

**Additional Ideas from the ADL's Curriculum Connections**  
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**Seeing the World through the Hands of People with a Visual Disability**

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce the concept of disability to students by exploring and understanding daily experiences of people with a visual disability. By engaging in concrete activities such as transcribing Braille and learning about the achievements of activists like Helen Keller, students are challenged to rethink assumptions and beliefs about the abilities of people with disabilities. Students are also asked to consider issues of accessibility by noting barriers in the environment that may limit opportunities for people with disabilities.

***Objectives:***

- Students will learn the terms disability, handicap, and visual disability.
- Students will learn about the varying degrees of visual disability.
- Students will learn the Braille alphabet, and use it to decode a sentence coded in Braille.
- Students will learn about Helen Keller, and her life as a writer and activist for people with visual disabilities.
- Students will research and discover the various ways that people with disabilities perform daily functions.
- Students will consider ableist attitudes and assumptions toward people with disabilities, and ways to challenge those assumptions .

**Requirements:**

- Braille Alphabet Card
- Famous Quote by Helen Keller Coded in Braille
- Group Discussion Questions about Helen Keller Quote

**Other Materials:** chart paper, paper, pencils, markers

**Time:** Parts I – III are 35 minutes each

**Part 1 (35 minutes)**

1. Distribute copies of the following handouts to each student:
  1. Famous Quote by Helen Keller Coded in Braille  
[http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum\\_connections/fall\\_2005/braille\\_quote\\_keller.pdf](http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/fall_2005/braille_quote_keller.pdf)
  2. Braille Alphabet Card  
[http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum\\_connections/fall\\_2005/braille\\_alphabet\\_card.pdf](http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/fall_2005/braille_alphabet_card.pdf)
2. Ask students if they know who Helen Keller was? Ask if they know what Braille is?

Explain that Helen Keller was a famous writer in the late 1800s / early 1900s. She was both deaf and blind, due to an illness she contracted as a child. She learned how to communicate through finger spelling with her teacher Anne Sullivan, and learned how to read using Braille.

1. Explain to students that Braille is a code used to enable people who have a visual disability to read. Explain that the quote written on their handouts has been coded in Braille, letter by letter, thus making it possible to transcribe for non-Braille readers. Normally, certain words like 'of' and 'the' are coded in contractions that stand for the whole word, and other words are abbreviated, like "tomorrow " which is spelled "tm", and "friend" which is spelled "fr". For the purposes of this exercise, students will translate letter by letter.
2. In their groups, ask students to translate the quotation using the [Braille Alphabet Card](#), and to discuss the following questions in their groups. Invite students to puncture the points of Braille on their individual handouts with their pens or pencils after they have transcribed the quote to feel what the quote would feel like to a person who is blind or has a visual disability.

*[Once transcribed, the quote will read: "The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people towards them. -Helen Keller ]*

- What do you think was Helen Keller 's message in this quote?
- What are some attitudes of "seeing people" towards people who are blind or who have a visual disability?
- How do these attitudes or beliefs affect the way "seeing people" behave towards people who are blind or who have a visual disability?
- How might people with a visual disability go about doing things differently from people who can see?

3. Reconvene the class, and hold a class discussion to process the group questions above. Write the words “DISABILITY”, “HANDICAP” and “VISUAL DISABILITY” on a piece of chart paper, and ask the following questions:
- What is a disability?  
*(Explain to students that the word disability means a mental or physical condition that affects a person's ability to engage in one or more activities, for example seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, or working.)*
  - What types of disabilities could a person have?
  - What is the difference between a “disability” and a “handicap”?  
*(Explain to students that the word "handicap" was commonly used to refer to people with disabilities, but that it is an offensive term and should no longer be used. The origin of the word "handicap" is literally a person with "cap in hand", or beggar. Because of this negative association, it is disrespectful to call a person with a disability "handicapped". The more appropriate and respectful term is "person with a disability". Explain to students that a disability describes a person's mental or physical impairment, whereas a handicap describes a barrier in the environment that limits that person's opportunity to enjoy in everyday activities, such as not having ramps or elevators in a school for a student who uses a wheelchair. )*
  - What is the difference between blindness, and having a visual disability?  
*(Explain to students that blindness is a form of visual disability. Some people may have a slight visual disability, and need to wear glasses, whereas other people may be blind and are not assisted by glasses. Visual disability can range in terms of levels of visual impairment.)*
  - What do you think was Helen Keller's message in her quote?
  - What are some attitudes of “seeing people” towards people who are blind or who have a visual disability?
  - How do these assumptions or beliefs affect the way “seeing people” behave towards people with visual disability?
  - How might people with a visual disability go about doing things differently from people who can see?

