



ReadtopiaGO™
by Building Wings

An Evidence-Based Early Literacy Curriculum

A White Paper



This publication was developed by Allison Dennis, Ph.D. and Maureen Donnelly, M.Ed. The design and execution of ReadtopiaGO are drawn from the work of Dr. Karen Erickson and her team at the Center for Literacy and Disability Studies, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill whose mission is to promote literacy and communication for individuals of all ages who face learning challenges.

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Part 1: A Model for Thinking about Language and Literacy

Emergent literacy is defined as the behaviors that precede conventional reading and writing (Sulzby, Branz & Buhle, 1993) and refers to the ways in which all learners, including those who face the most significant disabilities, learn to read, write, and communicate (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020). Emergent literacy is predicated on the idea that nurturing, supportive others play a significant role in helping all learners develop and grow (Mariage, Englert, & Garmon, 2000). Furthermore, since reading, writing, speaking, and listening are capacities that develop concurrently, instruction that focuses on supporting any one of the above domains often results in growth and learning of the others (Koppenhaver, Coleman, Kalman, & Yoder, 1991, adapted from Teale & Sulzby, 1989).

Part 2: Challenges in Early Learning Today

Today, teachers who strive to support children who face learning barriers, face some significant challenges in their efforts to find, adapt, and deliver learning curricula. Some of these challenges are historical, while others have arisen out of more recent conditions, like the status of funding, the role of educators in the larger society, and/or the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on learning outcomes. These challenges may include:

The Nature of Instruction

The kind and quality of instruction typically provided to young children who face learning challenges can either be non-existent or tend toward more narrow, decontextualized, and/or mastery-based learning. This approach fails to help learners develop the foundational knowledge that contributes to later literacy and communication success. Instead, they develop proficiency in one area (such as phonics, for example) yet struggle to apply this knowledge in the flexible ways that are required to read and write conventionally (Erickson, et al., 2009).

Quality and Access to Materials

Learners with low-incidence disabilities are less likely to have access to a curriculum that is engaging, language-rich, integrated, and reflective of their lives, abilities, and experiences. The dearth of such materials has both immediate and long-term impacts. First, it disengages learners from day-to-day instruction. Second, it serves to disincentivize them from building a positive disposition toward reading and writing,

generally. (Fleming, Catapano, Thompson, & Carrillo, 2015). Beyond exposure to these materials, learners require independent access to books, writing implements, and AAC systems that support learning (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

Measuring Progress

Measuring progress for learners with disabilities can be an ongoing challenge for today's special educators. For one, it can be difficult to determine meaningful, measurable and developmentally appropriate goals that are directly consistent with the later goal of conventional reading and writing. For another, identifying progress can be difficult since growth is often best measured in small increments. Last, teachers face the challenge of capturing data in real time, interpreting it, and sharing it with others in meaningful ways (Webster, 2020).

Classroom Culture and Function

Classroom culture can be an invisible yet pernicious barrier to the learning development of young children with special needs. Instructional philosophies that prioritize assessment over instruction, the degree to which we presume competency on behalf of our students, as well as our beliefs about disabilities all can impact the experience, instruction, and relationships that drive literacy learning (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

Professional Training and Knowledge

Many early learning settings, particularly those that serve children with low incidence disabilities, struggle to attract and/or retain knowledgeable staff. In some cases, teachers have little or no requirements or training that relates to literacy instruction specifically, or early learning, generally. Additionally, the pandemic has amplified the challenge of providing ongoing professional development and retaining current staff (Zamarro, 2022).

Lack of Time

Today's teachers face a growing trend that asks them to complete additional tasks and duties, like setting goals, providing assessments, and collecting data, for example, without additional time to do so. Similarly, many early special educators have latitude when it comes to defining curriculum, yet little in the way of guidance for making such decisions. Given those conditions, many teachers then spend precious hours searching, downloading, adapting, and aligning materials for their learners. This approach frequently results in curriculum that is disjointed, poorly aligned and detracts from energy and attention that might otherwise be spent planning instruction (Polikoff, 2019).

