



THE RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS OF NEWS-2-YOU



Let's begin at the beginning. News-2-You is a symbol-supported, simple text electronic newspaper delivered weekly on the Internet. Its focus is on current events. Each issue is wrapped around a newsworthy--and subject appropriate--event of interest to our readers in the special education and beginning reader communities.

News-2-You stands alone as the national newspaper for special education, a role akin to that of the New York Times in print journalism. We are "the paper of record" by default; only News-2-You tackles "real world" topics and serves them up in an accessible format specifically tailored for students with significant disabilities. But what is the teaching value of a newspaper-augmented curriculum? How is a current events newspaper valued in the special education classroom? And how is its value enhanced by the use of symbol-supported text? All of these questions are addressed by a standing body of research.

THE NEWSPAPER AS A TOOL FOR EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

"Encourage newspapers and you encourage learning." The quote is from a 1795 article as cited by contemporary research team of Gardner and Sullivan (1). The statement rings as true today as it did when it was written. The Gardner/Sullivan study expands on the idea. They state that today's use of newspapers in education: improves reading ability; sparks interest; furnishes a variety of content; provides reference points for less accessible subjects such as geography; acquaints the reader with contemporary trends and developments; and gives the reader a bridge between the confining world of school and the vibrant "real" world in which they may long to participate. Students will read a newspaper when they will not read other school materials because the newspaper records events that have meaning for them (2).

Additional educational benefits are cited in a study authored by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation (3). Schools that rely on newspapers to educate in the classroom benefit through:

- Sharpened student skills (communicative and participatory)
- Increased student interest and motivation by providing study materials relevant to their lives.
- Involvement of school in the lives of the communities they serve
- Improved relations with students' families

THE VALUE OF A CURRENT EVENTS FOCUS IN THE CLASSROOM

News-2-You's weekly format of simple symbol-supported text, charts, maps and graphs is tailored specifically for beginning and struggling readers. It subscribes to the thought that a regular dose of current events can achieve a multitude of positive teaching goals. A recent article in Education World (4) expands on the concept. Educators can "use the news" to achieve the following:

- Cover a wide range of subjects and connect to all areas of the curriculum
- Build language, vocabulary, reading comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving, oral expression, and turn-taking and listening skills
- Open up communications between students and parents. Students are often eager to emulate their parents' and siblings' reading behavior, and talking about the news is one way for parents to engage students in adult conversation
- Offer ideal opportunities for cooperative group instruction, classroom debates and directed follow-up discussions

Dean Edward F. DeRoche of the School of Education at the University of San Diego addresses the point in a 1991 book (5). "For children to become competent lifelong learners, they must learn to use nonfiction materials to expand their knowledge base, solve problems and make decisions." A large body of research, he says, supports the use of newspapers and current events as teaching tools. He establishes the following facts:

- Newspapers help teach students to be effective readers
- Newspapers can help develop and improve student vocabulary, word recognition skills and comprehension
- Newspapers are effective tools for teaching many math concepts, particularly fractions, decimals, currency and averages
- Surveyed students overwhelmingly support the introduction of newspapers into the classroom and have a positive attitude towards reading newspapers
- Though not intrinsically interested in current events, evidence suggests that the inclusion of the topic can—and does-- awaken that interest

THE VALUE OF SYMBOL-SUPPORTED TEXT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Research indicates that picture systems can actually accelerate speech and language acquisition. Symbol sets do have a positive effect on the development of written language because they become the scaffold for expressive communication and cognition. They serve as a bridge between the concrete (pictures) and the abstract (print text). In a study done by Jean Slater, results show that the addition of pictures was vital for the success of students with disabilities. Her students all had struggled to read text, and the adaptation (of symbols inclusion) allowed them to participate in reading activities that had previously either been very difficult or very limited (6).

Literacy learning is achievable for students with significant disabilities. Literacy materials must be made accessible, not only for physical manipulation, but by adding pictures and objects along with print or by modifying the cognitive demands of text content. Incorporating pictures and/or symbol associations with print words will help students learn targeted sight words (7).

SUMMARY

News-2-You recognizes the paucity of research addressing the academic education of students with significant disabilities. Historically these students participated in a curriculum that focused on functional life skill applications with limited participation in academic skills. The 1997 IDEA and 2001 NCLB legislation changed the academic landscape forever. Downing now lists five general guidelines for literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities:

1. Recognize the link between communication and literacy
2. Maintain high expectations for students to acquire literacy
3. Make literacy materials accessible
4. Follow the interest of the student
5. Engage the student in direct and systematic instruction (8)

News-2-You is designed to achieve those goals. It is a tool for teaching and expanding literacy skills, from basic awareness of symbols and print to reading fluently with comprehension. It spurs discussion and student interest. It expands the knowledge of cultures, customs, events and places in the world. Importantly, it sparks an interest in reading for pleasure as well as information. Importantly it provides multiple opportunities for educators to measure student performance on standards-based skills.

News-2-You is truly your “national newspaper.”

- (1.) Gardner, J.N. & Sullivan, B.L. (undated). *The National Newspaper as a Tool for Educational Empowerment: Origins and Rationale*, University of South Carolina’s National Resource Center
- (2.) Sullivan, B.L. & Allen-Thompson, P. (1998). *The Newspaper as an Educative Institution: Origins & Rationale for Using Newspapers in Education*. San Francisco, CA: Use the News Foundation
- (3.) Anonymous. (1995). *NIE: Getting Started—A Guide for Newspaper in Education Programs*. Newspaper Association of America Foundation Report
- (4.) G. Hopkins. (2005). *Why Teach Current Events?* Education World
- (5.) DeRoche, E. (1991). *The Newspaper: A Reference for Teachers and Librarians*. ABC-CLIO, San Diego, CA
- (6.) Slater, J.M. (Undated). *Increasing Literacy Skills in Students with Disabilities: A Pictorial Approach*. Slater Software, Guffey, CO
- (7.) Staugler, K. (2008). *Research Summary for Unique Learning System*, Fort Recovery, OH
- (8.) Downing, J. (2005). *Teaching Literacy to Students with Significant Disabilities: Strategies for the K-12 Inclusive Classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press