## **Part II (35 minutes)**

1. In their groups, ask students to list all the things they do in a day (going to school, using a computer, going to the library, playing an instrument, going to the movies, watching TV, etc).
2. Once each group has completed its list, ask students to go through the list and imagine how a person with a visual disability might go about doing those things differently. Have groups conduct research to find out the answers to their questions about the daily experiences of people who are visually disabled by

- going to the [Lighthouse for the Blind](#) and [National Foundation of the Blind: Questions From Kids About Blindness](#) websites. Teachers may also print out the pages from these websites, and have students work in groups to check their responses against the information provided by both organizations.
3. Reconvene students to share their ideas and research with the class, and to clarify answers. Chart responses of students, and add the following, if not mentioned by students:
    - People who are visually impaired or blind can travel unassisted, and some may use canes or guide dogs to do so. They plan their routes using certain landmarks to guide them, or by using trained guide dogs that follow their directions and commands (like 'right', 'forward', 'left', etc).
    - People with visual impairment or blindness who use guide dogs are reliant on their guide dogs to be alert; thus a person should not pet or distract a guide dog, and should always walk on the side opposite the guide dog so as not to stand as an obstacle in the way of the person.
    - Depending on the different levels of visual impairment a person may experience, some people with a visual disability may read written material in large print, whereas others may use Braille to read. (If possible, present a book coded in Braille for students to feel the raised points of Braille.)
    - In any physical space, it is helpful for a person with a visual disability to have bright light, and to have doors, stairs, electrical outlets, light switches, and railings along stairwells be painted in different colors from the wall so that they can recognize them more easily.
    - Always introduce yourself first to a person with a visual disability, before asking to make physical contact, like shaking their hand or hugging them. If you are in a large group, always have others introduce themselves too.
    - Some people who have a visual disability rely on their arms for balance; therefore, it is best to offer your arm or elbow for support if the person requests to be guided.
    - If you serve food to a person who is blind, describe to the person where everything is placed on the plate so that they know what they are consuming, and can avoid certain foods they may be allergic to.

### **Part III (35 minutes)**

1. Explain to students that they are going to work in their groups to discover how much they know about Helen Keller. Distribute copies of the handout, [True/False Questions about the Life of Helen Keller](#), to each student and ask students to work together in their groups to complete the handout.

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Helen Keller was born in Alabama in 1880, and died in Connecticut in 1968. **T F**
2. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf. **T F**
3. Helen Keller was a famous poet. **T F**
4. Helen Keller was not a well-behaved girl. She had many tantrums, and broke a lot of dishes and lamps in her house when she was little. **T F**
5. Helen Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan, was also visually disabled. She lost most of her sight by the time she was five years old. **T F**
6. Helen Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan, first taught Helen how to communicate by spelling out words in the palms of her hands. **T F**
7. Helen Keller never went to college. **T F**
8. Helen Keller was an activist, and wrote several essays and books about the life of poor people in the United States who were visually disabled or blind. **T F**
9. In Helen Keller's time, women were campaigning for the right to vote. Helen Keller could not march with other women for the right to vote. **T F**
10. Helen Keller traveled the world to Japan, Australia, South America, Europe and Africa . **T F**

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Helen Keller was born in Alabama in 1880, and died in Connecticut in 1968.  
**TRUE.**
2. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf.  
**FALSE.** Helen Keller was born a healthy child. When she was nearly two years old, she contracted a serious illness that left her blind and deaf. Her illness was never officially diagnosed by doctors at the time.
3. Helen Keller was a famous poet.  
**TRUE.** Helen Keller also wrote many essays and several books, two of which were autobiographies.
4. Helen Keller was not a well-behaved girl. She had many tantrums, and broke a lot of dishes and lamps in her house.  
**TRUE.** Helen Keller was very unruly until Anne Sullivan became her teacher at the age of 7. Anne Sullivan would punish her for her tantrums by ignoring her and not speaking to her for a while. Eventually, Helen stopped misbehaving.
5. Helen Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan, was also visually disabled. She lost most of her sight by the time she was five years old.  
**TRUE.** Anne Sullivan lost the majority of her eyesight by the age of five, but she was able to correct some of her impairment with two surgeries later in life. She remained slightly visually impaired for the rest of her life.
6. Helen Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan, first taught Helen how to communicate by spelling out words in the palms of her hands.  
**TRUE.** However, when Helen learned how to read and write Braille, she mostly preferred to communicate sounding out or writing down her thoughts.
7. Helen Keller never went to college.  
**FALSE.** Helen Keller was the first person who was deaf and blind to enroll in college. She graduated from Harvard University, Radcliffe College in 1904.
8. Helen Keller was an activist, and wrote several essays and books about the life of poor people in the United States who were visually disabled or blind.  
**TRUE.** Helen Keller discovered after conducting a research study that most of the cases of blindness or visually disability in the early 1900's were of poor people who were injured in industrial accidents, or could not afford medical care to treat their disease that caused their disability. Helen Keller became an advocate for working class and poor people to receive proper medical care to avoid needless cases of visual disability whenever possible.
9. In Helen Keller's time, women were campaigning for the right to vote. Helen Keller could not march with other women for the right to vote.  
**FALSE.** Helen Keller was an activist for women's rights, and marched at the head of many women's suffrage parades.
10. Helen Keller traveled the world to Japan, Australia, South America, Europe and Africa.  
**TRUE.** Helen and her friend Polly Thomson traveled all over the world raising money for the American Foundation for the Blind.

