

Struggling Decoders: Reading Fluently and Making Meaning of Text

Until I started losing my sight, decoding and reading had never been a problem for me. When I reached my late 30's though, my central vision began to deteriorate due to retinitis pigmentosa. I tried using a closed circuit television screen, which darkened and enlarged the print I placed under it. This worked for about 7 years, but further deterioration of my vision meant that I had to enlarge the characters so much that I could only see 1 small word or just a part of a larger word on the screen at any time. Trying to read anything that was longer than a page was very frustrating. Not only did my eyes tire, but I also lost some of the meaning of the text from the effort extended trying to decode.

While in my 40's, I started studying Braille. Braille has become very helpful for me both in terms of taking notes and labeling materials. Although I do read some articles in Braille and do appreciate receiving program agendas and menus in this alternate format, my reading speed in Braille is such that I have still not developed the fluency/speed to tackle longer publications or large books.

As an elementary school teacher and principal for the past 32 years, I have had ample opportunities to listen to students read. By the time that they are in the third grade, most students are able to read with fluency and make sense of at least simple texts. Some students with learning disabilities plod through the same texts that their peers read with ease. When I think about these students, I am struck with how their reading in many ways mirrors my reading when I use my eyes and, to a lesser extent, my fingers. They take longer to read. They seem to get tired more quickly. They often have trouble comprehending what they have read since they put so much energy into decoding the words.

A primary responsibility of elementary schools is to help children become independent readers. Once children have started decoding, teachers work hard to make sure that students have access to "just right" books – books that they can read with fluency, good understanding and at least 95% accuracy. Effective teachers support students by offering appropriate word analysis and comprehension strategies so that students can progress to increasingly challenging material.

Despite intensive instruction, there are some students with specific learning disabilities who still do not and may never read with fluency. Although these students may have average or above average intelligence, some struggle through grade level texts at relatively slow speeds and without full comprehension. It is hard for these students to keep up with the large quantity of reading required when just using their eyes. They often get frustrated, some get lower grades, and some do give up.

Being an elementary principal, I am expected to read many educational articles, reports, and official documents. With my limited vision, there is no way that I could read even a fraction of these readings using the closed circuit television screen with extra large magnification. And even if these materials were all available in Braille, I would have to

dramatically increase my Braille speed in order to keep up with the expected reading. Fortunately, we have entered the digital age. Most articles and documents are available electronically. With one of the various speech output software packages, I can listen to just about anything that can be found on a computer.

Although it took a little getting used to at the beginning, I am now quite comfortable listening to digitalized text. Most software packages allow the user to select from a variety of voices and to control the speed of the speech. After much practice, I am able to set the speed at fast settings so that I can listen to text as quickly as I could see it when my central vision was normal. My comprehension of the texts that I listen to digitally is usually strong, but if I get confused I can either slow down the speech or listen to the text a word or a line at a time.

No one usually questions whether I am “reading independently” because I am listening to books, articles, and reports on cassette or digitally via computer. Most would think, “hey, he’s blind, and that’s the only way that he can make sense of those things.” However, many do think that students with learning disabilities who use these same accommodations are not “reading independently.” This misconception is rooted in the false assumption that just because some students with learning disabilities can read some print with their eyes, then they should always follow this “normal” or “preferable” manner of “independent reading.”

The ultimate goal of reading is, of course, making meaning of text. Reading relies on thinking, and it is the comprehension of text, which is most important. Clearly, one needs to be able to decode text in order to make meaning of it. However, does it really matter whether or not that decoding occurs using one’s eyes, one’s ears, or one’s fingers?

More and more people with and without disabilities are listening to text. Books on cassettes and books on CD’s are becoming increasingly popular in libraries and bookstores. Digitalized books and newspapers are regularly listened to over computers and telephones. Learning to make meaning of these voice renditions or digitalized texts takes practice. There are also many ways to adapt the sounds of text to tailor to individual needs and enhance comprehension.

No one is suggesting that educators should stop trying to teach students with learning disabilities to decode more effectively with their eyes. Early intervention and ongoing instruction in proven intervention programs should continue. However, once someone who struggles with decoding starts falling behind, it is imperative to provide opportunities to keep that student engaged with the volume and variety of text.

Listening to text is an option that needs to be promoted more in all classrooms. In some instances, students may benefit from both hearing and seeing the text at the same time. Cassettes can be used along with books. Scanners and computers can provide opportunities to see and to hear. Teachers need to create a classroom environment in which there is no stigma in reading in different ways. Listening to books or feeling them with one’s fingers should be recognized as other ways of reading

Students who have learning disabilities and who continue to struggle with decoding deserve the opportunity to try listening to text. If listening to text enhances their fluency and comprehension, then such opportunities should be provided in all subjects including reading. Such accommodations, if beneficial, should be documented in students Individual Education Programs. Students with learning disabilities have the capacity to become independent readers. We can do a much better job helping more of them realize that success.