

# What is literacy for students with severe learning difficulties? Exploring conventional and inclusive literacy

Penny Lacey,<sup>1</sup> Lyn Layton,<sup>1</sup> Carol Miller,<sup>1</sup> Juliet Goldbart<sup>2</sup> and Hazel Lawson<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Birmingham; <sup>2</sup>Manchester Metropolitan University; <sup>3</sup>University of Plymouth

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**This paper arises from research into inclusive literacy for pupils with severe learning difficulties who do not learn to read and write conventionally. The ultimate aim of the study was to seek out examples of good practice in teaching and learning literacy that includes students with severe learning difficulties and disseminate them as widely as possible. Thirty-five schools were visited and observations made in 122 lessons. Sixty-one teachers were interviewed and their paperwork examined. Ten focus groups and five 'expert witnesses' were consulted, alongside desk-based research designed to locate 'good practice'. Teachers used a mixture of conventional (e.g., texts) and non-conventional (e.g., pictures, film and oral) media, although more observations were made of conventional literacy teaching (e.g., phonic work) than of non-conventional (e.g., filmmaking). Results from the research suggest that few students with severe learning difficulties are likely to learn to read and write conventionally (i.e., read for pleasure, work and study) and teachers may be relying too much on teaching traditional literacy to them. It may be useful to explore teaching and learning around alternative media such as still and moving images, live theatre and storytelling, digital technology and the arts. Although some teachers are making good use of these media, the potential of these media for providing inclusive literacy experiences could be further developed.**

Although students of all ages with severe learning difficulties (SLD) spend a significant amount of curriculum time in literacy lessons, most of them only learn the rudiments of reading and writing. Some may learn a sight vocabulary of common words and some individual phonic sounds but most will find it hard to generalise these skills beyond early reading scheme books or similar simple text. Some will find it outside their ability to learn even a few words and sounds, and for those with the most profound intellectual disabilities, conventional literacy could be seen as irrelevant.

Bearing in mind the difficulties faced by students with SLD, a research project was set up to explore current practice in teaching and learning literacy in schools where these students can be found. The majority of schools examined in the study were special schools but a few mainstream schools were also included. One of the aims of the study was to explore an inclusive concept of literacy. How could the teaching and learning of literacy be extended to include students who are conventionally considered to be illiterate? The intention was to find out how teachers conceived of literacy for students who do not gain many skills in reading and writing. What did these teachers do in literacy lessons? Did they teach conventional literacy skills? Did they see literacy for their students as different from students who would learn to read and write conventionally? Did they utilise inclusive activities that might be considered alternatives or additions to conventional literacy?

The ultimate aim of the study was to seek out examples of good practice in teaching and learning literacy that include students with SLD and disseminate such examples as widely as possible.

## Literacy and SLD: literature review

### Definitions

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2000) divides literacy into five levels:

1. People with very poor skills.
2. People who can deal only with simple material.
3. Roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry.
- 4 & 5. People who demonstrate command of 'higher-order information processing skills'.

In this paper there will be reference to 'conventional literacy', meaning the kind of reading and writing attained by those at Level 3 and above. At these levels, people can understand and use printed information in daily life, at home and work, and in the community. Most people with learning difficulties will achieve only Levels 1 and 2. Children with SLD are likely to fall into the very first level.

The term ‘inclusive literacy’ is also used in this paper, meaning a broad range of activities that includes everyone, however rudimentary their knowledge and use of conventional literacy might be. Inclusive literacy enables everyone, including those at OECD Level 1, to enjoy books, stories and other media in a way that has meaning for them, even if conventional reading and writing are not achievable. In this paper, there is an exploration of both conventional and inclusive literacy in relation to school children with SLD.

#### *Guidelines for learning literacy in England*

In England, during the time of the project reported in this paper, primary schools were mainly expected to teach literacy through the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and secondary schools through the Key Stage 3 Strategy ‘Literacy Across the Curriculum’ (DfEE, 2001). Despite the severity in their disabilities, children with SLD were expected to be taught in the same way as their typically developing peers, primarily learning about text through phonics, grammatical knowledge, word recognition and knowledge of content (DfEE, 2001, p. 4). In fact the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) did not provide a definition of literacy that specifically included pupils at OECD Level 1, and neither were there suggestions for any literacy activities that would include those not able to access conventional literacy. Teachers were expected to use the same strategies as for any child learning to read and write, though with the anticipation that individual children with SLD will take longer to learn particular aspects or will need the task broken down into smaller steps.

In order to support teachers of pupils with SLD, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2001) published guidelines for teachers on how to interpret the English curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties. For example:

*‘For pupils with learning difficulties, reading may be interpreted as any activity that leads to the derivation of meanings from visual or tactile representations, for example, objects, pictures, symbols or words.’*  
(QCA, 2001, p. 7)

As part of these guidelines, level descriptors (called *p*-levels) were written to help teachers to describe the progress of children who are working below Level 1 of the National Curriculum and contribute to target setting. These have been elaborated on by individual schools and local authorities, such as B-Squared (2007) or PIVATS (Lancashire County Council, 2007), who have provided more finely grained detail. For example, each level in the PIVATS target setting tool has been differentiated into five stepping stones to lead to each P-scale milestone. In English, there are two separate but complementary sections within speaking and listening to reflect the development of expression and comprehension skills within language and communication. The English elements of PIVATS are closely linked to the Framework for teaching the National Literacy Strategy and

the National Strategy for Key Stage 3 and, recently, the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006a).

