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Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8

# Literacy-Rich Environments

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Reading is a fundamental skill that defines the academic success or failure of students. As noted by Barbara Foorman, from the University of Texas, Houston Medical School, “88 percent of students who were poor readers in first grade were poor readers in fourth grade” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000, 9). Once students reach fourth grade, most of the information they need is given to them in textual format where the focus changes from learning to read, to reading to learn. Therefore, those poor readers may have difficulty interacting with content in the curriculum (Higgins, Boone, and Lovitt, 2002). Identification of delays or disorders in literacy development typically occurs in the upper elementary grades, but research also indicates that this may be too late for remediation (NICHD, 2000). Language acquisition and literacy experiences begin at birth. Students lacking previous experience with skills such as print awareness, the alphabetic principle, and phonemic awareness need supplementary instruction to ensure they do not lag behind their peers. Therefore, elementary school teachers must provide an environment that allows students with disabilities to have access to experiences they may have missed in their preschool years.

Research conducted by the National Reading Panel (NRP) found that skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are essential to literacy development (NRP, 2001). Before students with disabilities can begin to develop these five skills, they need to understand the functions and uses of literacy (Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995; Mason & Allen, 1986; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). A literacy-rich environment is a setting that stimulates students with disabilities to participate in language and literacy activities in their daily lives thereby giving them the beginning understandings of the utility and function of oral and written language.

This information brief describes the various elements of a literacy-rich environment in an elementary school classroom that provide students in special education access to the general education curriculum. It provides elementary school teachers with information on why a literacy-rich environment is important and how to establish one. This brief discusses how a literacy-rich environment facilitates access to the general education curriculum, and cites the research that demonstrates the effectiveness of this strategy in the classroom. Lists of additional resources are also included to enhance the readers’ ability to implement literacy-rich environments. Please note that while this information brief specifically discusses the needs of students with disabilities, particularly those affecting literacy acquisition, the strategies discussed are effective for all children in elementary settings.

# Strategy Description

## A Snapshot of a Literacy-Rich Environment

Imagine walking into an early elementary school classroom and seeing all students immersed in literacy experiences. Children are engaged in a variety of reading and writing activities, with some students working in groups and others working individually. Students explore books of various genres, not just in the library or during reading times, but also in science, math, and social studies. During math the teacher reads aloud a book on math such as *The Math Curse* (Scieszka & Lane, 1995), and discusses the content in order to expose students to literacy across all content areas. During science, students explore the science literature, such as eye-witness books, to gain greater knowledge about concepts. Students interact with books on CD-Rom and listen to books on tape.



Materials in the classroom are adapted not only to help students with challenges interact with text, but also to serve as a motivator for reading. Students write books and reports in all of the content areas. Writing also occurs in student journals and notebooks. When needing a resource for more information, students use books, computers, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and word walls, as well as teachers and peers, for assistance.



The classroom has labels with words and pictures everywhere so that students constantly connect written language with the things they represent. Teachers display these labels based on student needs and interest to provide children with disabilities support in the classroom (Dorrell, 2002). Students use calendars, schedules, signs, and directions to see how words can

be used everyday. Teachers and students reconstruct the classroom to represent a book or a theme that the class has studied with written materials, so that students can live in the lesson. All materials are adapted to meet the needs of children with disabilities. For example, Braille and textured materials may be used in labels, signs, and other displays for children with visual impairments.

Teachers engage in language and literacy activities in all elements of instruction. Conversations abound in which teachers elicit language from students and ask them to transcribe that language.

For example, a teacher conducting a science lesson may request hypotheses, observations, and conclusions from students in oral and written form. Teachers also facilitate language and literacy exploration with games and activities that students can use one-to-one, independently, or with peers. Finally, teachers demonstrate their own participation in language and literacy through modeling its use continually throughout the day. Teachers can demonstrate writing on the board by recording what children share in class discussions.

## ***The Purpose of Literacy-Rich Environments***

From the atmosphere and décor of the room to interactions with peers and teachers, every element of the classroom is designed to allow students with disabilities to explore the elements of literacy. The literacy-rich environment emphasizes the importance of speaking, reading, and writing in the learning of all students. This involves the selection of materials that will facilitate language and literacy opportu-

### **Literacy-Rich Environments with a Theme**

*Ms. Fassler's second grade class is studying weather. In her literacy-rich classroom you can find students:*

- *Reading books on weather*
- *Exploring labels around the classroom identifying weather vocabulary*
- *Learning content on raindrops and clouds*
- *Drawing pictures of the different types of clouds*
- *Singing songs about the weather*
- *Writing in their weather journals about the conditions each day*
- *Graphing the daily temperature*

nities, reflection and thought regarding classroom design, and intentional instruction and facilitation by teachers and staff (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999). Because literacy-rich environments can be individualized to meet students' needs, teachers are able to create both independent and directed activities to enhance understanding of the concepts of print and word, linguistic and phonemic awareness, and vocabulary development. All of this occurs in a concrete setting giving students with disabilities multiple opportunities to gain the skills necessary to participate in the general education curriculum. For example, books, technology, manipulative materials, art projects, and explorative activities can be used around a central theme.