Part 3: Recommendations for Literacy Instruction to Young Children with Learning Barriers

Evidence-based early literacy instruction, as it pertains to young children who face learning barriers, should be comprehensive in nature and deliver opportunities to engage in meaningful, expressive, and receptive communication, as well as opportunities to explore a range of reading and writing tools, materials and experiences (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020). Ninety or more minutes a day of predictable, age-appropriate literacy instruction has been proven

to help children operationalize knowledge of these emergent routines so that they can focus more deeply on the skills and knowledge that lead to literacy success. As indicated by Erickson and Koppenhaver, these emergent routines include shared reading, shared writing, independent reading, independent writing, and alphabet and phonics instruction. Below find a description of the nature and value of each routine:

Shared Reading

Shared Reading is an active/interactive reading experience that occurs when adults or knowledgeable others read to children. During shared reading, adults invite learners to participate or collaborate on the reading of a book with the goal that gradually, children begin to take ownership of the activity. Shared reading has been called “the single most important activity for developing the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (National Academy of Education & Anderson, 1985). This is because, during shared reading, we demonstrate what reading is, what it sounds like, and how we draw meaning from texts (Bellon-Harn & Harn, 2008).

Shared Writing

Shared writing is an activity where adults scribe messages dictated by the learners. Predictable chart writing is an approach to shared writing that is often used in early learning settings because it is accessible to all, even those at the earliest stages of literacy development because it reduces the language demands placed on students (Hall & Williams, 2001). The repeated sentence frame offers a familiar structure, clarifying the intention of the activity and reducing the language demands we place on learners. Shared writing produces benefits in both reading and writing development by showing how we deploy the alphabet to create and share meaning with each other.

Alphabet and Phonics Instruction

Knowledge of the alphabet is the single greatest predictor of learning to read (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). The four aspects of alphabet instruction include letter name identification, letter sound identification, identifying the letter in text, and producing the letter form (Jones, Clark, & Reutzel, 2013). Effective instruction provides learners with daily opportunities to explore all four aspects of alphabet instruction, regardless of the methods used to do so (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020). Rather than require mastery, learners are exposed to rapid cycling, which provides both the repetition and the variety that improves retention.

Independent Reading

Independent reading is when learners engage with text with minimal support from adults. Regardless of how each child accomplishes this (and even for how long), the main purpose is to allow learners a chance to apply their learning about printed work, illustrations, and book handling to their own experiences. This routine is also critical in helping learners set a foundation for later, lifelong reading (Owocki & Goodman, 2002).

Independent Writing

Independent writing supports learners in applying their understanding of alphabet, knowledge, phonological awareness, and print concepts to the writing process (Erickson & Koppenahver, 2020). While some learners may need assistance in finding and using writing tools that meet their needs, students with the most significant disabilities can write independently when adequate, individualized supports are in place (that includes access to the entire alphabet) (Hanser, 2006).

Part 4: Introducing ReadtopiaGO

ReadtopiaGO, by Buiding Wings, is a core curriculum designed specifically for young children who face learning barriers. Its state-of-the-art design addresses the kinds of challenges inherent in today's special education learning settings, and provides key support to help teachers at all levels of professional knowledge deliver effective, nurturing, and play-based literacy instruction. ReadtopiaGO was designed as the precursor curriculum to Readtopia, which provides comprehensive ELA instruction for students in grade 3 and beyond. Some key features of ReadtopiaGO include:

Comprehensive Cycles

ReadtopiaGO provides a framework for 90+ minutes of daily literacy instruction. A single cycle includes all the routines of comprehensive literacy instruction prescribed for emergent learners. There are additional learning opportunities to help build learning communities, like morning message and suggested activity centers that provide all learners with opportunities to extend their learning thematically.