In addition to the learning difficulties guidelines and target setting tools, Equals, an association of teachers of pupils with SLD, has published a scheme of work for literacy which can be found in many special schools. Others have provided ideas for both conventional and inclusive literacy, such as the use of symbols and access to literature specifically for pupils with SLD (Abbott, Detheridge & Detheridge, 2006; Berger, Henderson & Morris, 1999; Detheridge & Detheridge, 1997; Grove, 1998; Grove & Park, 1996; Mencap, 1999). These topics will be revisited in the later part of the literature review.

#### *Children with SLD learning to read*

When the Literacy Hour was introduced as part of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), teachers of children with SLD experimented with ways of working within the published structure and devised a range of ways of bending and stretching the ‘rules’ to accommodate the differences presented by their pupils (e.g., Carpenter, 1999; Carpenter & Morris, 2001). Many saw the prescribed hour as a skeleton on which to place the flesh of both conventional and inclusive literacy teaching. Others felt more bound by the structure and more closely copied the Literacy Hour for typically developing children (Layton, Lacey & Miller, 2002).

Alongside the introduction of the Literacy Hour has been research into aspects of reading and learning difficulties. Much of this research relates to pupils with Down syndrome, some of whom have moderate rather than severe learning difficulties and are likely to master at least the basics of conventional literacy, taking many to OECD Level 2 and a few to Level 3. Nevertheless, the research is useful for understanding the differences and similarities in learning to read for those who have more severe learning difficulties.

Researchers at the Sarah Duffen Centre at the University of Portsmouth have contributed much to the body of research on Down syndrome. For example Byrne, MacDonald and Buckley (2002) demonstrated that most children with Down syndrome in their study were capable of reading single words, although they found comprehending text much more difficult. The Latch-On project in Australia confirmed the comprehension difficulties and showed how the young people with Down syndrome they worked with could be helped towards better comprehension through focused teaching (Morgan, Moni & Jobling, 2004).

Researchers such as Kennedy and Flynn (2003) have been interested in how young adults with Down syndrome learn and make use of phonics. From their study, Kennedy and Flynn (2003) concluded that poor auditory short-term memory and hearing impairments in students with Down syndrome both contributed to difficulties in learning to read using phonic cues. Morgan, Moni and Jobling (2006) and Morgan and Moni (2005) also found difficulties in learning phonics in a young man with Down syndrome and

recommend the use of multiple approaches and activities for focused teaching.

Current knowledge of literacy learning for children with Down syndrome suggests that they learn best from a whole word approach at first which then can be supplemented by both teaching comprehension of text and how to use phonic cues (Buckley, 2001; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 1998). Although there is less research evidence to call upon, other groups of children with learning and language difficulties also seem to learn more easily through visual pathways rather than auditory ones (Carpenter & Morris, 2001; Porter & Ashdown, 2002) and thus it may be helpful for teachers to begin with whole words when teaching students with SLD.

#### *Use of symbols*

Other research has focused on alternative access to literacy using, such as using symbols. Much of the research on the use of symbols for literacy was carried out in the 1980s and 90s but recent work by Sheehy and associates has suggested that teaching symbol systems (symbols under the words which are later removed) are no more successful than teaching words alone in gaining traditional reading skills. At worst, symbols interfere with the recognition of words. Sheehy and Howe (2001) suggest that the association between the picture symbol and the written word can actually make it harder for someone with learning difficulties to remember the association between the spoken and written words. Sheehy (2003, 2005) has been working on other ways of using symbols to help learners to read traditional orthography and has found that associating words with something meaningful to the learner is effective. The association is triggered through a small mark (or handle) placed on or inside the word, which was added at the time the association was established. Although these are small-scale studies, they may indicate that those who find learning words using traditional text difficult may be helped by making associations.

Although symbols are not always useful as a bridge between spoken and written words, they can be used as a written text in their own right and most schools for pupils with SLD give them a range of uses, for example in displays, communication books and visual timetables. In a recent survey, Abbott and Lucey (2005) found that 96% of schools for children with SLD reported using symbols which demonstrates their popularity. Despite the research of the 1970s and 80s, when symbols were mainly developed, there is actually little evidence to support the usefulness of learning of symbols instead of words for people with learning disabilities. One of the difficulties may be the lack of an agreed set of symbols across the country and across the age groups. For example, schools tend to use Widget symbols (Detheridge & Detheridge, 1997) but many adult services tend to use photographs or picture symbols (see, for example, the Valuing People website <<http://valuingpeople.gov.uk/index.jsp>>).

Symbols are increasingly being used as an aid to communication with children with SLD, including those with

autistic spectrum disorders. For example, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy & Frost, 2001) is used to teach children, who do not use spoken language, the use of symbols to request desired objects and activities such as food and drink or favourite toys. It is not well researched as a communication approach although Webb and Baker (in Jones, 2004) are studying PECS in 10 classes over a 3-year period. However, the interest in this area is in relation to supporting communication and not to developing literacy.

#### *Pictures and drawings*

Although symbols are popular in school for pupils with SLD, photographs, drawings and picture books are found everywhere, particularly with very young children who are not yet able to read text. Little research have been carried out on developing literacy through the use of pictures and photographs with learners with SLD, although there are some interesting studies that can feed into this. For example, Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad and Zhang's (2002) study suggests that wordless books are a powerful influence on emergent readers and Evans and Saint-Aubin (2005) show how pictures totally capture the attention of very young children being read to by their parents. One of the skills specifically taught to emergent readers is that of extracting meaning from illustrations to help them make sense of the text. Arizpe and Styles (2004) studied how children actually read pictures with young typically developing children aged 4 to 11 years. Their results demonstrate how illustrations can evoke a depth of thinking and emotional response. In their conclusions from that study, the researchers suggest that insufficient importance is given to visual literacy in the National Literacy Strategy, pointing out that pictorial cueing systems do not figure in the skills required for learning to read.

