

**The use of a Visual and Performing Arts Curriculum
to teach Sight Words
to four students who have an intellectual disability.**

Bronwyn Welch

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Currently in the United States of America, schools have been instructed to provide high quality reading programs that include the components of vocabulary, phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension (Kenny & Gunter, 2004). In Australia, students work towards being able to read texts using graphophonic, semantic and syntactic cues in the early levels of reading (V.E.L.S., 2005).

A major goal within the field of special education is that of providing effective reading programs to students (Therrien, Wickstrom & Jones, 2006). In order to understand texts, students need to be able to decode words and read them in a fluent manner (Therrien, et al., 2006). Numerous authors have examined literacy programs in order to find effective ways to teach students to read. However, in a review of the literature, Vaughn, Levy, Coleman and Bos (2002) found that literacy programs for students who either had learning difficulties or emotional/behavioral disorders included a significant amount of 'lost' time where students were either out of the room, waiting, or 'off task', and in some cases, students had more 'lost' time than time spent actually reading. Vaughn, et al. (2002) also found that the review of the literature showed that these students were expected to complete independent seatwork and worksheets for over half of their literacy programs and did little actual reading. In addition to this, it was found that the reading programs were not individualized to meet the students needs and often consisted of whole group, undifferentiated instruction.

Being literate is seen as an important skill in our society and being illiterate conjures up a negative stigma (Kenny & Gunter, 2004). Student's difficulties with literacy have been attributed as a causal factor for chronic school misbehavior in secondary school students (Taylor, Hasselbring & Williams, 2001). Research has found that reluctant readers are more likely to read if they are motivated with appropriate texts (Eriksson, 2002, cited in Kenny & Gunter, 2004).

Teacher's views of learning has centered around the use of language, be it oral or written, as the way of making meaning (Leland & Harste, 1994). This can become restrictive as other ways of 'knowing' are dismissed. Berghoff (1998) stated that some

students may not be motivated by language (including written) based programs, and may be able to work better through the mediums of art, music and movement. Multiple ways of knowing can be developed into a language arts program that will suit the needs of all learners (Morin & Begoray, 2002). The English Language Arts curriculum in Manitoba, Canada, draws upon alternate sign systems in teaching literacy and language as a way of meeting the needs of their students and in recognition of the impact of media and technology on their students (Morin & Begoray, 2002). Programs that use different teaching methods and materials to the traditional programs are likely to achieve greater success in teaching students who have difficulties in the areas of reading and writing (Taylor et. al., 2001). Nelson and Zobairi (1999) took the viewpoint that multiple literacy, where music, story, movement and visual arts are used to communicate experiences, can be an alternative way to develop knowledge in young children. This has been developed further by Leland and Jerome (1994) who stated that literacy is the ability to read and use multiple cue and sign systems.

Mediums such as music, art, mathematics, drama and speaking are methods of representing and communicating ideas using signs (Leland & Harste, 1994; Morin & Begoray, 2002), however the signs used in these mediums will not communicate ideas unless the person receiving the ideas have some prior knowledge of the specific sign system (Berghoff, 1998). Sign systems help us send or receive information, as well as assist us in constructing and remembering information. Simple works of art constructed by a young child have been documented as a form of communication - the young girl attributed meaning to the marks on the paper and she was able to use these marks to assist her in articulating her message to researchers (Berghoff, 1998). Body and hand gestures are other examples of sign systems that may be used by children at around five years of age (Nelson & Zobairi, 1999). Berghoff (1998) continued to report research which demonstrates the skill that many children have in their early years of schooling where they move between the two sign systems of visual arts and writing to communicate and represent meaning. Just as messages can be sent to other people using a variety of sign systems, Berghoff (1998) suggested that the concept of 'reading' should be broadened to include the ability to make meaning from any sign system, not just the ability to make

meaning from writing. Kenny and Gunter (2004) agreed with this and suggested that the signs used in any medium serve a communicative purpose and should therefore be seen as an authentic tool of thought. Little (1999) described a mathematic project that combined the use of geometry, literacy, art and technology to assist secondary school students learn about geometric concepts.

Sign systems not only assist in conveying meaning, but can also assist people in constructing their own meaning by creating different works of art (Wright, 1998). Aesthetic experiences are motivating for students and encourage them ask questions and develop their creative thinking skills (Berghoff, 1998; Wright, 1998). Incorporating the arts into the curriculum can also assist students in making connections between prior experience, formal lessons and practical experience, as well as assisting with academic performance by encouraging self-directed learning (Wright, 1998). Although arts disciplines, such as music and visual arts, have been traditionally taught in schools, Berghoff (1998) suggested that there is a difference between teaching these areas as disciplines as compared to teaching them as sign systems. The knowledge of the discipline should be used as a medium for teaching the sign system, allowing students the opportunity to read and create these signs (Berghoff, 1998). Leonhard (1999) developed this notion further and stated that the current political climate presents an opportunity to make arts education an essential part of the general curriculum.

