



“Reading and Mental Retardation”

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Reading is an imperative skill not only during a child’s early years of education but throughout a person’s lifetime. Everyone learns to read in a different manner. Some may learn through isolated phonics instruction, others may learn through whole language and yet others may learn through a combination of both skills. Although children learn to read through an array of approaches, there are still thousands of students each year who are diagnosed with some form of reading disability. According to IDEA 2004, students with disabilities must have access to the same challenging content taught to non-disabled students. Despite a disability, every student should be included with the regular education children to the maximum extent possible. This concept is known as the least restricted environment (LRE), and this requirement includes children with mental retardation (MR).

The American Association of Mental Retardation (AAMR) defines MR as a “...disability characterized by significant limitation both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior...”. Numerous individuals believe that children with MR should be taught in separate classrooms and/or schools; however, researchers argue that setting high goals for MR students with the same general expectations as regular educational students will improve their learning and education outcomes.

Since all students learn to read in a distinct method, children with MR are no different. There are two approaches that researchers believe will teach MR students to learn to read. The first approach, which is sometimes called the traditional or direct instruction approach, focuses on subset skills such as phonics and sight word recognition and involves drill and practice. The second approach is a holistic approach that teaches comprehension, critical thinking, phonologic awareness, decoding and vocabulary (www.readingassessment.info/resources.com) It is believed by many researchers that one approach is not necessarily more effect than the other; rather, many MR students will learn to read through a combination of direct instruction and the holistic approach (www.readingassessment.info/resources.com).

According to research, there is not one exact research-based reading program that “fits” every MR student. Typically, teachers will gather various skills from numerous programs. *The Edmark Reading Program* has been very successful for samples of kindergarten and first grade

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students as the students were able to generalize their reading ability to untaught words and the program developed critical pre-reading skills such as left to right progression.
(www.proedinc.com)

Another reading program that has been researched and successfully utilized with children with MR, is Patricia Cunningham's *Four Block Model*. This model includes four components, namely Guided Reading, Working with Words, Writing, and Self-Guided Reading. All four of these components involve critical components in learning to read and the simple exposure to the *Four Block Model* exposes MR students to literacy activities and the literacy experience (Locke, 2000).

No matter what the approach, all students, including children with Mental Retardation, need to learn the critical skills of reading. Whether a student learns through phonics isolation or through the holistic or whole language approach, as long as a child learns to read, that student can be more successful in life.

Locke, Peggy A. (2000). *Literacy: Everyone Can Benefit*. Retrieved on September 17, 2008, from Promoting the Participation of Literacy for Individuals Web site: www.csun.edu.

Reading and Students with Mental Retardation. Retrieved on September 15, 2008, from www.readingassessment.info/resources.com.

The Edmark Reading Program and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Retrieved on September 17, 2008, from Website www.proedinc.com.

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