

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

**Our Alphabet Book:**  
**Promoting Personal Relationships**  
**Between Children with Disabilities**  
**and their Nondisabled Peers**

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For my sister Gail,  
because the word disabled  
is not in her vocabulary

*Our Alphabet Book* was created because negative attitudes do not allow interaction between children with disabilities and their peers to occur naturally, and so it must be planned. This book provides one opportunity for natural interaction between students to occur in the classroom.

The following text outlines the reasons for the creation of *Our Alphabet Book*. A summary of classroom observations is included to provide a sense of what the education of children with visual disabilities involves. Notes on how to use this book and a sample lesson are provided to guide teachers in their work with *Our Alphabet Book*. Goals for future books are presented in a proposal for further research.

## Why this Book was Created

In 1975 Public Law 94-142 was passed. PL 94-142, The Federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was to include students with disabilities in the mainstream of society so that they could receive an "equal" education. Brown vs Board of Education's 1954 decision, which ruled that separate schooling for black children did not provide an equal education, was now extended to include all children. But, PL 94-142 carried with it two ambiguous phrases: "least restrictive environment" and "to the greatest extent possible".

What the law states is that all children with disabilities have the right to be educated in the "least restrictive environment." Unfortunately, there is no consensus among school districts or courts as to what "least restrictive" means. Ideally, the child with a disability should be educated in the same classroom with his/her nondisabled peers.

In spite of the law we still have back wards, "special" schools and separate "handicapped" wings in our public schools. Because the law states that schools must provide a least restrictive environment to the "greatest extent possible", this phrasing allows school districts to segregate disabled students because they are considered "too" disabled to be educated in their home schools. A person with a disability is not handicapped until we, as a society, set up barriers that keep him or her out of our communities, away from our children, and out of "our" schools and classrooms.

One step toward changing these negative attitudes toward people with disabilities is to teach children that their peers who have disabilities are more like them than they are different from them. By teaching children in an integrated classroom, one with students who have disabilities and those who do not, the children will come to know how much they can learn from each other. They will not learn to say "Greg is the nice guy in the wheelchair"; they will just say "He's my friend".

The primary purpose of *Our Alphabet Book* is to promote positive, natural relationships between children with visual impairments and their sighted peers in a classroom environment. Therefore, the purpose of the book is not so much to teach the English letter *E* or the concept of "eggness", but to act as a common experience that two or more children can share. The objects and shapes that can be felt are used as a common language that activates each child's individual memory of experiences. From this common basis the students can then share their separate written languages of Braille and English text. This first sharing will lead to the development of personal relationships which leave ambiguous or negative attitudes about disabilities behind.

All lessons using *Our Alphabet Book* should be geared toward the goal of achieving a positive dialogue between students. A sample lesson and notes on the use of this book have been included to help promote its goal. Currently, a majority of students with visual impairments are not educated with their nondisabled peers but in separate "handicapped" classes. *Our Alphabet Book* is to be used as a tool to integrate students with disabilities into regular classrooms.

Removable letters, movable objects and open shapes that students can feel and manipulate have been included to stimulate investigation and in turn discovery of experiences that the students share. The color correlation between the Braille and English is to show the sighted child how Braille's six-dot system is equivalent to his/her written language.

## Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were made to see how children with visual impairments are taught. All of my observations reinforced my belief that children with disabilities are more like their peers than they are different from them. Segregated school settings were not observed because most students educated in facilities of that type are children with multiple disabilities, one of which is blindness, and they are often not Braille readers. Classroom observation was done at the Smith School in Painted Post, New York, and the VE Whiteman School, Haverling Central, and the Dana Lian School in the Bath, New York school system.

### *Painted Post, New York*

At the Smith School I observed Itinerant teacher Elaine Mazler. The student I observed was Nicole. Nicole is a student who has recently gone from being a large print reader to a reader of Braille, and is in a special education class that contains only children with disabilities. Nicole's desk is against the blackboard at the front of the room and is piled high with learning aids like a Brailier, a braille phonics kit, and a braille calculator. While Nicole is in a public school she is still segregated. Even in her room she is isolated from her classmates because she faces the board and not the other students.

Elaine worked with Nicole on a reading lesson that took place like any other lesson taught from a basal reader series except Nicole was reading Braille, and she was the only student in the group. Another child could have been involved in the lesson by reading from Elaine's English translation, providing some interaction with the class. When I asked the school librarian what materials she had for Nicole in the form of books she replied that she had *none*. Nicole uses books on tape that the librarian had on hand but, in the last few years Nicole has gone through almost the entire supply of tapes.