Multiple ways of knowing allows different perspectives of knowledge being understood and valued (Leland & Harste, 1994). Questions such as 'How would an artist portray this?' can promote an alternative way of exploring a topic. Using different mediums to explore topics is particularly useful for students whose dominant way of learning is not language based (Leland & Harste, 1994). Taylor, et al (2001) stated that reluctant readers and writers needed to see themselves as learners and experience success at school.

The University of Manitoba, Canada, designed, delivered and evaluated a teacher education program in multiple forms of literacy. This program examined the

characteristics of literacy and how these could be achieved in schools, as well as how teachers could provide literacy programs with the mediums of print and non-print, and how evidence of literacy in multiple forms could be shared and tracked (Morin & Begoray, 2002). Teachers used a variety of mediums (including music, drama and visual arts) to assist students in developing their literacy skills. However, Morin and Begoray (2002) stated that it is difficult for teachers to integrate arts into literacy programs on an ongoing basis, and effective long-term professional development is needed if long-term curriculum change is going to occur.

Visual arts can be used to enhance students' understanding of the world if they are encouraged to look slowly and closely at pictures in stories rather than looking superficially at the pictures on the page (Nelson & Zobairi, 1999). Similarly, students can be encouraged to draw pictures based on issues discussed in stories, providing them with a different medium to express their feelings and ideas (Leland & Harste, 1994).

Music can be used in literacy programs to represent objects, movements and everyday sounds in an auditory manner (Nelson & Zobairi, 1999). Words of songs can be analyzed to assist students learn about their own culture or the culture of others (Morin & Begoray, 2002). Pop songs have been sung and lyrics examined to assist immigrants learn common words and pronouns, as well as provide an enjoyable medium for students to practice their English pronunciation (Lems, 2001).

There is a variety of literature that suggests why it is beneficial to use the medium of the arts to teach literacy and how the arts can be used to teach literacy skills. Mason, Steedly and Thormann (2005) stated that there is little actual data that can assist teachers in understanding the impact of the arts on artistic, social or cognitive development in their students. Their review of the literature showed that studies had found that music can assist with learning of language; drama can assist with higher order thinking skills; and visual arts can assist with the development of literacy, writing and numeracy skills.

Based on the research, I wanted to find out how a visual and performing arts curriculum could affect the learning and recognition of sight words in four students who have an intellectual disability.

Method

Four students attending a Specialist School participated in this study. These students all had an intellectual disability. Before the program was implemented, they were individually tested to establish the number of sight words that they could recognize. The sight words were taken from the M100 Sight Word List. The results from the pre-test, along with their personal details are outlined below in Table 1.

Student	Gender	Age at pre-test	Diagnosis	Pre-test score
A	Female	8 yrs, 9 mths	Autism, ID	7
B	Male	7 yrs	ID	40
C	Male	8 yrs, 7 mths	ID	17
D	Male	8 yrs, 7 mths	Autism, ID	91

Table 1. Student details.

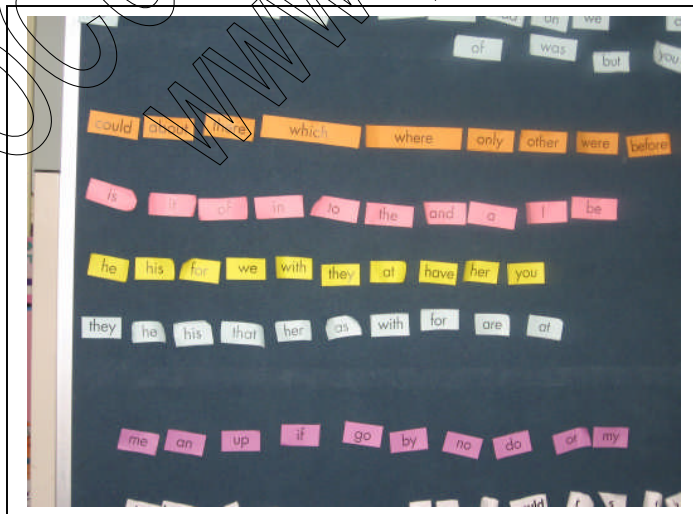
Initially, the program consisted of 5 activities. However, after the first two weeks of the program, an additional 2 activities were added to the program. This was done in an attempt to make the program more cohesive. The two activities that were added were sections 5 and 6. The program outline is shown below in Table 2.

	Activity
1.	Singing 10 sight words – students to point to the words while singing
2.	Alphabet and phonemic awareness – student's list words that start with a specific letter of the alphabet, and then sing a song that incorporates words that start with that letter of the alphabet
3.	Singing – students sing familiar songs, then after singing, each student identifies one sight word that is in the song from their individual word list.
4.	Big Book – teacher reads story to class

5.	Sight words – teacher asks individual students to identify one of their sight words in the Big Book
6.	Drama – students act out the story from the Big Book
7.	Drawing and writing – students draw a picture about something from the story. They then write sentences about their picture.

Table 2. Activities used in the program.