Implementation Support

Like Readtopia, ReadtopiaGO's Teacher Guide provides step-by-step instructional sequences and support so that practitioners at all levels of professional development can deliver evidence-based instruction. Instructional sequences are predictable (and sometimes scripted) which allows teachers to easily integrate these instructional cycles. Additionally, ReadtopiaGO provides opportunities for real-time learning via two-part Teacher Tutorials that link to each routine. These video supports provide busy teachers with a visual and auditory primer that they can consume in under five minutes, so that they can quickly grasp or reinforce the what, why, and how of each routine.

Resources To Save You Time

ReadtopiaGO provides you with everything you need to get started delivering meaningful, integrated instruction on Monday morning. The program includes books (at three levels) that anchor each topic, videos to support background knowledge, tricks and tips for setting up inclusive play centers, extended reading lists, and activity sheets that can provide tangible support for individual or group learning. The entire program is aligned to standards and conceptually integrated so that you can be sure you are providing evidence-based literacy instruction, as well as opportunities to develop vocabulary and knowledge related to science, social studies, social-emotional learning, and life skills.

Communication Support

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users are supported in engaging in ReadtopiaGO through supplemental resources designed by Karen Erickson, PhD and Caroline Musselwhite, EdD, and modified for ReadtopiaGO by Allison Dennis, Ph.D. and Maureen Donnelly, M.Ed. The AAC support is a multi-page paper system organized around the core vocabulary (Erickson & Geist, 2016). Beyond core words, this system provides fringe vocabulary organized into general categories that expand as students progress toward using Readtopia. You can download this booklet by searching ReadtopiaGO at: Lessonpix.com

Building Background Knowledge

Each year of ReadtopiaGO supports learning across 16 themes that provide learners with opportunities to deepen their knowledge and vocabulary in science, social studies, social-emotional learning, and life skills. These topical themes were drawn from state and national frameworks and endeavor to build the kind of diverse knowledge base that supports language development and reading comprehension. ReadtopiaGO also features video-based puppet featuring Geartrude, a robot who helps young children become acquainted with the concepts and vocabulary of each domain via music, questions, and playful conversations.

Engaging and Culturally Relevant Materials

ReadtopiaGO offers a library of 32 anchor texts each year. These libraries were intentionally designed to reflect the diverse lives, cultures, and experiences of all young children, especially those who face learning barriers. In doing so, we use these books as mirrors for children to see and celebrate themselves, but also as windows onto worlds and experiences beyond their own. Our intention was for a learner using ReadtopiaGO to open a book, see a scientist wearing a hearing aid, and think “that could be me!”

Providing Physical Access

Recognizing that all learners need ways to access and/or manipulate their learning materials, we have provided tips and tricks to modify Activity Centers so that all learners can engage. Additionally, ReadtopiaGO is currently developing an interactive, switch-accessible platform so that learners can freely navigate books using touch, eyegaze, or through scanning. Last, look for the links to Project Core in the closing credits of each Teaching Tutorial. There you’ll find a wide variety of both video and written text that will support teachers in providing access to students with various abilities during opportunities for both reading and writing.

Measuring Progress

Currently, Building Wings is developing a product to address the challenges of progress monitoring. With this product, users will be able to set up a classroom of student, assess and determine goals for literacy skills, track progress and collect work samples in real time. Be on the lookout for Building Wings progress monitoring solution in late 2023.

Part 5: Conclusion

ReadtopiaGO is a core curriculum that endeavors to support the unique needs, interests, and abilities of young children who face learning challenges, as well as the adults who support them. With a range of implementation supports, we strive not only to aid in the delivery of everyday literacy instruction but also in all practitioners' ability to deepen their practices. With the combined resources of comprehensive cycles of instruction, meaningful implementation supports, accessible leveled books, and tips to include all children in play-based learning, you can help all emergent learners build the kind of literacy and learning foundation upon which later academics are predicated.

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