



Provincial Outreach Program for Students with Deafblindness

Literacy Screening for Students with Deafblindness

Deafblindness is an information gathering disability where an individual experiences combined vision and hearing differences such that neither sense can fully accommodate for the other.

A student with deafblindness experiences a degree of hearing and vision loss, the combination of which affects:

- Communication
- Learning (education)
- Vocational (work skills)
- Avocational (leisure skills)
- Social Interactions/Social skills
- Mobility

(BC Special Education Policy Manual, 2016, p. 67)

The combinations of visual and auditory differences vary widely between individuals and have a “profound effect on learning, especially in relation to communication and concept development, which are the foundations of literacy” (Cushman, n.d.). While one student reads print and communicates through speech, another student reads braille and communicates via American Sign Language (Cushman, n.d.).

Each person who is deaf-blind—whatever her sensory, mental, and physical abilities—deserves the opportunity to become literate in all the ways of which she is capable. Reading and writing are especially crucial for one whose world is narrowed because of vision and hearing losses. Literacy can enable such a person to exchange information and ideas, and develop relationships that would otherwise be out of reach (Miles, 2005).

Some students with deafblindness have additional disabilities and do not use alphabet-based communication (Cushman, n.d.). Other forms of symbolic communication may be used for literacy and communication, so the definition of literacy needs to go beyond the traditional definition of “reading and writing.” Examples of non-traditional symbolic communication may include objects, textures, gestures, signalling, and images. Communication broadens the definition of literacy by including the multitude of ways that people can engage with one another. Sharing experiences, communicating ideas, and engaging in dialogue are ways to demonstrate literacy abilities. All students, regardless of age or perceived abilities, can be included in, and benefit from, literacy experiences that are tailored according to the individual’s needs and abilities (Bruce, Nelson, Perez, Stutzman, & Barnhill, 2016).

Considerations

Cushman (n.d.) outlines specific considerations that the student’s team needs to understand as they impact the effect of deafblindness on literacy acquisition. Questions include:

- How much vision does the individual have?

- How much hearing does the individual have?
- Is either of those losses progressive?
- Are there medical considerations that affect learning?
- Are there additional disabilities?
- At what age did the individual lose vision and hearing?
- Are assistive devices being used consistently?
- How does the individual communicate?
(Cushman, n.d.).

Functional Vision and Hearing

The student's functional vision and hearing needs are essential pieces of information for building meaningful literacy programs for students with deafblindness. A qualified Teacher for Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) and a qualified Teacher for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (TDHH) are required to work collaboratively with the student's team to assess and provide information on the student's functional vision and hearing for the purposes of determining learning educational adaptations and accommodations, instructional strategies, and specialized technology that would be necessary for the implementation of literacy programs (CEEDAR, 2014).

Psychological-Educational Evaluation

If a learning disability is suspected, the student with deafblindness needs to be assessed by a psychologist with a specialization in testing children and youth with deafblindness. Student teams are encouraged to reach out to BC Children's Hospital for qualified psychologists.

- In some situations, district psychologists may be able to do the assessment under the supervision of the BCCH psychologists.

Literacy Skills Assessment

Standardized assessments are inappropriate tools for testing students with deafblindness as they are not normed for this population and may be inaccessible to learners with deafblindness due to visual, auditory, and/or conceptual components. Attempts to do informal or dynamic assessments of students with deafblindness need to be across various environments and include people who know the student well (CEEDAR, 2014).

After establishing visual and auditory access needs, the student's team can apply a literacy skills assessment as a starting point to building a literacy program. To assist with the assessing the student's current literacy skills, a professional on the student's team needs to be familiar with the multiplicative impact of deafblindness (CEEDAR, 2014).

There are a variety of literacy skills checklists available online. The National Center on Deafblindness (NCDB) has literacy skills checklist that they recommend for students with deafblindness. [All Children Can Read: Literacy Skills Checklist](#) (2016) is a free download that teams can use to assessment the student's current literacy skills.

References

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