# Essential Experiences to Undergird the Early Development of Literacy

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***Abstract:***This study identified a repertoire of essential early life experiences to which young children with visual impairments need to be exposed to undergird their development of literacy. The authors analyzed 254 stories from three published basal literacy series to identify the experiences necessary to bring meaning to each story. Through analysis and categorization of the data, they then identified 22 global areas of experience as essential. Guidelines for providing these experiences are suggested, including ways to link experiences to early literacy events.

Gaining a rich repertoire of early experiences is an essential foundation for the development of literacy. Literacy events are meaningful when children have had experience in situations portrayed in stories. The way in which children with visual impairments gain this repertoire of experiences differs from that of fully sighted children. Parents and teachers play a key role in directly exposing young children with visual impairments to these early experiences.

Early life experiences provide the foundation for everything that is learned in school and beyond. Infants act on their environment and learn quickly that crying will bring their mothers or that batting a mobile will create a compelling spectacle. Toddlers move about in their homes to satisfy their curiosity about the objects, people, and events around them. Preschoolers venture into the world by exploring their backyards and neighborhoods, all the while learning about trees, insects, friends, playing, and a wealth of other new things.

For young fully sighted children, early experiences allow incidental learning to take place readily and with little active involvement from parents or other adults. Also, for experiences that cannot be acquired in person, the children can use television, pictures, and other visual media to compensate for the lack of direct involvement. When children enter school, teachers use early experiences as the basis for formal instruction.

For children with visual impairments, incidental learning through casual observation may be restricted or impossible. Visual impairment limits not only a child's incidental learning, but opportunities for gaining access to experiences. Since movement in the environment is restricted, the child has fewer opportunities to gain new and different experiences naturally. In addition, experiences that fully sighted children may gain vicariously through television and visual media are similarly restricted. To compensate, parents and teachers must provide direct exposure to and involvement in common, routine experiences and activities.

The development of meaningful concepts has received much-deserved attention in the early education of students with visual impairments (Finello, Hanson, & Kekelis, 1992; Warren, 1994). Concepts that young fully sighted children acquire, often without direct instruction, generally are taught directly to students with visual impairments. To help children with visual impairments learn the concepts they need for beginning reading instruction, Hall and Rodabaugh (1979) developed the*Preparatory Reading Program* that includes 10 units that provide hands-on experiences in basic concepts, such as size, shape, position, time, and classification. Olson's (1981) book on teaching braille reading skills presented a similar list of early concepts needed as a basis for reading. Certainly, these concepts are essential for learning many things and for acquiring meaning from literary experiences. However, teachers also should emphasize the broader life experiences that young children need to acquire--within which meaningful concepts are applied--to undergird the development of literacy.

The goal of literacy is to gain meaning through reading or to convey meaning through writing (Koenig, 1992). According to Hall and Rodabaugh (1979, p. 257), "For reading to be meaningful, the child must be able to relate what he or she is reading to previous experiences." The same principle applies to writing. If young children have a rich repertoire of basic life experiences--such as playing in city parks, riding horses, and helping their mothers and fathers rake autumn leaves--they will be prepared to bring meaning to literacy events that relate to these kinds of experiences. Without direct experiences, children may read or write words "correctly" but not truly understand what they are reading or writing about. Such situations fail to meet the basic goal of literacy. The question, then, may be, What types and variety of early life experiences do young children with visual impairments require to bring meaning to literacy events?

The purpose of the study reported here was to identify the repertoire of essential experiences that young children with visual impairments need to bring meaning to reading. The authors analyzed stories and other forms of literature for young children that are important aspects of schooling and thus can form the basis for such a repertoire.

**Procedure**

Three basal literacy series were selected for analysis: *A New View* (Macmillan/ McGraw Hill, 1993), *HBJ Treasury of Literature* (Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich, 1993), and *Celebrate Reading* (Scott Foresman, 1993). Each series contains "big books," student books, and books or stories to be read aloud by the teacher. These series are based largely on whole-language principles, although each is a prepared set of materials for teachers and students that are consistent with the basal approach.

For the purposes of this research, stories at the first-, second-, and third-grade levels were analyzed, including those that are to be read aloud by the teacher. Although some of the series have the same stories, each story was analyzed only once. In *A New View*, 33 stories were analyzed at the first-grade level, 24 at the second-grade level, and 22 at the third-grade level, for a total of 79 stories. In *HBJ Treasury of Literature*, 83 total stories were analyzed (26, 34, and 23 at the first-, second-, and third-grade levels, respectively), and in *Celebrate Reading*, 92 stories were analyzed (32, 27, and 33 at the first-, second-, and third-grade levels, respectively). Across the three series, 254 stories were analyzed, with 91 at the first-grade level, 85 at the second-grade level, and 78 at the third-grade level.