Sources:

- *Loewen, James W., [Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong](#), The New Press, New York, New York, 1995.*
- *Royal National Institute of the Blind:*  
[http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public\\_keller.hcsp](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp)

2. Once each group has completed the quiz, review answers and share details about Helen Keller's life included in the [Answer Key: True/False Questions about the Life of Helen Keller](#).
3. Ask students some or all of the following discussion questions:
  - Were you surprised at some of the things that Helen Keller accomplished as a person who was deaf and blind?
  - What types of assumptions do you think people who are not disabled made about her being disabled?
  - How do you think she may have felt about the assumptions that people made about her?
  - How do you think people like Helen Keller challenged some of those assumptions?
  - Do you think these types of assumptions or attitudes about people with disabilities still exist today?
  - How can people change some of their attitudes or assumptions about people with disabilities?

#### ***Extension Activities Related to Visual Disabilities***

- a. *Organize a class project for students to assess their school's accessibility to people with visual disabilities and/or other forms of disability. Select questions from the [Assessing Your School Environment for Access to People with Disabilities \(Student Version\)](#) resource sheet, and have students work together in research teams to investigate the accessibility of their school (as necessary, adapt statements to make developmentally appropriate).*

## **Assessing Your School Environment for Access to People with Disabilities**

- Is the international symbol of access (an outline of a person in a wheelchair) displayed in the entrance way of the school?
- Are forms of public transportation that reach the school accessible to people with disabilities?
- Are parking spaces available close to and level with the entrance to the school building, and clearly marked with the international symbol of access?
- At entrances with stairways, are ramps available?
- Do the doors of the entrance way provide a clear opening of no less than 32 inches, and can they be easily opened?
- Is there a working elevator in the building? If not, are there enough classrooms on the first floor for all students who use a wheelchair? Or do stairways have mechanical risers wherever possible or necessary? Are there enough classes scheduled in these accessible classrooms for all students who use a wheelchair?
- Do all stairways have handrails?
- Do floors have a nonslip surface?
- Are the building hallways wide and flat enough to accommodate a person who uses a wheelchair or by other persons with different kinds of physical impairment?
- Are safety alarms, telephones and room controls (lighting, heat, air conditioning, windows, window shades) within reach for a person with a disability?
- Is there an emergency exit plan that assumes the needs of people with disabilities?
- Are warning signals clear to people with disabilities? Can they be heard and seen by people with disabilities?
- Are there water fountains and phones at a height that can be reached by a person in a wheelchair?
- Are there Braille signs in elevators, on restroom doors, public phones, etc.?
- Are common areas (libraries, cafeteria, auditorium, and other common spaces) accessible to people who use wheelchairs?
- Are there restroom stalls that permit a full 36" rotation of a wheelchair? Are there grab rails surrounding the restroom seat? Are sink, soap, and paper towel holders at a height accessible to a person in a wheelchair?

- Are there tables in common areas (computer labs, libraries, snackbars) and in classrooms high enough so that students who use wheelchairs can fit under them?
- Is classroom furniture moved so that aisles can be wide enough for students who are blind/visually impaired or who use wheelchairs or crutches?
- Are students with disabilities given equal opportunity to learn in public schools in your community?
- Are students with disabilities given multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement throughout the curriculum and within the classroom?
- Are inclusion methods employed to include students with physical, mental, developmental, and/or learning disabilities in all aspects of classroom activity?
- Are support services, special educational services and paraprofessionals provided to students with disabilities as needed?
- Are extracurricular and athletic program provided for students with disabilities?
- Are books in Braille provided to students?
- Are forms of assistive technology available to students with disabilities?
- Are audio and visual devices equipped with captions?
- Are big books or large type books provided for students who are visually impaired?
- Are specially equipped computers available to students who have difficulty printing on paper?
- Is there computer software that “reads” the print on screen to students?
- Are there classes provided in sign language for students who are hard of hearing or deaf?
- Are there athletic programs for students with disabilities, or athletic programs taught by a staff person with a disability?

Sources:

Adele Schwartz, Ed.D., Marymount Manhattan College, “Educational Inclusion Course Materials”, 1999

Miller, Nancy B. & Sammons, Catherine C., Everybody’s Different: Understanding and Changing Our Reactions to Disabilities, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1999.

b. *As an individual reading assignment, have students read the book [Sees Behind Trees](#) by Michael Dorris. Ask students to write a two-page essay in response to some or all of the questions below :*

*-What are some of the most important lessons that Sees Behind Trees learns from his journey to adulthood?*

*-How do his feelings about being visually disabled change from the beginning to the end of the story?*

*-How does Sees Behind Trees challenge negative assumptions or beliefs about people living with a disability?*

c. *Have students research and learn about the life story of Louis Braille, and his invention of Braille. Have students visit a local Braille bookstore or publisher to learn about the process of transcribing books into Braille.*