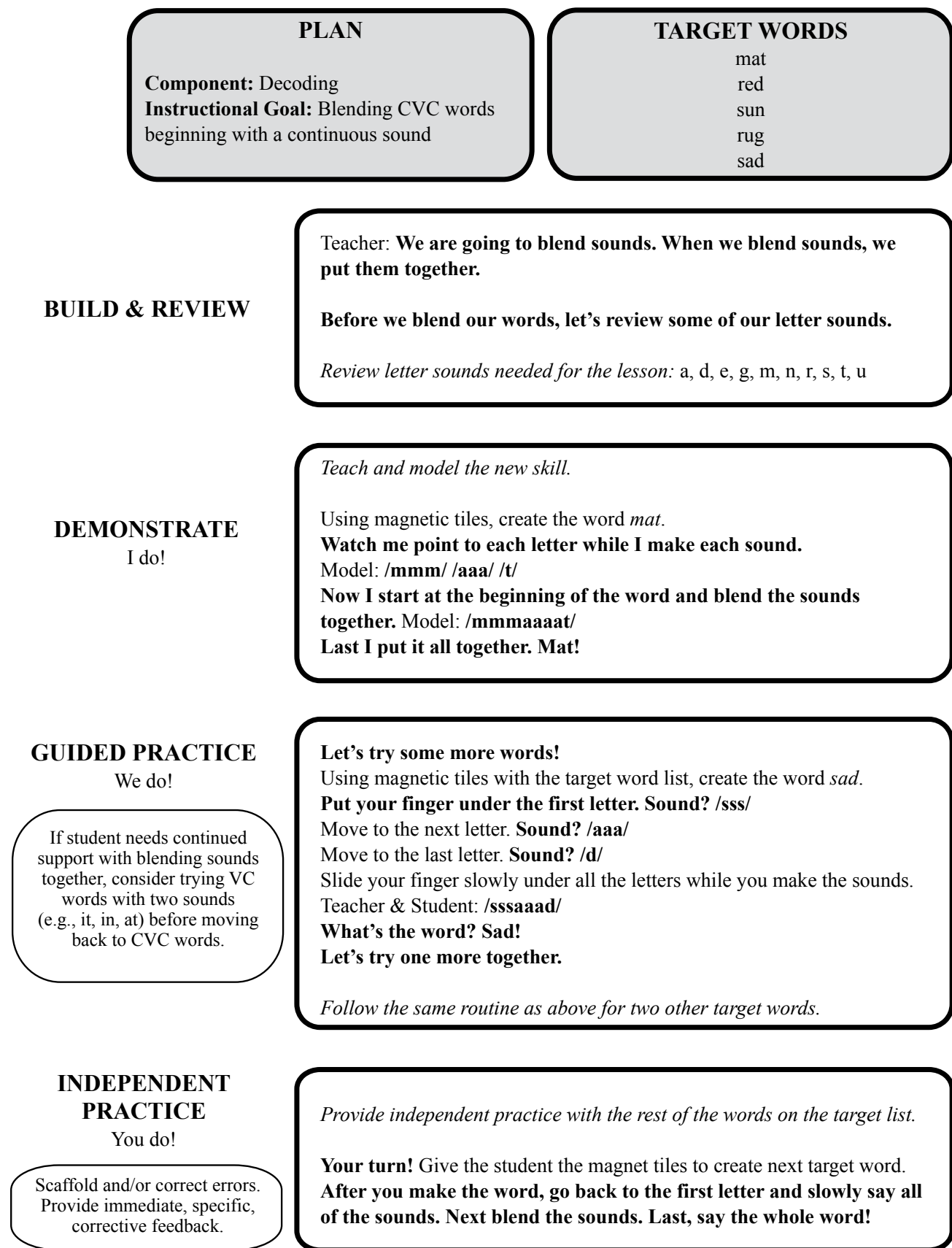
Structured Literacy Content

The expectations of what effective reading instruction is for students with IDD have greatly changed over the last two decades. Historically, students in this population were taught with a limited focus on sight word instruction. However, throughout the last twenty years of research, multi-component instruction that includes decoding words and developing language comprehension skills has shifted instructional expectations to better align with the principles of Structured Literacy (Afacan et al., 2018; Allor et al., 2020; Browder et al., 2008). In support of the use of code-based instruction (i.e., phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency), much of the current research typically focuses on foundational reading skills to build fluent word recognition (Allor et al., 2020; Sermier Dessemontet et al., 2019). However, as students with IDD progress through each grade level and have greater access to more texts and different text structures, comprehension becomes a necessary skill for academic success and fostering independence in and out of the classroom. Current systematic reviews (Joseph