Anning (2003) is also interested in the way young children interact with pictures and promotes the importance of developing personal and social drawing as part of a wider view of literacy than is commonly associated with the National Literacy Strategy. Anning suggests that children's personal versions of meaning making are undervalued in schools, where they are quickly shaped into reading and writing. This may have an important message for teaching children who find it very difficult to transfer from pictures and drawings to text, encouraging teachers to spend more time on supporting the interpretation and drawing of pictures. These perspectives on visual literacy may also be helpful in developing a wider, more inclusive view of literacy that can be found in studying the range of media used in the digital world today (Pailliotet & Mosenthal, 2000).

#### *Information and communication technology*

There is a growing literature on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for people with learning difficulties, particularly computers and digital image-making to assist in developing both text and non-text literacy. The use of 'Writing with Symbols' (Widgit Software, 2000) and 'Boardmaker' (Mayer-Johnson, 2007) are just two examples of software used to support literacy and movie-making that do not (necessarily) use traditional

text. There are many examples of hardware in Beck's (2002) case study of assistive technology for preschool children with multiple disabilities, ranging from picture communication symbols to adapted books, the use of switches and a computer with an adapted keyboard. A study from Advance (2007) shows the potential for various 'gadgets and gizmos' for adults with learning disabilities, enabling them to gain a measure of independence where normally their poor literacy skills would prevent them. For example, a simplified mobile phone has three buttons to call three different numbers and if the red button is pressed twice, it calls the emergency services.

Use of the Web by adults with disabilities was the subject of a study by Johnson and Hegarty (2003), who showed how eight adults with mild and moderate learning difficulties were supported to find websites related to their interests. Although access was difficult for them because of their low levels of literacy, the websites themselves were very motivating. Other studies have shown accessibility difficulties for disabled people, for example Weber (2006) and Adam and Kreps (2006); however, there are some sites that offer much to children and adults with learning difficulties, for example, soap websites such as Eastenders <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders/>> or specialist websites such as Mencap's YAP <<http://www.y-a-p.org.uk>> or Symbol World <<http://www.symbolworld.org>>.

Despite the obvious importance of ICT literacy in the 21st century, Stephen and Plowman (2003) suggest that there is very uneven teaching of ICT especially to young children. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE, 2005), in their Annual Report 2004/5 suggest that, in primary schools, the links between ICT and literacy are not 'sufficiently inventive'. Inspectors see teachers as being too cautious and neither able to be creative with the curriculum to meet pupils' needs nor to make sufficient use of 'new literacies' associated with the World Wide Web, emailing and instant messaging (as discussed by Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Still in relation to ICT, there is growing research evidence to assist teachers in making the best use of multimedia in supporting the learning of traditional text and in developing skills in understanding alternatives such as still and moving pictures. However, little of the research is directly related to SLD. Schiller and Tillet (2004) and Potter (2005), for example, showed how primary-aged children learned to make stories with digital cameras. Another study by Clark and Moss (2001) demonstrated how young children could operate disposable cameras to record their experiences in nursery, using the photographs to express themselves. Again it is possible to see how these studies could provide support for pursuing these activities with children who, because they are unlikely to learn to read text, require alternative access to the world of literacy.

#### *Drama and storytelling*

The final aspect of inclusive literacy that is important to explore briefly is that related to drama and storytelling, including the use of television, video and DVDs.

Conventionally, although drama and storytelling are taught as part of English, they are not strictly about learning to read and write. However, as access to great literature is denied to those who have poor literacy skills, inclusive literacy would not be complete without considering access through theatre and television. There has been much interest (but little research evidence) in how to render literature accessible, particularly through the work of Grove and Park (e.g., Grove 2005; Grove & Park, 1996; Park, 2001, 2003), who give examples of getting to know Dickens, Shakespeare and classical stories through drama, music and, for the most severely disabled, interactive games that create the atmosphere of the stories. Grove (2006) is currently conducting a project on storytelling with people with severe and profound learning difficulties.

#### *Conclusions from the literature*

Although the literature, and specifically the research literature, on teaching literacy to learners with SLD is not conclusive in any way, there are several points that can be extrapolated:

1. National guidelines on teaching literacy assume that learners with SLD should be taught in much the same way as typical learners, although this is not based on any research evidence with this group.
2. Research on learners with Down syndrome shows that many can learn to read and write conventionally. It also shows that they are likely to use visual pathways to learning more effectively than auditory pathways. Further research is required to establish whether this is true for other groups of learners who have difficulties in the area of language and communication.
3. Learning symbols as a bridge to using text may not be helpful but learning to read symbols may be a useful skill in its own right. However, as yet there are few books for older learners that use alternatives to text such as symbols.
4. Although almost all schools for children with SLD use symbols, it is not known how many use them systematically for learning to read.
5. Despite the importance of pictures in emergent literacy for very young children, little is known about how to teach students with SLD picture 'reading' as a skill in its own right.
6. ICT provides useful media for learning about both conventional text and inclusive access to literacy, through computer software, digital photography, filmmaking and other technology such as CD players, mobile phones and iPods. HMI suggest that schools may not be using these media very imaginatively.
7. Access to literature through means other than reading and writing (e.g., drama, television, video and storytelling) is important in its own right even if it does not lead to conventional literacy. The extent of the use of these inclusive literacies in schools for pupils with SLD is not yet known.

