

Children with Disabilities: Reading and Writing the Four-Blocks® Way



The Four-Blocks® Literacy Framework is a regular part of Language Arts instruction in many elementary classrooms across Alberta. The original goals of this framework were to help elementary teachers respond more effectively to individual learning differences. The Four Blocks – guided reading, self-selected reading, working with words and writing – represent four different approaches to teaching students to read. Four Blocks is based on the reality that children do not all learn in the same way and because of this, teachers have to provide a range of educational experiences to support various learning preferences and strengths and needs. Students also differ in their level of literacy competency, so teachers also need to provide experiences that are as multilevel as possible.

In the early 1990's, two researchers from the Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies, Karen Erickson and David Koppenaver, began using the Four-Blocks® Framework to help students with a broad range of disabilities learn to read and write. The researchers used Four Blocks to help students with significant cognitive disabilities improve their ability to read with understanding. They also used Four Blocks to help students who could not talk improve their ability to converse with peers and teachers through improved spelling and writing.

The result of this research is the book *Children with Disabilities: Reading and Writing the Four-Blocks® Way*. The book outlines six general areas when students with disabilities may require additional or significant supports. The six areas include: communication, cognition, physical abilities, sensory (primarily vision and hearing), affect and attention. The authors propose that these areas of potential difference are more informative to instructional planning than the label assigned to characterize a student's type of disability.

Another goal of this book is to increase teachers' awareness and use of the wide variety of technologies that now make it possible for students with disabilities to participate in and succeed in the reading and writing curriculum. Technologies can increase students' productivity, simplify complex tasks, provide informative feedback, supply a voice for children who cannot speak, and meet a variety of sensory needs.

The 144-page book begins with an explanation of why the authors wrote this book and then provides an overview of what a sample Four-Blocks Day might look like in both a grade-level classroom and in a self-contained special education classroom. The remaining chapters of the book largely parallel those of *The Teacher's Guide to the Four Blocks* (Cunningham, Hall and Sigmon, 1999) and provide a succinct explanation of the impact of individual differences on learning opportunities central to each Block. The authors describe adaptations and modifications of tools, materials, experiences, and the classroom that will help students with disabilities become readers and writers.

This book is one of two teaching resources used in the 2011–2012 Literacy for All pilot. Feedback from participating teachers was that the Four-Blocks Way offers a promising organizing structure that teachers can use to provide effective literacy instruction and supports to students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Erickson, K. and Koppenaver, D. (2007). *Children with Disabilities: Reading and Writing the Four Blocks® Way*. Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa.