

DCDD Hot Topics

The DCDD Board prepares briefs for DCDD members about topics of interest for professionals who serve children and youth with communication disorders and their families. This brief focuses on a writing and students with significant disabilities.

We appreciate your continued membership with DCDD. Please share this message with your colleagues and urge those colleagues to become a member of the DCDD community of learners.

Writing and Students with Significant Disabilities

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Students with significant disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, and those with severe speech and physical impairments, often do not receive optimal writing instruction and remain non-writers upon graduation from high school. Many of these students also demonstrate severe communication impairments and use pictographic augmentative and alternative communication symbols to communicate. The messages these individuals are able to communicate through pictographic symbols are often chosen by the adults in their lives. The ability to write, using letters of the alphabet, is a game changer for these students because it opens the possibility of unlimited messages for communication and gives them a powerful voice. Now, more than ever, it is critical that their voices be heard.

Given the range of abilities and needs across students with significant disabilities, it can be daunting for educational teams to know how to approach writing instruction for this population. Some students with significant disabilities struggle with communicative intent for both writing and communication (e.g., not initiating spoken communication and not knowing that a pencil leaves a mark on the paper that can be shared). Others may be able to produce spoken and written language but need to refine these skills (e.g., staying on topic across multiple sentences in oral or written communication). This range of student abilities may be present in a single classroom; therefore, multi-level, differentiated instruction is critical!

For students with significant disabilities, who are often beginning writers, instruction should draw upon research involving 1) best practices of instruction, 2) writing development, and 3) federal and state standards. Research on best practices of instruction (Troia, 2014) indicates that students should be:

- Receiving instruction that draws upon varied approaches (e.g., process-based instruction paired with self-regulated strategy instruction)
- Writing daily (i.e., daily instruction with repetition and variation of content)

- Writing for a variety of purposes (e.g., composing different text types)
- Learning about how to write (e.g., spelling and handwriting)
- Learning about processes (e.g., planning, composing, and revising) and products (e.g., using a range of vocabulary)
- Learning in an engaging environment (i.e., a writing community where everyone is an author)

The implications of this research clearly emphasize that, to become writers, every student learner, including those with significant disabilities, needs extensive opportunities to write in an engaging environment that provides extensive instruction. Research on writing development indicates that children begin by leaving meaningful marks on a page as early as 18 months (Tolchinsky, 2006). Typically developing children then move into drawing, scribbling, creating letter shapes, letters, words, and sentences. Starting in the preschool years, students with significant disabilities need authentic, repeated, meaningful opportunities with traditional writing tools (e.g., pencils), and the alphabet, to develop foundational writing skills. To develop emergent and conventional writing skills, students with significant disabilities will need more opportunities, not less, than their typically developing peers. National and state mandates also have stressed the need for emphasis on writing instruction for students with significant disabilities. The Common Core State Standards, inclusive of students with significant disabilities, indicates that writing instruction for ALL students must be rigorous and support student gains across writing, speaking, and listening, and language. The *First Author Writing Curriculum*, described below, offers an example of how writing instruction can be provided to students with significant disabilities.

The *First Author Writing Curriculum* (Sturm, 2015) provides students with an evidence-based curriculum that integrates a process-based approach (i.e., Writers' Workshop) with self-regulated strategy instruction and social interaction training. The core foundation of this curriculum draws upon research on evidence-based practice, writing development, and federal standards (i.e., writing, speaking, and listening, and language). Writing instructional time is comprised of three key components:

- *Mini-lessons* = A 5-15 minute explicit instructional session that involves teacher and peer models, collaborative co-construction of texts, and targets speaking and listening skills.
- *Writing Time* = A 30-35 minute session where each student self-selects a topic by choosing a personally motivating photo image (e.g., pop culture images or field trip pictures that serve as the student's drawing) and generates a writing product (e.g., scribbling, letters of the alphabet, words, or sentences) that can be shared with others.
- *Author's Chair* = A 35-45 minute session where each student shares his or her writing. Author's Chair is a time to reinforce that writing is shared with others and should be celebrated. During this time, students' share their writing, or have

someone assist them in doing so. Educators and peers can then ask questions or make comments about the author's writing.

Mini-lessons and writing time occur four times each week, with the fifth day of the school week reserved for Author's Chair. Educators introduce the curriculum by creating a culture of learning that presumes competence in students with significant disabilities and provides each student with a way to communicate (e.g., using speech, gestures, pictographic communication boards, or speech-generating devices) and a way to write (e.g., magnetic letters of the alphabet, alphabet boards, on screen alphabetic scanning arrays) throughout writing instruction (mini-lessons, writing time, and Author's Chair). In the First Author writing curriculum, students are exposed to many ways to use writing tools (e.g., pencils or markers) and the alphabet to create an artifact that can be shared.

There is no question that students who demonstrate significant disabilities present with a range of abilities and needs; however, these key principles may influence your thinking:

“defy old assumptions and embrace new perspectives

challenge students and keep them safe

be fearless and create students who are fearless

AND, most importantly, be joyful!”

(Sturm, 2015, p. 78)

Some final thoughts that emphasize these principles include:

- *Eliminating Prerequisites* – Expose students to multiple ways to communicate and write! Students do not need to demonstrate letter sound and letter name skills to get started.
- *Developing Preferences and Choice Making* – During writing time, present students with a wide array of interesting object or photo choices and provide augmented input to help them know (e.g., I think you chose the pheasant because it is the picture you did not throw on the floor).
- *Providing Beginning Writers With Access to the Alphabet* – Eliminate use of pictographic symbols and identify creative ways to support students in inventive spelling. All students need repeated, meaningful exposures to the alphabet to become writers!
- *Being An Authentic Audience and Inspiring Your Authors* – Throughout writing instruction, demonstrate that you value each student as an author through your words and actions. Show that that you are excited about their accomplishments both big and small and honor everything that they do as writers and communicators. Keep students safe through your positive words and by letting students know that you have supports that will help them write and communicate.

Challenge each student by helping him or her set learning goals for both writing and communication. Your actions will create authors that are fearless and joyful.

Sturm, J. (2015). *First author writing curriculum*. Volo, IL: Don Johnston Incorporated.

Tolchinsky, L. (2006). The emergence of writing. In S. Graham, C. MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 83-95). New York: Guilford Press.

Troia, G. (2014). *Evidence-based practices for writing instruction* (Document No. IC-5). Retrieved from University of Florida, Collaboration for Effective Educator, Development, Accountability, and Reform Center website:
<http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configuration/>