#### **Design of the study**

The study was designed as a survey to find out what happens in literacy lessons for pupils with SLD across the

whole age range of compulsory school age (5–16 years). Researchers wanted to know how teachers promoted literacy for pupils who were likely to acquire no, or only the most basic, skills in conventional reading and writing; those who were in Level 1 of the OECD classifications of literacy ('People with very poor skills'). The study was entirely explorative and qualitative in character and relied mainly on semi-structured observations and interviews to provide the data. Analysis of these data alongside school documents and Internet sites led to the presentation of examples of literacy teaching and learning.

The project consisted of several phases that overlapped and fed into each other:

1. Desk-based research (research literature and later, a Web search for practice)
2. Observations in schools and interviews of teachers
3. Focus groups of teachers and interviews of 'expert witnesses'

Between October 2004 and May 2005, a total of 35 schools was visited in the Midlands, Greater Manchester and the Southwest of England. The schools comprised a mixture of primary, secondary and all-age special schools and, although plans had been to include mainstream schools, only a very small number of them educating children with SLD could be found. As far as possible, schools were selected on the basis of good Ofsted reports in terms of their literacy teaching, although this information was not always available.

In these schools, observations were made in 122 lessons taught in classrooms across different age phases (5 to 16+ years) after which 61 teachers were interviewed. Both literacy lessons and lessons in another curriculum area were observed in order to gather firsthand evidence of what and how teachers were teaching. The majority of the lessons lasted between half an hour and an hour and covered Key Stages (KS) 1–4. The semi-structured schedule was designed to enable collection of descriptive data in relation to the literacy environment, examples of interactions between pupils and teachers, the literacy activities undertaken and the resources used.

The interviews established teachers' perceptions of what they were teaching and why. Questions were also asked about literacy training teachers had received and influences on their teaching. Discussion was given to the differences between teaching literacy and teaching communication and whether it was important to see a difference. Policies, schemes of work and lesson plans were collected from the teachers and these were used alongside the observations and interviews to build up a picture of 'good practice'.

Following the data collection in classrooms, focus groups of teachers were asked to discuss some of the findings in order to explore further how literacy can be interpreted for pupils who do not learn to read and write conventionally. These were held in 10 schools and included some of the

interviewed teachers as well as their colleagues. The schools were selected mainly for their geographical convenience for gathering groups of teachers together. The researchers collected a range of statements from the teachers' interviews about the differences and overlap between literacy and communication and used these as the basis for discussion between participants. They were also asked to consider the potential use of some of the activities and resources collected from schools.

Although there were several different aspects to the analysis, in this paper there will only be reference to the findings in relation to conventional and inclusive literacy. From the literature, examples of both conventional literacy (traditional text-based reading and writing) and inclusive literacy (symbols, pictures, videos and 'new literacies' associated with ICT) had been noted and observations in classrooms were directed at gathering examples of both in action. Emphasis in this paper is on the activities and resources that engage pupils and enable them to participate in literacy at a level that holds meaning for them, whether these were examples of conventional or inclusive literacy.

### Literacy activities

When asked about what literacy activities pupils might be involved in, either within or beyond the Literacy Hour (lesson), teachers' interview responses revealed diverse conceptualisations of 'literacy':

- **Traditional orthography:** 'phonic session; letter of the week; identifying parts of letters; writing surname; handwriting'
- **Conventional literacy:** 'library – choosing a reading book; use of pens, pencils; stories, other print genre; reading numbers; guided reading and writing'
- **Reading with symbols:** 'symbol matching; books with symbols; sequencing with symbols in wider curriculum area; symbol books and timetable; labelling a picture with symbols to tell story'
- **Social sight recognition:** 'literacy out in the environment; preparation for everyday living'
- **Non-conventional 'literacy' artefacts:** 'Writing with symbols cut-and-stick; puppets; Bag Books; story sacks; objects (to support Big Book); photographs; dressing-up to take on a character; making marks to note-take'
- **Communication:** 'speech and language sessions with the Speech and Language therapist; PECS cards to ask for things; oral skills – blowing, mirrors, facial movements'

It must be emphasised that the examples quoted above demonstrate the range of responses, and in many cases, this 'range' was represented in the views of a single teacher. This suggests that teachers are conceiving of literacy according to the perceived ability levels and needs of individual pupils although the demands of the curriculum also appear to be influencing the choices that they make in determining the content and direction of further input.

Observations in classrooms confirmed some of the range of activities suggested by teachers. The following are examples of observations:

- *At School 4 the teacher worked intensively with a boy at KS1 using a template and a wordless book with magnetic pictures. The pupil placed the pictures onto the template and the teacher wove a story around the resulting scenario. During the plenary she related the pupil's story to the rest of the class.*
- *At School 16 a child at KS1 selected a programme symbol and operated the CBeebies programme on the interactive whiteboard, then continued to play with the programme, thus demonstrating the capacity to respond appropriately, on request, to a symbol.*
- *Children at KS2 at School 25 listened to the Big Book story about Elmer the Elephant, and took turns to match symbols or words to pictures (velcroed to the Big Book), then recognised symbols or words to recall the main events of the story.*
- *The teacher at School 25 read 'Oliver's Vegetables'. Pupils (at KS2) then looked at a selection of vegetables, chose one, peeled, tasted, named it. They matched it to a word, symbol or to its equivalent on a picture poster. They then described the vegetable in terms of colour, size, texture.*
- *At School 14, post-16 pupils who were unable to read conventionally gravitated to the daily newspapers on arriving at 9.00 am, commenting on items featured, using photographs and the format as cues. For example, one pupil wanted to cut out and use an offer coupon.*

As can be seen from the observation examples chosen, many of the activities that were observed were relatively traditional in that they mainly related to books and to conventional words and sentences, although often connected to practical activities and contexts. In fact teaching traditional orthography (conventional words and sentences) was observed in every school, although not pursued with every child.

#### *The use of phonics*

Phonics, that is, the teaching of phoneme-grapheme correspondence was evident in most Literacy Hour lessons but the emphasis that was placed on phonics activities varied:

- *In School 1 there were several activities related to 'm'. The pupils ran their fingers round a large tactile 'm' and followed large pre-placed footprints around the classroom and adjacent areas in search of familiar objects beginning with 'm'.*
- *In School 3 a group of pupils 'fish' for coloured table tennis balls with single letters on them, using a magnetic rod (blue balls consonants 'C' and pink balls vowels 'V'). They then built up CVC words.*
- *In School 26, pupils were using a computer and were clicking on things that began with 'y'.*

In some instances, it seemed that only a few pupils were responding to this emphasis, although the whole class was often present during phonics activities. However, many of the settings included children with autistic spectrum difficulties (ASD) and it was observed that these children

were sometimes more easily able to make phoneme-grapheme correspondences than those with SLD but without ASD. For example, a child at KS3 with ASD at School 6 spontaneously remarked at break-time, after a phonics session, *'I've got an orange /ð!'*

In the focus groups, teachers discussed the use of phonics. The participants were divided on the value of phonics for these children but for many of them, phonics seemed to mean 'sound' work which did not necessarily involve written letters. Two of the teachers agreed that it could make a child more aware of sounds. Sound work could be individualised, building the child's own sounds into songs and building up listening skills. Phonics was seen as a way of ensuring familiarity with all the sounds of English. Several participants thought that phonics can help with speaking or sound making as it increased children's awareness of speech sounds. In another group, it was said that children can enjoy rhyme without understanding how it works.

Where phonics was linked with written language, teachers believed children were helped to recognise words in their environment, for example supermarkets such as Tesco and Asda. They could think of pupils who used initial letters to recognise words, particularly social sight vocabulary, shop names and favourite items and their own names. Several schools included phonics learning in their policies and lesson plans. For example, School 1 uses the Jolly Phonics Scheme <<http://www.jollylearning.co.uk>> and one lesson plan shows how the pupils selected objects from a bag with adults vocalising letter sounds and saying letter names linked to 'm'. An 'm' hunt was described with pupils looking for 'm' objects, whilst being encouraged to vocalise the name of the object. At KS2, phonic work was planned to continue alongside non-conventional literacy activities: letter-sound correspondences reinforced with flashcards and the interactive whiteboard. Many activities were listed to support the sound of the week, such as eating mousse ('m'), later making a necklace and a noodle nest ('n'). We may infer that such elaborated activities are designed to respond to the learning needs of pupils for whom the principal aim of phonics teaching at this level (isolating initial phonemes) is unlikely to be achieved. The learning needs may or may not be related to literacy attainment for these children.

#### *The use of symbols*

Alongside traditional reading and writing activities, there were many examples of the use of symbols, although most of these were in support of communication rather than as part of a planned approach to teaching literacy. Many schools used PECS (Bondy & Frost, 2001), mostly using symbols as the medium, although some used conventional words with individual pupils. Teachers said that for some pupils, symbols are an important form of literacy and represent much of the text that they are exposed to. Symbols also support text when used in books, sometimes alone or alongside text. They may represent the key words of a story or other text, including published books, which

teachers adapt extensively for use by individual children. Some children can read simple text without symbols, whereas others just use the symbols. In many schools, including mainstream schools, text plus symbols are now used in all timetables and materials around school:

- In School 22, pupils at KS2 wrote news from the weekend on a computer using Clicker 4. They chose symbolised text from a selection of words, printed out what they had written and stuck the text into their news book. Careful phrasing of the help given to individual pupils was emphasised on the daily planning sheet, to encourage progression towards independence.
- In School 2, children at KS3 touched symbols on the interactive whiteboard and dragged them to make a physical exercise schedule, which was then given to another person to undertake. Children then jumped, ran, walked and sat down according to the symbol instructions.
- In School 27, pupils at KS2 were learning to make choices and request choices by building sentences from symbolised words in PECS books.

The investigation revealed a range of different views on the potential of a progressive relationship between text and symbols in order to assist a child's movement towards reading. For example, a school might give plenty of exposure to text alongside symbols after which symbols would be faded by being made smaller as text size is increased. In one school, progression was expected from objects of reference to photos and then symbols, and the practitioners considered that symbols act as an aid to reading. However, they could only recall one child in 8 years who had made a real transition from reading symbols to reading text for pleasure, although many children currently in the school read symbolised books for pleasure. Teachers generally felt that children made very slow, if any, progress towards reading text alone.

The importance of symbols as literacy was emphasised by teachers frequently because of their ubiquity in the world in general. In discussion, they pointed out that even if pupils are not going to become independent readers in the conventional sense, they can use their symbol literacy to read supermarket names, logos, toilet and emergency exit signs. Many pupils can access and 'read' websites with low literacy demands, such as CBeebies and Eastenders websites. It was agreed in one focus group that unfortunately there are few books using symbols in public libraries and they suggested that this was because of the lack of agreement on sets of symbols across schools and in the wider community.