This program was implemented three times a week for a total of 24 days. Each student who participated in the program had his or her own list of sight words that were used in Activity 1. One word was printed on a small piece of coloured paper 10 words were then stuck on a carpet board with Velcro. Each student was assigned a specific colour to ensure that the words that they were learning did not get confused with another student's. As the students are all accomplished at learning words of songs, the order of the M100 words on the carpet board were changed intermittently so that the students had to look at the words as they sang, rather than simply memorizing the words and not looking at them during the song. When the students could consistently recognise the 10 words, two words were taken away and two new words were introduced. The tune for the song used in Activity 1 can be seen in Appendix 1. Each student came to the front of the class and sang their words on their own while being accompanied on the guitar. The other students sat and listened during this time. A photo of the carpet board with the sight words can be seen below.



The song used in Activity 2 (Alphabet song) was taken from the book 'Sounds through Songs'. This activity was done as a whole group, where all students were invited to list words that started with a specific letter of the alphabet. The words to the song were then written on the white board, and all of the students were encouraged to sing the song together whilst being accompanied on the guitar. The group focused on one letter of the alphabet for three days. During Activity 3 (singing familiar songs), students requested to sing two familiar songs from a selection of songs that were well known to them. Songs included folk songs ("I'll Tell My Ma") or songs that the class had written themselves ("Growing Plants"; "Purple People Eater – adapted version"). After singing the song, each student was asked to find a word in the song that was in his or her list of 10 sight words.

The teacher chose the books used in activities 4 to 7. The book was read for three sessions, and therefore changed each week. During the drawing and writing activity, each student had different expectations placed on him or her. Students A, B and C dictated a sentence to a staff member, but were encouraged to attempt to write any words that were in their sight word list without adult assistance. These students then copied their sentence under their drawing. Student D was able to write the majority of the sentence on his own, and only required assistance with an occasional word.

Results

All four students recorded an increase in the number of sight words that they could recognize at the end of the 24-day program. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score	Change (%)
A	7	11	+ 57.1%
B	40	65	+ 62.5%
C	17	31	+ 82.3%
D	91	96	+ 5 %

Table 3. Post-test scores.

A visual and performing arts curriculum can result in an increase in the number of sight words that students can recognize. The words that were recognized by each student in the pre-test and post-test can be seen in Appendix 3.

As student D appeared to have mastered the 100 Meadow words before the completion of the program, an additional selection of sight words (taken from the Dolch Sight Word list) was added to his program during Week 7. The results for student D do not record the words that he learnt from the Dolch Sight Word List, as he was not initially tested on these words in the Pre-test stage.

Discussion

A program that combined music, drama and drawing was developed for four young students who have an intellectual disability. The program aimed to increase the number of sight words that these students could recognize. The program was conducted three days a week over an 8-week period. All four students recorded an increase in the amount of sight words that they could recognize.

Of particular interest were the results from students A, B, and C. Although they recorded very different pre-test and post-test scores, the number of new words learnt

during the program – when expressed as a percentage – was over 50%. Although student D recorded an increase in the number of sight words learnt, his results are not as impressive as the other three students. Therefore, it may be possible to conclude that a program of this nature is most beneficial for students who are beginning to learn sight words.

One of the reasons for the student's success during this program could be attributed to the highly individualized nature of this program. Although the students spent the majority of the program working as a group, each student had his or her own individual list of words that they were learning, and the list of words changed once the students became competent in 10 words. The list of words for student B and D changed regularly as they became confident in recognizing the words on their lists. However, the list of words for student A changed only once as she did not learn the words as quickly as the other students (although the order of the words on the carpet board was changed to prevent memorization). This finding supports Vaughn et al., (2002) recommendation that literacy programs be highly individualized.

When analyzing the list of words that each student learnt, it was found that although student B was given words from the 'Gold' and 'Red' levels of the Mioow Sight Words, he also learnt words that were not on his word list. Some of the new words that this student learnt were included in student D's word list, and may have been learnt by student B while he was listening to the other students.

By encouraging the students to draw about the story that had been read during the Big Book activities, the students had the opportunity to express thoughts and ideas through an alternative sign system (Berghoff, 1998). Explaining and then writing about the picture allowed the student to practice their sight words in a functional manner.

Using music, drama and drawing was motivating for the students, and all four students were eager to be involved in the program. The success that the students experienced (especially during Activity 1 where they could see that they were learning

words and new words were being added to their list) provided the students with more motivation to continue learning (Taylor et al., 2001). In fact, student C (who in the past has been easily discouraged by his difficulty in being able to recognize words) was often seen practicing his words during his free time.

How much can we attribute the results from this program to the visual and performing arts curriculum? This question is not easy to answer. If we had spent the same amount of time each week reading the words (instead of singing them) and writing the words in worksheets, would the same results have been gained? Vaughn et al. (2002) are skeptical about the overuse of worksheets in Literacy programs, but there is no control group in this program to compare results with. In addition to this, students B, C, and D participated in an individual 30-minute literacy program once a week with a Literacy teacher – what effect did this have on the results?

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