Each story was read and analyzed to identify the following elements: 1) the main experience that a student would need to understand the story, 2) the supporting experiences contained in the main experience, and 3) specific concepts and vocabulary words associated with the story. For example, a main experience might be "exploring nature"; supporting experiences might include hiking in the woods, picking flowers, and chasing frogs; and specific concepts or words associated with these experiences might include *forest, trees, leaves, flowers, turtles*, and *frogs*.

To ensure consistency in identifying these elements, the two authors jointly analyzed about 15 stories. Toward the end of this working session, each author analyzed stories separately, and then the two authors compared their findings to make sure that independent analyses yielded essentially the same results. Thereafter, the second author read and analyzed the stories, but both authors analyzed all the stories for which there was uncertainty about any of the elements.

The main experiences, supporting experiences, and concepts-words were entered into a database for numerical analysis. This database was an exhaustive and unduplicated list of the main experiences contained in the 254 stories, cross-referenced with the associated supporting experiences and specific words-concepts. [Table 1](https://www.afb.org/afbpress/pubjvib.asp?DocID=jvib910104tab01) presents an example of the way in which data were coded and categorized in one of the small areas of experience. Note, for example, that "arguing-fighting" was not the main focus of a story at the third-grade level, but *fighting* appeared as a specific word-concept at this grade level. A situation such as this would occur if the main focus of the experience was going to the zoo, but during the trip, two children started fighting. So although fighting was not the primary focus, understanding this term would be necessary to gain full meaning from the story.

To arrive at a more concise (and ultimately more teacher- and parent-friendly) list of experiences, the authors grouped the main experiences into larger categories labeled "global experiences." They did so by placing all the main experiences on individual notecards and then jointly sorting the main experiences into logically and conceptually similar categories. For example, as Table 1 shows, five main experiences--arguing-fighting, causing trouble, getting lost, not helping a friend, and running away--were grouped together to form the category getting into trouble. As a final step in the procedure, the notecards, database printouts, and raw data were cross-checked to ensure that the findings were consistent.

**Results**

**Global experiences**

The grouping of main experiences into broader areas resulted in 22 global experiences. These data are presented in rank order in [Table 2](https://www.afb.org/afbpress/pubjvib.asp?DocID=jvib910104tab02). The most common global experiences included doing or making things. Of the 254 stories analyzed, 42 (17%) involved activities, such as looking for something, making something, painting, digging a hole, and trying to do something, all of which were placed in the category doing or making things. Other common global experiences were experiences with friends or pretending (15%); working together, sharing, helping (10%); and looking for or finding something (10%). Given that the stories were written for students in the early grades, it would be expected that such routine parts of daily life would emerge as common experiences for young children.

The analysis also yielded two areas that appeared distinct from the other ones: learning and content areas and understanding specific concepts. The global experiences in these two areas would be dependent largely on instruction, usually in school programs, whereas the others would be gained by engaging in typical daily activities. For example, one focus of learning and content areas was dinosaurs. Since common experiences with dinosaurs are not possible, knowledge of them is obtained by studying science and history in school. Understanding specific concepts included areas like counting, shapes, colors, size, body parts, and measurement.

**Supporting experiences**

Supporting experiences were those that would be necessary for understanding a story, but were not the main focus. For any given story, there could be a number of supporting experiences that a child would need to gain meaning. Therefore, an extensive number of supporting experiences--2,698 in the 254 stories--were identified. A rank ordering of the supporting experiences, grouped according to their global experiences, is presented in [Table 3](https://www.afb.org/afbpress/pubjvib.asp?DocID=jvib910104tab03).

When supporting experiences were considered, the rank ordering of the categories changed considerably. Three areas clustered at the top were the most essential supporting experiences: exploring nature, plants, and insects; experiences with living creatures; and experiencing emotions and a sense of well-being. Although these areas were not identified in the top group of global experiences, they were essential for understanding many of the stories. For example, of the 2,698 supporting experiences that were identified, 219 (8%) involved nature, plants, and/or animals in some manner, while 207 (7.6%) involved living creatures, and 207 involved emotions or a sense of well being.

Another group of supporting experiences also emerged as being important; experiences with family and family traditions, experiences in the community, and experiences at home. This group highlights the importance of common experiences that center on the home and family and extend to the neighborhood and community.

An interesting finding was related to the importance of understanding specific concepts. In this area, there were 912 instances (34% of the 2,698 supporting experiences) in the 254 stories in which understanding a concept was essential for gaining meaning from a story. This large number emphasizes the importance of gaining a concrete and real understanding of basic concepts to undergird not only the development of literacy, but all other areas of learning. Supporting experiences related to learning and content areas (*n*=142) were also important, but not to the same extent as understanding concepts.

**Specific words and concepts**

Specific words and concepts were analyzed in the 254 stories to identify those that are the most essential for gaining meaning from reading the stories. [Table 4](https://www.afb.org/afbpress/pubjvib.asp?DocID=jvib910104tab04) presents three to five of the most common words and concepts grouped according to the rank-ordered global experiences. The numbers after each item indicate the number of times that a particular word or concept appeared in the 254 stories. For example, in the areas of experiences with friends or pretending, *friends* appeared in 51 stories, *games* or *competition* in 18, *playing* in 18, and *party* in 6. This table provides the best indicator of the nature and scope of each of the global experiences.

**Discussion and implications**

If children have had experience with the events or situations portrayed in stories or other forms of literature, then a basic requirement is present for gaining meaning from the text. The global and supporting experiences identified in this study can provide a framework of basic life experiences that should be gained during the early years. Parents, early childhood teachers, and teachers of students with visual impairments can use this information to ensure that young children acquire a balanced repertoire of high-quality experiences.

**Experiences with doing routine things**

The findings revealed the importance of common, daily experiences in doing routine things with family and friends around the home and in the neighborhood. Given that young children spend most of their early lives at home and nearby, ample opportunities exist in these settings for gaining valuable experiences that undergird literacy. As a global area of experience, doing and making things emerged as the most common. Early home experiences are ideal for emphasizing activities like playing house, making a fort, washing the car, painting the fence, and planting a tree. Parents and teachers can make such experiences meaningful for children with visual impairments by consistently applying Lowenfeld's (1973) three principles of special methods: 1) provide concrete experiences; 2) provide for learning by doing; and 3) provide unifying activities that give experiences a sense of wholeness, rather than fragmentation.

Playing with siblings and friends is critical, since much of the early literature that children read revolves around such simple and important parts of daily life for young children. Developing social relationships with peers not only increases the quality of shared experiences, but provides an avenue for ongoing experiences as children get closer to formal schooling. Also, family traditions, routines, and chores provide high-quality hands-on experiences, many of which increase daily living skills, such as cleaning up one's bedroom. Teachers and parents should recognize that many high-quality experiences in the home and neighborhood are an important foundation for literacy and should provide continuing access to these experiences.

**Experiences with living creatures and nature**

Given the frequency with which living creatures--domestic and exotic animals, reptiles, insects, livestock--appeared in the literature for young children, this global area of experience deserves special attention. Similarly, experiences with nature and plants are important and closely aligned with living creatures. Parents and teachers should strive to provide every opportunity for young children with visual impairments to gain meaningful experiences in these two broad areas by providing access to petting zoos, pet stores, state parks, nature preserves, and other settings.

Children can gain rich, high-quality experiences with common animals and creatures, such as cats, sheep, frogs, rabbits, turtles, and even nonpoisonous snakes. Since it is not possible to have hands-on experiences with most wild animals, children with visual impairments can gain knowledge of these not-so-common creatures by exploring preserved animals prepared by taxidermists and scale models. To understand exotic animals, though, they need to have rich experiences with common animals and pets on which to build this new knowledge. For gaining experiences with insects, especially those that are too small to explore tactilely, scale models are useful. Of course, to provide for unifying experiences, any use of scale models should be accompanied by real-life experiences in environments in which the insects live, such as forests or ponds.

**Developing meaningful concepts**

The analyses suggested the importance of developing sound concepts for bringing meaning to and gaining meaning from literacy. Of course, meaningful concepts are also fundamental to all other areas of learning. The *Preparatory Reading Program* (Hall & Rodabaugh, 1979) is a valuable resource in teaching essential concepts. Teachers and parents of children with visual impairments should focus on developing meaningful concepts within the context of other experiences. For example, while exploring in the woods, children with visual impairments can be guided to compare trees with smooth bark versus trees with rough bark. Although fully sighted children may develop these concepts without any or much direct involvement, it cannot be assumed or left to chance) that children with visual impairments will gain such meaning without direct teaching and experiential learning.