#### *The use of resources for literacy*

Investigations of the sorts of resources used by teachers of learners with SLD were ongoing through the period of the project. Data were collected through the observations, interviews and a search of the literature and the Internet. Various leads were followed up to obtain a fuller picture of the resources and activities available for teaching both

conventional and inclusive literacy. A thematic analysis of the findings indicated the following groupings:

1. **Conventional texts** include children's storybooks, reading scheme books, reading books for pupils with special educational needs and books for older readers with few words. Conventional text also refers to magazines, newspapers and computer programmes.
2. **Accessible texts** range from sensory stories (books where the pages comprise objects attached to large pieces of card or where objects are kept together in a bag), books for adults with pictures only, books with key words and phrases reproduced on BIGmack and PowerPoint talking books (key words and phrases).
3. **Pictures and photographs** encompass graphic facilitation (where the facilitator draws simple pictures to represent what is being said), computer programmes of pictures such as Boardmaker, picture rich magazines and books, and digital photography for pupils to tell their own stories.
4. **Symbols** can comprise objects of reference, life quilts (sample pieces of material that have associations with different phases in someone's life) and personal history boxes where objects have those associations; computer programs such as Writing with Symbols; symbol books such as recipe books and storybooks; symbol websites; and communication books using symbols.
5. **Information and Communication Technology** includes websites for young children (early literacy activities), teenagers and adults with learning disabilities (e.g., Trans-Active for teenagers moving from school to adult life), and computer programmes such as '2Create a Story' or 'My World'.
6. **Moving images, drama and storytelling** are exploited in video and filmmaking, multimedia work, watching TV, video or film shorts to stimulate discussion and pupils' own drama or role play. There were examples of pupils experiencing episodes from Shakespeare plays on stage or acting out Dickens's novels or Greek myths. Puppets-support drama and role-play and historical events such as the Battle of Trafalgar.

Even though a range of different resources was observed, some were much more evident in the schools than others. For example, there was much more use of resources in Categories 1 and 2, those related to a conventional view of literacy, than any of the others. They were least evident in Categories 5 and 6, activities that are related to less conventional or inclusive literacy.

#### *Inclusive literacy*

Despite the relatively small number of activities that fell into Categories 5 and 6 (see above), some were observed in some schools. First there are some examples of ICT:

- Pupils in School 22 told the story from a storyboard into a Dictaphone. Other pupils wrote their news from the weekend on the computer.
- In School 28, they played a Wellington Square game on the computer

- *The children in School 2 used the Web to look up information on 'firefighter'. They typed letters, scrolled to see different pictures and chose a picture to print.*
- *In School 16, a child operated the CBeebies website on the interactive whiteboard, selected a programme and played it.*

Category 6 activities related to moving images, drama and storytelling were also represented in a few observations, particularly storytelling was accompanied by objects such as those found in a Bag Book <<http://www.bagbooks.org>>, stories that use a multi-sensory approach. Books were dramatised and films of stories were watched:

- *In School 5 children were acting out the book 'The Train Ride'. A physically disabled child stood in a standing frame acting as the ticket collector and the other children came to buy tickets in turn.*
- *Pupils in School 23 watched a short section of a 'Romeo and Juliet' video and then shared a retelling of the story with the teacher.*
- *In School 28, after reading a book about 'special effects', pupils added sound effects to a dramatised short story.*
- *In School 11 a mixed ability group were involved in a Bag Book, 'Gran's Visit'. The large card 'pages' of the book were passed round so that everyone had a turn at interacting with the multi-sensory objects.*

Most of the data relating to alternatives to conventional reading and writing came not from observations but from the desk-based research, interviews with expert witnesses, and from some of the interviews with teachers. For example, teachers were asked to report on the resources, activities and methods that worked best for their group of pupils. There were references to interactive whiteboards, film or cartoon versions of books, photo stories with cartoon speech bubbles, software such as Clicker, digital photos of pupils, character work in drama, music and audio books. It was interesting, however, that the responses to the question were much more likely to be related to text or phonic work or the use of symbols than to these inclusive alternatives.

During the desk-based research, the Web was seen as a very useful source of information about, and examples of, inclusive literacy. The following are examples:

- *Life quilts and life history boxes (objects that tell a personal story)*
- *Personal storytelling (e.g., Somerset Unlimited Company of Story Tellers – see <[http://www.bild.org.uk/04projects\\_storytelling.htm](http://www.bild.org.uk/04projects_storytelling.htm)>)*
- *Sensory stories and multimedia stories (e.g., Pete's Stuff)*
- *Photo albums and scrapbooks*
- *Books without words and learning to read pictures*
- *Graphic facilitation (where a supporter draws cartoons to represent what a person is saying)*
- *Computer icons and community symbols (e.g., M for MacDonalds)*
- *Talking books (on tapes, CDs and the computer)*

- *Drama and role play and interactive drama games (e.g., call and response using the original text – see Park, 2003)*
- *Early literacy software (e.g., 2Simple, Crick, Widgit)*
- *Television and films (especially soaps, cartoons and highly visual stories)*
- *Websites (e.g., Eastenders or Symbol World) and searching the Web for pictures, short films and cartoons*
- *Digital photography (using a digital camera and creating slide shows)*
- *Film making (homemade stories and journalism)*
- *Email (using photos, pictures, symbols and smileys)*
- *iPods (and downloading music)*
- *Computer games (e.g., car chases, football and games on CBeebies or Warner Brothers cartoon website)*

As can be seen from the examples above, collecting data on inclusive literacy encompassed activities that are related to conventional literacy but they either require minimal reading and writing or none at all. The activities were named by the research team 'literate practices' and were valued in their own right and not because they were tied to a developmental progression towards conventional reading and writing. The vast majority of the literate practices relate to tangible products, such as objects, pictures, moving images and symbols which can provide alternatives to letters, words and sentences on pages of books. A few do not, and these are related to spoken language and include storytelling and drama. These are included in 'literate practices' despite their lack of permanency, as they can provide inclusive access to a whole world of literature that is open to people who can read and write.