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Figure 1

Structured Literacy Content and Delivery for Students With IDD



et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2019) indicate strong response among students with IDD to strategy-based interventions (e.g., summarizing, predicting, questioning), from early elementary school through secondary school. Through systematic (e.g., clear scope and sequence) and explicit (e.g., scaffolding, gradual release of responsibility) instruction of these skills, students with IDD can have increased opportunities to build independence as readers and greater access to grade-level curriculum. Figure 1 shows a sample lesson structure for decoding that incorporates building the student's background knowledge of the skill they are going to learn, follows a systematic and explicit format of modeling and practicing the concept, and presents ways to scaffold the content to the skill.

Structured Literacy Delivery

Complementary to knowing what to teach is knowing how to teach it. Instructional planning should be anchored in two primary goals: (a) supporting access to text and (b) fostering independence. Although students with IDD often have difficulties in accessing the general education curriculum, following the tenets of systematic and explicit instruction is a key component to these students making progress in their learning. Planning instruction for these students includes an emphasis on the recommended components from the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) including phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency instruction. However, to meet their needs more effectively, the focus shifts to

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small, sequential steps that are informed by measurable and meaningful goals.

When planning reading instruction for students with IDD, educators should focus on small, sequential steps that progress from simple concepts (e.g., recall questioning) to more complex skills (e.g., inferencing). Instruction should include explicit teacher modeling, multiple exposures to the skill, and cumulative review. Educators should also provide opportunities for frequent student response and immediate, corrective feedback when needed. Lastly, continued opportunities to generalize skills across content areas and learning environments help support students to make connections to what they have learned and build stronger retrieval of learned skills in a variety of contexts. Figure 1 illustrates how to plan content and delivery together through a guided, scripted plan. After the completion of the CVC decoding task, one way to generalize would be to use highlighted tape on the target words in text across content areas. This cue supports word recognition and provides an additional opportunity to decode the word within text.

Adaptations to Facilitate Access

With a strong foundation of Structured Literacy content and delivery in place, teachers are well positioned to make reading instruction accessible and responsive to students' strengths and needs. In this section, we highlight some of the needs that can be addressed through thoughtful adaptations to the delivery of reading instruction.

Communication. Many students with IDD receive speech and language services to achieve communication goals on their individualized education programs (IEPs), and up to 82% of students with extensive support needs use symbolic communication and/or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to express themselves and participate in classroom instruction (Erickson & Geist, 2016). Partnering with a speech-language pathologist (SLP) to better understand students'

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communication needs can ensure greater access for students during reading instruction. Teachers and SLPs can collaborate regarding articulation needs, receptive and expressive language supports, considerations for multilingual learners with IDD, and programming curricular material (e.g., word lists) onto AAC devices. SLPs can help determine if certain prerequisite skills need greater attention before moving forward in an instructional sequence and identify which skills are less central.

Behavior. Students with IDD may benefit from motivational and behavioral supports embedded in their reading instruction. Whether or not students have behavioral goals on their IEPs, teachers may consider using visual schedules, intermittent breaks, and access to preferred activities (e.g., iPad, sensory area) interspersed throughout their reading instruction. Behavior-specific praise (e.g., “Great work reading all of the words carefully!”), reflecting together on progress (e.g., “I’m becoming a stronger reader!”), and involving students in tracking their progress monitoring data can further support engaged, self-determined learners. Although applicable to all students, these practices can be especially helpful for those experiencing frustration or uncertainty with the introduction of new material and routines.

Presuming Competence

In addition to the content and pedagogical knowledge essential to reading instruction for students with IDD, it is equally critical for educators to maintain high expectations for students’ reading development. No matter how strong a teacher’s knowledge is of what and how to teach, if the teacher does not believe that a student can or should learn to read, meaningful progress is not likely to occur. These expectations can be expressed via allotment of reading instruction time, rigor of students’ IEP goals, and choices of instructional materials.