Nicole's experiences with *Our Alphabet Book* were crucial to its completion. Observing her in a classroom situation gave me insight into the environment a child with visual impairments faces everyday. In an attempt to find a system of simulated braille that could be comprehended by a reader of braille I asked Nicole to test several materials (beads, raised plastic, knots, etc.) by trying to "read" them. By working with Nicole I found that variations in the size or spacing of the dots used to form the braille cell can make it difficult to comprehend; it would be equivalent to trying to decipher poor or blurry type. Therefore, objects like the beads were visually attractive and a pleasant touch sensation for Nicole but illegible to the braille reader.

I feel that because Nicole is segregated from the main student body both she and the other children suffer. Nicole misses out on being involved with her peers in group activities, thereby limiting her social growth. The other children miss out on interacting with Nicole as a person who has individual likes and dislikes and enjoys conversation. This separation only acts to perpetuate the myth that Nicole is very different from her peers.

### *Bath, New York*

Observation of Polly Wilson's Adaptive Physical Education Classes (PE for children with disabilities) in the Bath School District reinforced my belief that few differences really exist between children with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. With the exception of one class of "regular" children, all of Polly's classes contain only students who have been labeled handicapped by their school district. Without being told, an

observer would not have been able to see any difference in many of the children. They were all excited to run, compete, and cheer each other on. It was also interesting to note that the majority of the discipline problems observed existed in the "regular" class.

The students with visual impairments who work with Polly were in a class of only four students. Classes of this size limit the group interaction that is possible in a regular classroom and tend to stigmatize the children involved in them as "different". An open dialogue can not exist between students with disabilities and their peers if we keep them in separate classrooms. Students with disabilities may require special educational aids to facilitate learning but, learning can take place in a regular classroom with the aid and positive interaction of peers.

## **Educational Aids**

Like Nicole, 20% of the population of students with visual impairments in the United States are Braille readers(Heward,1988). Braille is a system of reading and writing invented by Louis Brialle in 1830. It consists of arrangements of a six dot cell (:::) that stand for letters in the English Alphabet. To permit faster reading the Braille system contains abbreviations of words called *contractions*. The same 26 combinations of the cell are used to represent upper and lowercase letters and numbers. For example, ' stands for a lowercase a and the addition of dot six before it . ' makes it a capital A. Because visual impairments are a low incidence disability, Braille is usually taught by a part-time itinerant teacher, a specialized teacher who aids the classroom teacher. Organizations like National Braille Press Inc. are also involved in assisting sighted parents in teaching Braille to their child by offering Primers that teach the parents just enough to begin teaching their child to read.

All the words in *Our Alphabet Book* have been spelled out letter by letter to promote letter identification in both the student with visual impairments and the sighted child. When a student begins to learn Braille he/she will learn contractions first in much the same way as a sighted child is taught function words (is, the), to aid comprehension and reading speed. The decision to spell out each word in this book was based on an attempt to reinforce for the students the one-to-one correlation that exists between Braille and English text.

In addition to Braille, synthetic speech technology plays a key role in the education of people with visual impairments. Talking calculators and clocks help students toward independent classroom activity and beeping canes help guide them in mobility within their environment. Books on Tape are used by 23% of the students who have visual impairments(Heward,1988). Embossed maps and three-dimensional models can help students to understand concepts usually learned through vision. Supply catalogs used by itinerant teachers and parents focus primarily on large-print and audio equipment (balls that beep in the air, talking watches, and computers with simulated voices).

## **Notes on the Use of *Our Alphabet Book***

The primary concern of any lesson using this book should be to promote positive dialogue and interactions between the child with visual impairments and his/her sighted peers. Pairs of students should work independently on learning the Braille and English text on each page.

To promote the learning of concepts introduced on each page, *Our Alphabet Book* should be used as a nucleus around which a learning center can be created. A cabinet with drawers or a shelf unit with bins can be used to hold materials necessary for reinforcing letters and concepts. Each drawer or bin should be labeled with a Braille and English letter so that either child in the pair can find it efficiently. Materials to be stored in each bin should include real objects that reinforce the concept listed on the page correlating to that letter. For example, the *L* bin should include a supply of sugarfree lollipops, and if deemed appropriate, other objects beginning with *L* like laces, locks, and latches.

To promote understanding of *L*, students may be asked to write original stories using as many *L* words as possible. Story writing can be encouraged even in preschool and kindergarten students. Many teachers advocate use of "invented spelling", where the children write down a few symbols or letters that represent a word for them. The students must then transcribe the work on a typewriter, or in this case a Braille. The students should then be given time to share their stories with their partner and the class. Collections of stories could be bound and added to the learning center as a resource for future students using *Our Alphabet Book*.