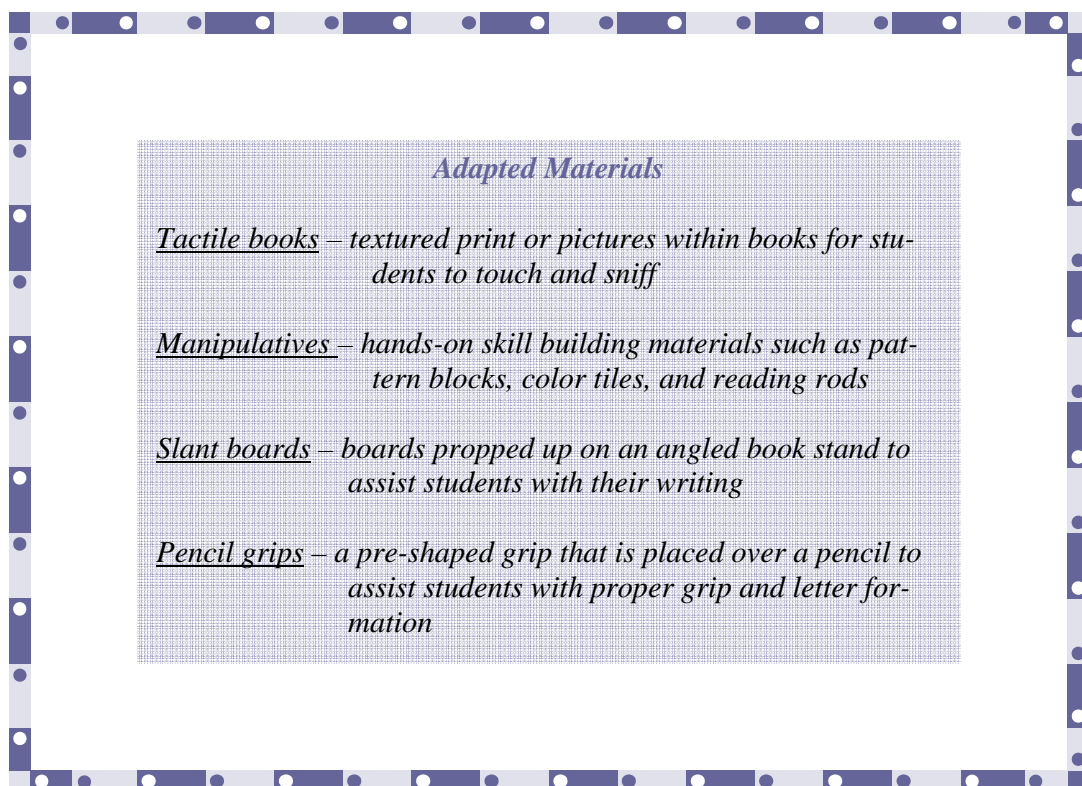
## ***Classroom Materials for Literacy-Rich Environments***

The intentional selection and use of materials is central to the development of the literacy-rich environment. Teachers ensure that students have access to a variety of resources by providing many choices. Teaching staff connect literacy to all elements of classroom life. Teaching staff alternate books in the classroom library to maintain students' interest and expose them to various genres and ideas (International Reading Association [IRA] & the National Association for the Education of Young children [NAEYC], 1998). For example, teachers should include both fiction and nonfiction literature. Classrooms include miscellaneous literacy materials that are used in everyday life to further demonstrate how literacy is used (Goodman, Bird, & Goodman, 1991).

### **Examples of Materials**

Phone books, Dictionaries, Menus, Recipes, Labels, Signs, Printed directions, Student work, Alphabet displays

Taking dictation for students not yet fluent in writing allows students to see how oral language is translated into written language. Written words let students see what they say. Therefore, writing makes thoughts visible. As students make attempts to write, allowing diverse materials (pens, pencils, markers, and crayons of varying shapes and sizes, typewriters, computers, keyboards, magnetic writing boards, etc.) increases students' choice and motivation. Adapted materials such as tactile books, manipulatives, slant boards, and pencil grips for diverse learners offer accessibility and motivation. Home-school connections are made through lending materials that ensure that students with diverse ability levels have literacy opportunities at home as well as at school. Parents are made aware of the materials and shown how students can use them at home.