From the data presented in this section, it can be appreciated that even if conventional literacy is not possible for pupils with SLD, there are many alternatives in which they can be involved. The modern world has many 'new literacies' and some of these are accessible without being able to read and write. A few of these inclusive alternatives were observed in the 35 schools in this study but there was little indication that they were being taught systematically, either from the teachers' interviews or from their planning paperwork. On the whole, literacy lessons were about learning to read and write text, and resources and activities encompassed books even if they were accompanied by a multi-sensory experience or were accessed through multimedia.

#### *Conventional or inclusive literacy?*

A question that was asked frequently of participants in this research study was whether they thought there were pupils for whom conventional literacy is not appropriate or whether there was a point in pupils' school careers when conventional literacy should be abandoned for a more inclusive alternative, such as access to literature through drama, learning to 'read' pictures or pursuing a different medium such as filmmaking.

Many respondents focused on conventional literacy as being an ambition for their pupils, even when they



acknowledged that independent literacy was highly unlikely. These teachers acknowledged that the most they could expect was that pupils would be able to recognise social signs or ‘a few key words’. At best, some would be capable of functional reading and writing, that is, for example able to ‘*make shopping lists; follow recipes*’. Related to this, a number of responses suggested that the acquisition of a sight vocabulary was probably within the grasp of the more able pupils. One teacher noted that it should be possible to teach some letter-sound correspondence so that pupils could identify ‘*words in newspapers; to select things in shops*’.

Teachers working with older pupils seemed to have formed a pragmatic view that some of the pupils will not learn to read and write in the conventional way. They therefore focused on life skills or they concentrated on symbolic approaches:

*‘With one or two exceptions they’re about as far as they’re going to go. If it hasn’t been made by now, 15-years-old, I don’t think they’re going to progress.’*

*‘We need to make a decision about sticking to literacy for real life rather than teaching to read.’*

Continuing the line of questioning, participants were asked: ‘What would be different if you thought that pupils would eventually learn to read and write conventionally?’ One teacher summed up the views of those who thought there would be a change in approach:

*‘[I’d] probably push more academic activities and fewer play activities.’*

Otherwise, teachers were disinclined to abandon expectations of pupils achieving conventional literacy skills, albeit at a functional level, while they were young, for example at primary levels. Their commitment is evidently towards maximising progress in areas relating to traditional orthography for as long as possible using approaches that seem effective for individual pupils whatever their abilities.

When asked whether literacy is important for children with SLD, without exception, every teacher replied that it is. In many cases, they cited the function of literature as its salient aspect:

*‘... for enjoyment, enrichment of imagination, creativity, structuring thoughts.’*

*‘... a valuable experience in its own right. A simple study of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ is teaching them about life, human relationships...’*

Other functions of literacy were specified:

*‘... [literacy] allows them to learn more about the world, a vehicle for widening understanding.’*

*‘... non-fiction for finding out information.’*

*‘... teaching vocabulary.’*

One response suggested that the teacher recognised the impact of being literate on inclusion when she stated:

*‘it’s empowering, [it enhances] self-esteem.’*

## Discussion

Literacy teaching and learning is clearly important in all of the schools in this study. Every school had daily (or almost daily) lessons in literacy in both the primary and secondary school (departments). Teachers talked enthusiastically of a range of activities under the umbrella of literacy, showing that they valued it for their pupils, even if those pupils were not going to become fully literate. They wanted the pupils to enjoy books and, as far as possible, experience the same things as their mainstream peers. They were reluctant to see their pupils as non-readers, especially at the primary stage.

The commitment to conventional literacy is clear from the data. Many examples of Literacy Hours were observed that are similar to those seen in any mainstream school, where children began in a circle with a Big Book followed by phonic work, formed small groups for follow-up work and finished with a plenary. Some of the books were very imaginatively presented and most of the time most pupils were very engaged in the activities. There is great hope from the teachers that these children will be learning a lifelong skill of handling and enjoying books, even if they will not learn many skills that enable them to read the text.

However, there were many fewer examples of inclusive literacy, where pupils could explore learning to ‘read’ pictures, moving images and the new literacies associated with ICT. Interview data suggest that pupils with SLD are, on the whole, unlikely to learn to read and write to a standard where they could be described as literate (in the conventional sense), that is, OECD Level 3.

If the complex technical skills of learning to read and write are largely beyond the ability of pupils and students with SLD, why do their teachers spend so much time on them? Interviewees did try to answer this by suggesting that they want to give each pupil a chance to learn whatever is possible and that anything learned about reading and writing is a bonus. They emphasised both the creative and functional nature of literacy but also its power to be inclusive:

*‘Literacy is important because of the joy of sharing books, learning stories, the sounds of words.’*

*‘Life evolves around reading, recognising symbols and being able to communicate.’*

*‘In her family, she sees people reading the Bible, etc. She conforms to that. She wants to belong and we want her to belong too.’*

The teaching of phonics to pupils with SLD was considered in some detail and although there is some argument for work on sounds to increase spoken communication and to improve discrimination between words such as 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen' or 'beans' and 'peaches', on the whole it was felt that acquiring technical skills in this area may be too difficult for many pupils. Some teachers did concede this difficulty and, certainly in the secondary phase, suggested alternative inclusive approaches to literacy. However, in the near future the teaching of phonics may actually increase in the SLD schools in the wake of the latest Government directive regarding the use of Synthetic Phonics to teach all children to read (DfES, 2006b).

