**Foundational Skills Strategies for Braille Readers: Anna Swenson (8:12)**

ANNA M. SWENSON, M.Ed.: The area of foundational skills includes four standards: print or braille concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. This video will present three practical activities for helping young braille readers acquire foundational skills.

The first activity is Making Words, which was developed by Patricia Cunningham at Wake Forest University. It involves manipulating letter tiles to spell or to read real words. The Word Playhouse, which is a product from APH, is ideal for this activity. It includes all of the letter tiles ready made on a Velcro board. If you don't have access to APH materials, it's very easy to find magnetic letter tiles on the internet, label them in braille, and use them on a cookie sheet. It's the same activity.

I begin by choosing a word of at least five letters. In this case it's the word "plane," which is in a book my student has been reading called Fast, Faster, Fastest. However I could also have chosen a word from one of Patricia Cunningham's many books called Making Words. This one is directed at first graders, but she has them for all grade levels.

I take the letter tiles for the word "plane" and I mix them up at the top of my board. Then I give my student directions to spell different words. First of all, I might say spell the word "pen." And to help the student out, I might go, "puh, uh, n." And the student would place the P, the E, and the N right on the board. Then I would say, "Change the word 'pen' to 'pan'." The student would know that he or she would need to change the vowel, change the E to an A, and then we would have the word "pan".

My next direction might be something like, "Okay, take those same three letters and turn them into the word 'nap'." And this involves reorganizing the sounds so that they say N-A-P instead of P-A-N. And this is a really good thing for children to learn, that the order of the sounds really can make the difference between different words.

After "nap," I ask the student to make the word "lap," removing the N and putting on the L. Now comes the tricky part. Change the word "lap" to the word "lane." So the child needs to remove the P, add an N, and then remember the rule for the long vowel silent E. And now we have the word "lane".

My last direction always says, "Take the remaining letter and spell a real word with it." The child brings down the P to put it in front of "lane," and we have the word "plane."

When this part of the activity is finished, I make flashcards of the words that the child created on the Word Playhouse. If there were contractions in the word, I include both the contracted and the uncontracted form of the word. I flash the cards to see how quickly the child can recognize them. We talk about which words rhyme. We might talk about which words use the same letters in different orders. We practice reading the words in several different ways.

I highly recommend the Word Playhouse for activities related to phonological awareness. Children love manipulating the tiles, and of course there are many more activities and games that you can do with it.

The second activity is called 1, 2, 3 Mastery, and it's a way for students to practice high frequency words like the Dolch words. It was developed by my colleague in Fairfax County, Mary Kate Harris.

To start with, you take a file folder, open it up. And in the top half of the file folder you place three self-adhesive library card pockets in a row and number them 1 2, 3 in print, braille, or both. On the bottom half of the open file folder you place a bag or an envelope. And this is where the finished flashcards will go when the student has proved mastery. Once you have your folder set up, make a set of flashcards of high frequency words that your student needs to learn. You can use words from the Dolch list, or you can use words from a classroom list that the teacher has for the rest of the students.

Introduce the words to the child, perhaps only eight or 10 words at a time. Talk about the phonetic characteristics, talk about the braille contractions. Practice them a couple of times. Put them back in pocket number one. When they come in the next day, flash the cards. And the ones that the student can recognize automatically-- and I usually say that's in less than three seconds-- go in pocket two. The ones that the student is still struggling a little bit with stay in pocket one.

The following day, you flash the cards from pocket two. Again if they're automatic and correct, they go in pocket three. You flash the cards from pocket one, they go in pocket two. So the cards are just moving up one pocket every time they become automatic, and they're getting repeated practice over a series of several days.

From pocket three, when the words are automatic, they go into the finished bag or envelope in the bottom of the folder here. And children love to see their words pile up in here.

Now, if at any time when a word is in pocket two or pocket three is missed, it goes back to pocket one, goes back to the beginning. And if at any time during the school day the child misses one of these words in a reading assignment or other activity, that word can come out of the bag or out of the pocket and go back to pocket one. We're really aiming for mastery.

My third suggestion is very simple. Rereading. And this is not so much an activity as it is a research-proven strategy for developing fluency. Rereading is especially important for our braille readers who have more symbols to learn, and who sometimes take a little longer to develop fluency than their typically-sighted peers who read print.

Here are five tips for helping your student develop fluency. First is model fluent reading yourself, and occasionally surprise them by modeling disfluent reading. Talk with your students about what fluent reading sounds like and what readers do to read fluently. Fluent readers read with two hands, they recognize words right away, they stop at ending punctuation. Make a list of these things with your student.

Expect children to read at home every night. It's perfectly fine for them to reread familiar books, and if it's a very short book that you send home, you can specify how many times the child should read it. Be creative about coming up with different ways for your child to reread familiar books. Perhaps you want to act it out as a mini-play and have different children read different parts. Perhaps your child can practice reading the book until they can read it fluently to another class as part of a braille demonstration. Make recordings or videotapes of your student reading, and analyze them with your student.

Assess reading speeds regularly. For younger children this would be warm reading speeds where they've had a chance to practice rereading. And perhaps set a goal for correct words per minute.

I'll end with a couple of additional thoughts about foundational skills. First, all children need instruction in foundational skills, but not all of them need the same intensity of instruction. Be sure to conduct regular assessments, focus on individual needs, and connect foundational skills to authentic reading contexts. This will ensure balanced literacy instruction, and also that your students remain motivated and engaged as they learn to read.