Lists of concepts (see, for example, Hall & Rodabaugh, 1979; Lyndon & McGraw, 1973; Olson, 1981) can be useful in summarizing those that are fundamental for learning, but these concepts should be taught in the true contexts in which they are typically used. When a child with a visual impairment can apply concepts meaningfully across situations and when these concepts are important in his or her life, then the child has truly learned the concepts. Using a knowledge of concepts to bring meaning to or gain meaning from literacy experiences certainly is one valuable application.

**Providing high-quality experiences**

In expanding a child's repertoire of early life experiences, parents and teachers need to emphasize the quality and depth of the experiences, rather than focus solely on the quantity. If children have numerous experiences whose quality of information is shallow or fragmented, then the meaning they gain from literacy experiences will be similarly limited. The following are some suggestions for ensuring that young children with visual impairments have high-quality experiences:

* Focus on providing rich, multisensory experiences that deal with activities and things that are a common part of young children's lives.
* Encourage children to use all their senses, coupled with an active, hands-on approach, to participate fully in experiences. Allow sufficient time because this approach typically takes longer to provide.
* Provide opportunities for children with low vision to explore objects and places tactilely, since a reliance on vision may result in learning that is inaccurate or fragmented. Tactile exploration is as important for them as it is for children who are blind.
* Give children opportunities to help with each step in a sequential experience, such as washing the family car, so the children gain a sense of the wholeness and reality of the event.
* Use experiences as opportunities to expand the child's vocabulary. Pairing new words with the authentic context of experiences ensures that the child's language is meaningful.

**Early literacy experiences**

When possible, experiences should be linked with literacy events, beginning in the home and later in formal school programs. For example, parents may show a child who is blind the braille in elevators when exploring a skyscraper or request a braille menu when eating at a restaurant. After special experiences, thank-you letters can be written using shared writing strategies: The child and parent compose the letter together, but the parent is responsible for writing the message on paper. If the child is blind, a braille copy should be generated, on-the-spot if the parent knows braille or afterward by the teacher of students with visual impairments. Miller (1985) suggested creating an "auditory experience album" after special events in which the child records his or her experiences on audiocassettes that are kept on a bookshelf and reviewed when desired; thus an auditory substitute for a photograph album is created. Miller provides other suggestions for early literacy experiences, as did Stratton and Wright (1991) and Koenig (1996).

The language-experience approach to reading is specifically suited for using actual experiences as the basis for reading instruction. In this approach, the child tells a story about a recent experience, and while he or she observes, the teacher writes it down. Then this story is read jointly by the child and teacher over a number of sessions. Since the reading passages are based on actual experiences and are told in the child's own words, the stories will be meaningful to the child. This approach is an excellent way to introduce children to written language and to move from early literacy experiences to formal literacy instruction. Furthermore, it may be used with equal effectiveness in print or braille. For guidelines on using this approach with children with visual impairments, see Harley, Truan, and Sanford (1987), Koenig and Rex (1996), Morris (1976), Olson (1981), and Rex, Koenig, Wormsley, and Baker (1994).

**Responsibility for providing experiences**

There is probably widespread agreement on the necessity for young children with visual impairments to acquire a rich background of early experiences to undergird literacy development. A point of disagreement, however, may center on who is responsible for providing these experiences. Since children gain many early life experiences before they begin formal schooling, some teachers may think that the responsibility rests with parents. The authors of this article believe that providing early life experiences is a shared responsibility between parents and teachers of students with visual impairments.

The level of involvement that teachers need to maintain with each family in providing experiences will vary. Some families may require only simple guidelines and perhaps some modeling by teachers of effective strategies for deriving high-quality information from experiences. Other families may require more direct and ongoing involvement in which teachers provide many of the early experiences. In some situations, teachers may have to assume sole responsibility for expanding the repertoire of experiences; rather than blame or chastise parents for their lack of involvement in their children's lives, the teachers will provide the children with rich experiences and foster the parents' increased involvement.

Gaining hands-on, multisensory experiences is not a "frill" in the education of children with visual impairments; *it is a necessity*. Matters of funding, convenience, liability risks, scheduling, and other logistical matters are insufficient reasons for failing to provide these essential experiences. The best practice in educating students with visual impairments supports experiential learning and upholds its essential role in early education and the development of meaningful literacy skills. Teachers of students with visual impairments who embrace this practice will use a wide variety of resources and strategies to ensure that the provision of early experiences is an integral component of schooling for these children.

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