The Need for Learning Media Assessments in Early Intervention

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One of the primary responsibilities of the teacher of students with visual impairment (TSVI) is to perform specialized assessments. According to best practice, these assessments include but are not limited to functional vision evaluation (FVE), learning media assessment (LMA), and expanded core curriculum assessment (Holbrook et al., 2017; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Traditionally, the LMA has been conducted to select appropriate learning media and literacy tools for school-age students who have visual impairments. Specifically, at the conclusion of an LMA, a recommendation is made as to whether braille, print, auditory materials, pictures, objects, or any combination of these are appropriate for a particular student. In early intervention (EI), the goal of an LMA is quite different. Unfortunately, there are few specific recommendations for conducting LMAs with this population.

According to Koenig and Holbrook (1995), there are three primary reasons to conduct LMAs for students, including those in EI. The first aim is to determine the child's learning channels. Specifically, an LMA will not only elicit the child's sensory preferences, but it will also reveal the child's most efficient learning channels. The LMA data will also reveal whether a student is accessing information via one channel alone or in combination. Next, an LMA ensures access to literacy and education by collecting data on emergent literacy skills, communication skills, and the potential effects of vision loss on the child's ability to access learning materials. Finally, conducting LMAs promotes collaboration among families, caregivers, and educational team members as areas of need are targeted and the most appropriate media are integrated within the child's instruction.

The aim of this report is to discuss the practice of conducting LMAs for EI students who have visual impairments. Various questions arose, including at what interval (annual, at transition) LMAs are being conducted, what tools are being

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used, and what information is being obtained. Most importantly, the authors wanted to understand why LMAs are not being conducted for this population in all cases.

As state and federal policy guidance regarding braille reading and writing assessment and instruction is largely focused on the population aged 3–21, TSVIs working with students in EI have no specific directive regarding the interval at which they should conduct LMAs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Schroeder, 1995). However, there are three events that prompt the need for an LMA (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995). Ideally, the TSVI should conduct an LMA at the time of the child's annual meeting. Next, an LMA should be updated if a change in the student's visual functioning should occur. Finally, an LMA should be conducted when a child is transitioning to a prekindergarten program.

Once we understand the value of conducting LMAs for infants and toddlers, the question that follows is how can TSVIs obtain the information required to identify the child's learning channels and preferences? First, an assessment plan should be established and assessment goals prioritized. For most students, determining their preferred and/or most efficient sensory channels, likes and/or dislikes, and additional considerations for cortical visual impairment (CVI) and/or deafblindness (if applicable) are the primary outcomes sought from an LMA. Currently, the standard tool used for this purpose is form 2 of *Learning Media Assessment of Students with Visual Impairments: A Resource Guide for Teachers* (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995). While this instrument may be used with any age group, there are several useful supplementary tools that can more fully capture the learning channels of an infant or toddler. For example, the *Individual Sensory Learning Profile* (Anthony et al., 2004), *Sensing and Learning* (Smith & Chambers, 2023), *Literacy Learner Profile* (Hodes et al., 2019), and both the *Likes and Dislikes Chart* and the *Pathways to Learning Chart* on the Active Learning Space website (Baltisberger et al., 2023) are all potential options to complete this portion of the LMA.

For students who have a diagnosis of CVI, additional considerations should be made including (a) the child's visual attention and (b) recognition of salient features, form perception (objects, photos, drawings, etc.), and the complexity of both materials and learning environment. Tools such as *The CVI Range* (Roman, 2018), *The CVI Companion Guide* (Lueck et al., 2023), *CVI 2D image Assessment* (Tietjen, 2019), and the *CVI Literacy Profile* (Teach CVI Project, 2017) may be used to address the needs of these students. Students who have dual sensory loss (deafblindness) have additional learning considerations (McKenzie, 2009). For example, the visual presentation of signs must align with the student's visual acuity and preferred visual fields in order for them to be received appropriately. Lighting, visual background, and hand tracking are a few

of the items that are featured in the *Assessment of Deafblind Access to Manual Signs* (Blaha & Carlson, 2007), which may be used to supplement both the FVE and the LMA.

To capture the child's emergent literacy skills, forms 4 and 9 in Koenig and Holbrook (1995) are typically utilized. The criteria for "readiness for a (conventional or functional) literacy program" (Koenig and Holbrook, 1995, pp. 186, 193) includes mastery of a number of specific skills listed on these forms that relate to a child's ability to interact with print and/or braille. As a significant portion of infants and toddlers who receive EI vision services have additional disabilities or "intense support needs" (Snyder et al., 2022), it is unlikely that these children would acquire the requisite skills to meet the criteria by the age of 3. In planning assessment of these students, it is worthwhile to reflect on the skills that may be most valuable in terms of literacy. For some students, the level of their emergent literacy skills may be best understood by utilizing the *Braille Readiness Grid* (McComiskey, 1996) or the *All Children Can Read: Literacy Skills Checklist* (Purvis & Steele, 2016). Specifically, the *Braille Readiness Grid* assesses a child's tactile, fine motor, listening, concept building, and book skills, while the *All Children Can Read: Literacy Skills Checklist* also includes foundational skills, such as social engagement and curiosity about the environment. For other students, including those who have multiple disabilities, communication skills may be prioritized. *The Communication Matrix* (Rowland, 2004) or the *Holistic Communication Profile* (Bruce, 2010) may be conducted in collaboration with other team members, such as a speech language pathologist or a teacher of the deaf to elicit the child's communication skills.

Often, decisions regarding the use of technology, including augmentative and alternative communication devices, are made prior to age 3. TSVIs need to share information regarding prerequisite skills for technology use with the individualized family service plan (IFSP) team at the earliest possible opportunity. These skills are gleaned from both the FVE and the LMA, including control of eye movements, functional visual acuities, positioning and head control, fine motor skills, concept development, communication skills, and the preferred and/or most efficient sensory channels.

Unfortunately, there are numerous factors that can prevent an LMA from being conducted for a student in EI. Due to teacher shortages and large student caseloads, lack of time may prevent TSVIs from completing an LMA although other assessments (such as functional vision evaluation) are being performed. Because EI for students with visual impairments is a highly specialized field, vision professionals may not feel confident conducting LMAs with infants and toddlers if they have not received the appropriate training nor have a template to utilize. Perhaps most importantly, TSVIs may not be aware of the array of supplementary tools that

may be used to conduct an LMA for EI students, including those infants and toddlers who have multiple disabilities or deafblindness.

A learning media assessment is an essential component of EI services for infants and toddlers who have visual impairments. An LMA has the potential to provide valuable information about a child's emergent literacy skills, communication skills, and technology skills. Providing these data to the IFSP team prior to transition creates opportunities for collaboration and ensures that appropriate learning strategies are implemented. Unfortunately, various obstacles exist that prevent TSVIs from conducting LMAs in EI, including lack of time, lack of training, and lack of appropriate tools. The authors recommend adequate LMA training for EI vision professionals and encourage collaboration among TSVIs to create a shared tool that may be used to assess young children of all abilities.

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