### ***Classroom Design for Literacy-Rich Environments***

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The room arrangement should encourage repeated opportunities to interact with literacy materials and activities to practice skills that students are learning (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995). Through repeated practice with materials and activities, skills become more automatic and students with disabilities are given ample opportunities to integrate new and old information. Combining opportunities for independent exploration and peer interaction with teacher instruction enhances and builds upon skills. "Their everyday, playful experiences by themselves do not make most children readers. Rather they expose children to a variety of print experiences and the processes of reading for real purposes" (IRA & NAEYC, 1998, 4).



## ***The Role of the Teacher for Literacy-Rich Environments***

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The role of the teacher is to encourage all attempts at reading, writing, and speaking, allowing students of varying ability to experience the different functions and use of literacy activities. Teacher interactions with students with disabilities build on students' knowledge as they develop literacy skills. Teachers use a variety of methods of communicating with students by asking questions, labeling objects and experiences with new vocabulary, and offering practice to help students remember and generalize new concepts and skills (Whitehurst, 2003). Teaching staff plan activities so that students "have opportunities to integrate and extend their literacy knowledge by reading aloud, listening to other students read aloud, and listening to tape recordings and videotapes in reading corners" (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 5). Also, staff teach students how to use the materials in their environment to promote interest in and use of literacy materials throughout the classroom (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995). Another strategy involves staff members intentionally making mistakes to demonstrate editing and revising (Goodman, Bird, & Goodman, 1991), modeling for children the importance of making mistakes while demonstrating the writing.

## ***Evidence of Effectiveness***

This section provides research evidence on the following areas:

- The classroom materials
- The role of the teacher
- The classroom design and layout

### ***Evidence on Classroom Materials***

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There are numerous classroom materials that help build a literacy-rich environment. By integrating phone books, menus, and other written materials into student play, children are able to see the connections between the written word and spoken language, as well as to understand how written language is used in real world situations. By creating a literacy-rich environment for students with disabilities, teachers are giving students the opportunities and skills necessary for growth in literacy development. "Through exposure to written language (e.g., storybook reading and daily living routines) many children develop an awareness of print, letter naming, and phonemic awareness. Additionally, through exposure to oral language, preschool children develop listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language facility" (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 3). Also, Lomax and McGee suggest that awareness of print is the precursor to phonemic awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondence knowledge, and word reading (Ibid.).

### ***Evidence on the Role of the Teacher***

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The literacy-rich environment also provides students with opportunities to engage with, and see adults interact with, print, allowing students to build their skills in understanding the conventions, purposes, and functions of print. "Children learn how to attend to language and apply this knowledge to literacy situations by interacting with others who model language functions" (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 11). Furthermore, findings from a study conducted by Morrow (1990) indicate that classrooms with greater teacher facilitation enhance literacy behaviors. Therefore,

teachers that provide literacy-rich activities within the classroom improve reading skills. “In adult-guided classrooms, teachers provided scaffolding by introducing literacy materials in the play centers and discussing with children how to use materials (e.g., reading to dolls, writing notes to friends, making shopping lists, and taking telephone messages). The students in those classrooms, in turn used more printed materials with attention to their printed aspects and produced more printed materials than students in classrooms with no specific teacher guidance” (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 3).

### ***Evidence on the Classroom Design and Layout***

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The physical environment of the classroom is also crucial for developing literacy growth for children. “Studies suggest that the physical arrangement of the classroom can promote time with books” (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986; Neuman & Roskos, 1997 in IRA & NAEYC, 1998, 4). Studies also indicate that the written language used for labels and signs in the natural environment enhance reading strategies for students with disabilities (McGee, Lomax, & Head, 1988; Neuman & Roskos, 1993 in IRA & NAEYC, 1998). These signs and labels, also referred to as environmental print, help students with disabilities make connections between information they know and the new information given to them in the form of writing. Finally, literacy-rich environments allow students with disabilities to see the connection literacy has to the real world. “In environments rich with print, children incorporate literacy into their dramatic play (Morrow, 1990; Vukelich, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1997), using these communication tools to enhance drama and realism of the pretend situation” (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 10).

## ***How a Literacy-Rich Environment Facilitates Access***

Some students begin elementary school struggling with literacy experiences. Creating a literacy-rich environment in school enriches literacy experiences for students who may have limited exposure to literacy due to delays or disorders in their development. Making literacy a part of the environment and ensuring that all children have access to the general education curriculum (e.g., Braille for children with visual impairments, assistive technology for children with physical, communication, or cognitive delays) occurs in many ways. Teachers assess the abilities and challenges of students, then problem-solve to determine what opportunities will best meet the needs of these students. Specific recommendations for alterations in the environment are best made on an individual basis and with the consultation of special educators and related service providers.

As teachers design their learning environment, it is essential that they consider the diverse needs and skills of the students they teach. As they integrate the skills and backgrounds of their diverse students, teachers should ensure that each student is represented in their classroom design and instruction. They can individualize the environment to meet the needs of students with disabilities and ensure that appropriate opportunities to participate in literacy activities are consistently available. “Children with diverse literacy experiences have difficulty making connections between old and new information” (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, 5). Structuring the classroom in a planned manner that immerses students with disabilities in accessible literacy activities provides them with opportunities to create connections between oral and written language, thereby gaining access to the general education curriculum.

### *Student Activity Examples*

- Word / letter games like Pictionary, Scrabble, bingo, and Boggle
- Play with alphabet letter cookie cutters or stamps
- Discuss the daily schedule
- Interact with magnetic letters
- Label photos of students, teachers, important school staff, and class activities
- Explore a variety of books, magazines, books on tape, and books on computer
- Complete daily communication notebooks

## ***Multicultural Implications***

The research indicates the importance of culture in understanding students' home literacy environments as well as the influence cultural values have on literacy development. Mason & Allen (1986) note that cultural context and perspective or purpose influence how students with disabilities interact with literacy environments. They cite several cultures and indicate how the purpose of literacy influences students' access to development of skills. For example, Israeli children learn to read Hebrew in order to read the bible, but these children do not speak Hebrew (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995). "What families and communities believe and value about literacy is reflected in the level of preparation children bring to formal instruction and affects the role of schools in providing literacy experiences and instruction" (Ibid., 12). Therefore, when considering the design of a literacy-rich environment for students from diverse cultures or assessing their interactions with the environment, teachers must consider the different frameworks and backgrounds regarding literacy in the culture of these children. Students who have not been exposed to specific vocabulary or literature will need additional support with learning concepts from new material. Teachers can discuss the literacy goals for each student with parents in order to gain support at home.

Literacy-rich environments support English Language Learners (ELL) as well. Many students come to school without understanding and speaking English. Therefore, a classroom that incorporates the elements of literacy-rich environments can help ELLs access the general education curriculum (Reading is Fundamental).



### *Strategies for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds*

- Read aloud frequently.
- Include children's primary language in print around the classroom.
- Allow children to make mistakes when attempting to use a second language.
- Encourage children to read the same books repeatedly to become familiar with the text.
- Plan activities that involve using language.

### **Conclusion**

The literacy-rich classroom serves as a means to build the basic skills necessary for literacy development by demonstrating to students with disabilities the function and utility of language in an intentional, purposeful, and intensive way. While many students come to school with exposure to literacy in their everyday lives, students who may not have access or exposure benefit from the instruction and intensity provided by teachers and staff in this setting. Given the support of this environment, students are better prepared to work on other literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

### **Materials/Training**

The following references provide information for implementation and training regarding literacy-rich environments. All organizations mentioned in this section provide research-based information supported by studies in the field.

The National Governor's Association provides an information brief about the implementation of policies to facilitate literacy-rich environments entitled "*Developing and Supporting Literacy-Rich Environments for Children.*" It is available at <http://www.nga.org>

The Head Start Bureau commissioned and published a training guide regarding literacy that contains a module specifically regarding creating a literacy-rich environment in the classroom. It can be found at [www.bmcc.edu/Headstart/Trngds/Literacy/mod4\\_21.htm](http://www.bmcc.edu/Headstart/Trngds/Literacy/mod4_21.htm)

*The Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes: Strategies to support positive child outcomes.* It is available at: [www.headstartinfo.org/pdf/HSOutcomesguideFINAL4c.pdf](http://www.headstartinfo.org/pdf/HSOutcomesguideFINAL4c.pdf).

The Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) organization publishes two articles for parents on creating literacy rich environments in the home, entitled, “*Creating a Reading Environment at Home*” and “*Providing a Literacy-Rich Home Environment.*” These are available at [www.rif.org/educators/articles/](http://www.rif.org/educators/articles/).

The National Center on Learning Disabilities created the “Get Ready to Read” website, which offers [activities](#), [resources](#), [background on early literacy](#), and [answers to common questions](#), and other information regarding literacy rich environments. This is available at <http://www.getreadytoread.org>.

Allyn & Bacon have published a book by Lyndon Searfoss, John Readence, and Marla Mallatte about developing a literacy rich environment entitled, *Helping Children Learn to Read: Creating a Classroom Literacy Environment, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. To find out more about this book or order it you can go to the publisher’s website, [www.ablongman.com](http://www.ablongman.com), or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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We also would like to draw on your expertise and experiences in providing access to the general education curriculum. Please share your experiences and success stories with the Access Center by sending them to the address or e-mail below.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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