Generally, the teachers in the study seem to be keen to follow government directives. For example, when asked about the impact of the Literacy Strategy, teachers were very positive about its influence on their teaching and said that it provided a useful structure and it encouraged them to teach literacy in a systematic way even though they had to adapt the timings, objectives and expectations. From those reactions, it may be expected that teachers will be comfortable about being directed to teach through Synthetic Phonics.

Why do teachers in schools for pupils with SLD adhere so closely to Government guidelines for all schools and pupils? Why are they not more adventurous and creative or why are not more of them adventurous and creative? As usual, there are probably many answers to those questions. Perhaps the first suggestion is that, like all teachers, teachers of pupils with SLD feel compelled to teach in the way they have been directed. Many fear censure from Ofsted which may ultimately lead to failure and thus closure of their schools. There is also a fear from teachers of pupils with SLD that, if they do not follow as closely as possible the directives for mainstream schools, their pupils will be excluded from their entitlement to the National Curriculum and maybe eventually from education altogether. They may also see that joining in with mainstream initiatives has the possibility of increasing opportunities for inclusive learning. Also, as was suggested earlier, if Government directives are accompanied by guidance and resources, teachers are more likely to use those than to try to develop their own, relating to something different.

Another consideration is that most teachers of pupils with SLD have only received training to work in mainstream schools. Most have come directly from mainstream schools and those with up to 18 years' experience have only known the National Curriculum, and those with up to 8 years of experience, only the National Literacy Strategy. Most teachers in the study said that they had only had mainstream literacy training, so very few have had a chance to consider some of the issues we have raised in this paper.

If we are questioning the emphasis on conventional reading and writing, what might be the alternative? Time was spent exploring the use of symbols, as there was evidence of their use in so many schools. Although symbols were evident in

so many classrooms, school entrances and libraries, only a few schools had evidence of a systematic approach to teaching symbols either to support conventional literacy or as an alternative literacy. Most of the examples related to support for communication, especially for pupils with ASD, and mainly related to PECS.

There was also very little evidence that independent symbol literacy is a real possibility. This may be partly because some symbols are considered as difficult to learn as written words but more importantly, because there are few written materials in the public domain that use symbols. Also, many schools make their own, using packages such as *Writing with Symbols*. Consequently the opportunities for sharing the medium beyond the school that developed it are severely restricted and so the communicative function of literacy breaks down. On the other hand, there is increasing use of picture information in the wider environment and examples were found on the Net, where promoting the use of environmental pictures is featured in teaching and learning contexts.

Despite the rather negative conclusions in relation to symbols, there is insufficient evidence to dismiss their use in reading and writing completely. It is obvious that schools are keen to use symbols, particularly for supporting communication and so perhaps developing a systematic and informed approach for teaching them may be possible. The work of Detheridge and Detheridge (1997) and Abbott et al. (2006) is likely to be a helpful starting point, although it is difficult to see how far individual schools can go without some kind of agreement on a common set of symbols across the country. Currently symbols can be useful for individualised books but the sharing of things written across a community requires consensus across that community. There are likely to continue to be few symbolised books in public libraries until all symbol users can share the same books. This, of course, may not be possible, especially if the range of symbols exists to meet the range of needs of users.

Symbols are not the only alternative to conventional literacy and there are a whole variety of different activities that could perhaps legitimately be seen as supporting an inclusive view of literacy. Observation, interview and desk-based research revealed evidence of activities such as learning to 'read' and draw pictures, using accessible websites, DVDs and videos, making films, devising role play, dramatising stories, using digital cameras, telling personal stories, playing interactive games and using 'call and response' in drama. All these activities can be seen as enabling students to access the world of literacy through a medium that does not depend on being able to read and write. Some may have an element of reading and writing and others have little or none, but what is important is the ability to be able to enjoy what conventionally literate people can enjoy, even if only partially.

If inclusive literacy is to be taught with as much commitment as conventional literacy, then teachers will

need training in skills such as home filmmaking and teaching pupils the art of storytelling. They will need to plan for teaching inclusive alternatives systematically so that learning to read still and moving images is given credence. Teachers will also need resources and to share ideas for inclusive activities. They are unlikely to teach lessons on digital photography and filmmaking if the only resources and ideas available relate to teaching synthetic phonics.

### Conclusions

It seems that literacy for children who are unlikely to learn to read and write in the conventional sense is much the same as for all children. Teachers of children with SLD are committed to teaching conventional skills, at least throughout primary school. They use a range of different methods and approaches to teaching, employing whole word sight vocabulary, phonics, pictures cues and a whole host of activities and resources. Most teachers make use of symbols with at least some of their pupils, although the primary reason for using symbols appears to be to promote communication rather than reading or writing.

Most teachers of pupils with SLD teach through the Literacy Hour structure, especially at the primary stage, although they may adapt it in terms of timing and pace. They use Big Books and other resources found in

mainstream schools and generally try to use what they learned about teaching reading to non-disabled children. Generally most teachers in the study were observed and talked about teaching conventional literacy (reading and writing) as prescribed by the Government.

However, many teachers also make some use of 'inclusive' literacy, that is, literacy that is not about learning to read and write text. Many of these activities fit into the new literacies associated with technology and media related to the digital age. It is, perhaps, even more to these literacies that teacher of pupils with SLD should look in the future as they seem to have the potential not only to engage pupils who cannot read and write when they are of school age but also to become lifelong activities, such as telling stories, 'reading' pictures, making photo albums and home movies, surfing the Net and listening to music.

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### Address for correspondence

Penny Lacey,  
School of Education,  
University of Birmingham,  
Birmingham B15 2TT,  
UK.  
Email: p.j.lacey@bham.ac.uk.

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