When using *Our Alphabet Book* teachers should concern themselves with promoting independent learning on the part of the pupil pairs and reinforce positive and honest attitudes concerning visual impairments.

## Sample Lesson for *E* / Page of *Our Alphabet Book*

**Behavioral Objective** Given the *E* / page from *Our Alphabet Book* the pair of students will investigate the letter and its shape. They will also be asked to relate personal experiences and investigate both Braille and English text.

**Affective Objective** The students will engage in a sharing experience that will stimulate a growing personal relationship.

**Sponge** Removable *E* , and the forms of *egg* kept in the learning center.

**Standards** The two children will meet in a quiet part of the room and share in an investigation of the *E* page.

### Anticipatory Set

**Learning** The students will experience the visual and tactile input presented on the *E* page and discuss the letter *E* ( What it is in Braille and English, other words that begin with *E* ).

**Purpose** The *E* page will be used as a common experience that the children can use to relate past personal experiences.

**Transfer** The students will call on their common past experiences with eggs to talk about how the letter *E* begins *egg*, and what a Braille and English *E* look and feel like.

**Motivation** The children will be able to remove the *E* , hold it, trace it, and feel the simulation of an egg and real eggs.

### Materials

*E* page

2 rug squares or beanbags for kids to sit in  
braille

pencil and paper

\*hard boiled, raw, and cooked eggs (optional but highly recommended to promote the concept of the *word* *egg* standing for the real referent)

### Procedure

*E* is not likely to be the first letter covered but if it is the teacher must begin by modeling how to use a page from *Our Alphabet Book* .

Begin by letting each student handle the page. Then, model how to begin to *read* the page (*read* here refers to not only the visual process but the feeling for tactile cues).

Help each student to locate the Braille and corresponding English text. Remove the *E* and have each child hold it . Tracing the letter may also provide additional benefits for the sighted child (the tracing will help put the letter in visual memory so that it will be more easily recalled). Also remember that modeling is thinking out loud, so tell the students why the teacher takes each step he/she does in investigating the page.

Have the students recall when they have experienced eggs before( ie. Do they live on a farm? Do they like eggs for breakfast?) Ask them to contribute other words that begin with *E* . Be sure to print their words for the sighted child and also type them on the braille. This will give the teacher a chance to show how the Braille and English text on the page stand for the same word. Explain to them that they share common experiences ( any words or experiences relating to eggs that they had in common) and that they each use a different written language that means the same thing.



The teacher's open dialogue about the similarities of Braille and English text and the curiosity shown toward discovering *Our Alphabet Book* will spark their interest in looking further at other pages of the book.

**Closure** Meet with the student pair to discuss words they came up with and answer any questions. This step is especially critical when the pupil pair has been working independently; it provides the teacher with a chance to evaluate student learning and determine how effective the lesson format is.

**Reinforcement** Encourage the two children to collaborate on a story. Now that they have lists of *E* words to work from, they can be asked to write a story using as many of the words as possible. This assignment is relevant to the students because they will be writing with words they came up with from their own vocabularies. Have them create a copy that contains both Braille and English text. Then, have their book bound and put in the classroom library or on display in the school library.

## Proposal for Further Research

The original proposal for this thesis involved the creation of three books; an alphabet book, a book of concepts, and an animal book. Considering the time constraints of an academic semester my honors committee agreed that the time should be focused on the completion of *Our Alphabet Book*. In the process of researching and constructing this book I have become more committed to finding an effective means of promoting open, honest dialogue and relationships between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. The presentation of this thesis marks the end of only the first stage of my investigation of this topic. There are many more materials to test and students to meet. *Our Alphabet Book* is complete but my work is far from finished.

This book is a first step toward promoting positive relationships between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. By using this book with integrated pairs of students I hope to find the most efficient and effective means of production of this book. Ideally copies of this book would be tested in classrooms in different areas so that teacher and student feedback can be gathered from a larger pool of participants.

Materials that warrant investigation are heat-formed plastic pages, casts taken from actual objects used to illustrate the pages, printing methods that would also color the page edges, thin metal pages embossed with information, three-dimensional forms that must be opened to find the letters, and a means of creating Braille more expediently. Other casements for the book will include a set of square boxes resembling building blocks so that children can move the book by themselves. Adhesives, fabrics, and colorants of future books will be researched to find ones that are non-toxic.