In a recent national survey, over 25% of special education teachers working with students with IDD did not agree that all students can acquire literacy skills or should be provided with literacy instruction (Conner et al., 2022). In the same study, teachers expressing these views reported spending less class time on reading instruction than did respondents who held higher expectations for the reading development of students with IDD. These findings can have dire ramifications for students, whose performance will surely suffer with less access to effective instruction. However, teachers who believe that reading instruction is im-

portant for students with IDD and is necessary for presuming competence, must also reflect this belief in their instructional planning and implementation.

When teachers understand the value and power of reading instruction for students with IDD, they must then make instructional decisions that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with students’ short- and long-term goals. Findings from studies analyzing students’ IEP documents and observations of classroom reading instruction have highlighted the prevalence of approaches and materials that are developmentally inappropriate and often infantilizing, especially for students with extensive support needs. For example, one observation study reported teachers using early childhood storybooks (e.g., *The Three Little Pigs*) and infant toys during literacy instruction with fifth- and sixth-grade students with IDD (Kurth et al., 2024). These materials are emblematic of low expectations for students and are especially prevalent in segregated special education classrooms. IEP goals for students in the same study were vague and misaligned with grade standards, further indicative of low expectations. Students with IDD can learn to read with methods and materials resembling those of their peers. Age-appropriate materials, practices, and content are necessary for creating learning environments that are affirming and more likely to foster student growth. When planning reading instruction, teachers may ask themselves the following questions (Kasa-Hendrickson & Buswell, 2007):

1. How can I make this work?
2. How can the student demonstrate understanding?
3. Are my talk (tone and topic) and materials age appropriate for the student?
4. What biases or preconceptions do I need to revisit and/or challenge?
5. What areas do I need support or training in?

Our final note about presuming competence is one of encouragement and persistence, for teachers and students alike. Teachers who are familiar with Structured Literacy approaches for other populations of students—or those with experience working with students with IDD but who are new to Structured Literacy—may be discouraged by how long it takes for a student to acquire a particular reading skill. Studies indicate that even with intensive intervention, students with IDD may exhibit more gradual growth in certain reading skills than their peers with other disabilities (e.g., Allor et al., 2020). We recommend that teachers keep

with the program, continue to monitor progress with appropriate measures, and collaborate with fellow educators to identify potential solutions to access barriers.

Collaboration

Supporting the reading development of students with IDD is an inherently collaborative effort, engaging the expertise of various individuals in and out of the classroom. That is, the final essential understanding that we present is knowing when and how to draw on the knowledge and experience of others. Collaborating with related service providers (e.g., SLPs, occupational therapists), paraeducators, and families is necessary for navigating access barriers and making instruction more effective. Attempting this alone is not feasible.

For successful in-school collaboration to occur, time and resources need to be allocated accordingly. School leaders organizing professional development in the science of reading are encouraged to (a) solicit input from teachers on what barriers they have identified that are in need of strategizing, and (b) schedule time explicitly for teachers and related service providers to collaborate and plan for implementation that reflects individual student needs. Teachers may need to advocate for planning time and resources for adapting instruction to meet students' needs.

Although more common in early literacy contexts for other populations, collaboration between teachers and families is important throughout the grade span to support the reading development of students with IDD. Reading instruction is likely to be more effective when teachers engage meaningfully with families, sharing important information from the classroom and soliciting their input. Teachers may share information about how families can support reading development at home and how to advocate for higher-quality instruction. In turn, family members often hold valuable expertise about student interests, goals, preferences, and other information necessary for ensuring successful implementation. Research indicates that poor-quality reading instruction is more prevalent in classrooms where teachers make instructional decisions to keep students with IDD busy, rather than those in which they are considering students' long-term, postsecondary goals to guide instruction (e.g., Ruppert et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Teaching reading to students with IDD can be very rewarding, and there is a growing evidence

base for the content and practices that are most effective for addressing these students' varying needs. When educators are familiar with a curriculum and their students' strengths and needs, they can systematically identify the barriers to address for meaningful access to occur. By maintaining high expectations and collaborating with other professionals and families, teachers can implement instruction that is rigorous, supportive, and effective. ■

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