At present, there are groups of volunteers around the country who transcribe books into Braille and sew tactile (primarily fabric) books for students with visual impairments. Future research will include contacting and visiting these companies in New York State. The American Printing House for the Blind will also be contacted again to learn how to go about getting a tactile book to press and into circulation.

Because the current book was handcrafted it is inefficient to mass-produce. The only way to begin breaking down barriers restricting children with disabilities is to reach as many people as possible. Future editions of *Our Alphabet Book* will be constructed to be produced in greater numbers. I believe this book is a small step in the right direction and I plan to pursue it further.

If you have any further interest in *Our Alphabet Book* or the topic pursued in my thesis please contact me at one of the following addresses.

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RD#3, Box 255  
Schenectady, NY 12306

or

53 Dorsey St.  
Saranac Lake, NY 12983

The field of special education needs people with the curiosity to ask questions and the motivation to answer them. Please be one of those people.

## **Appendix**

### *Organizations*

American Foundation for the Blind  
15 West 16th Street  
New York, NY 10011

American Printing House for the Blind, Inc.  
1839 Frankfort Ave.  
P.O. Box 6085  
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

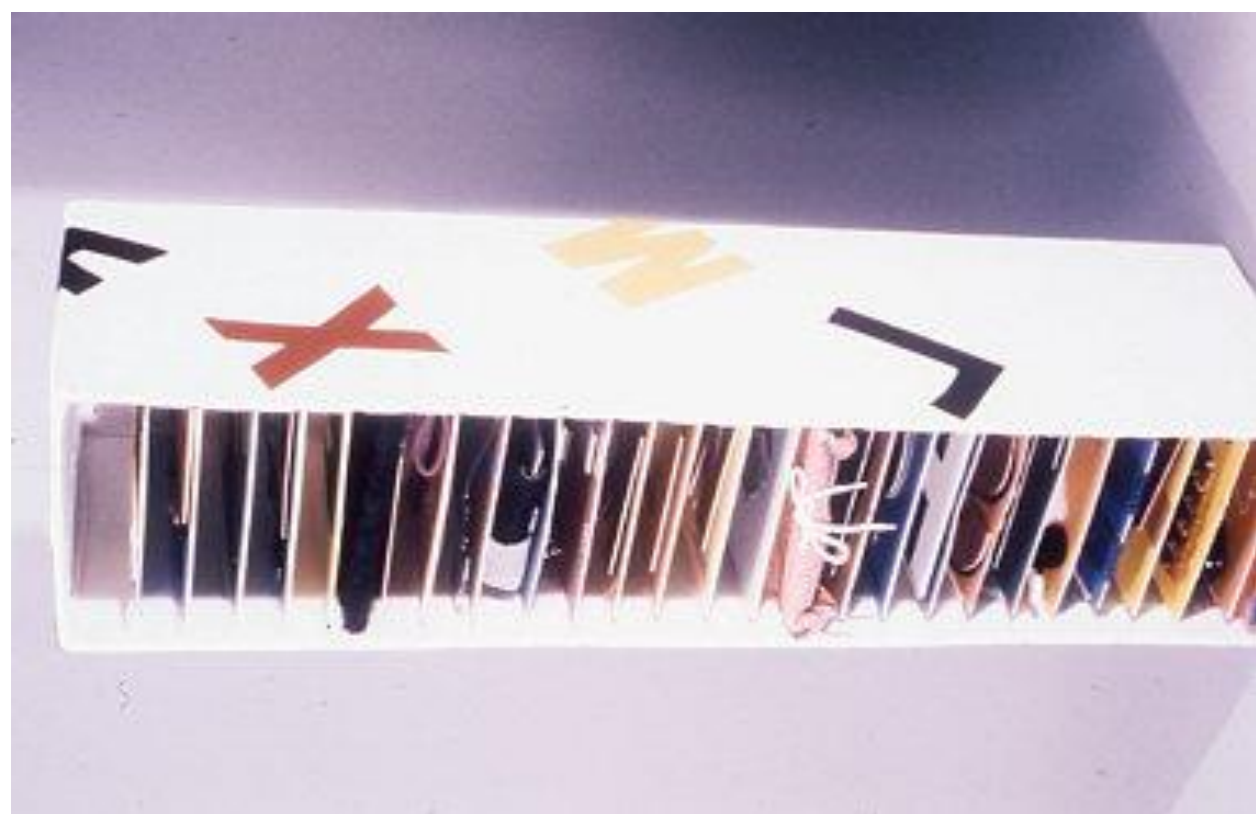
Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired  
206 North Washington Street  
Suite 320  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children  
The Council for Exceptional Children  
1920 Association Drive  
Reston, Virginia 22091

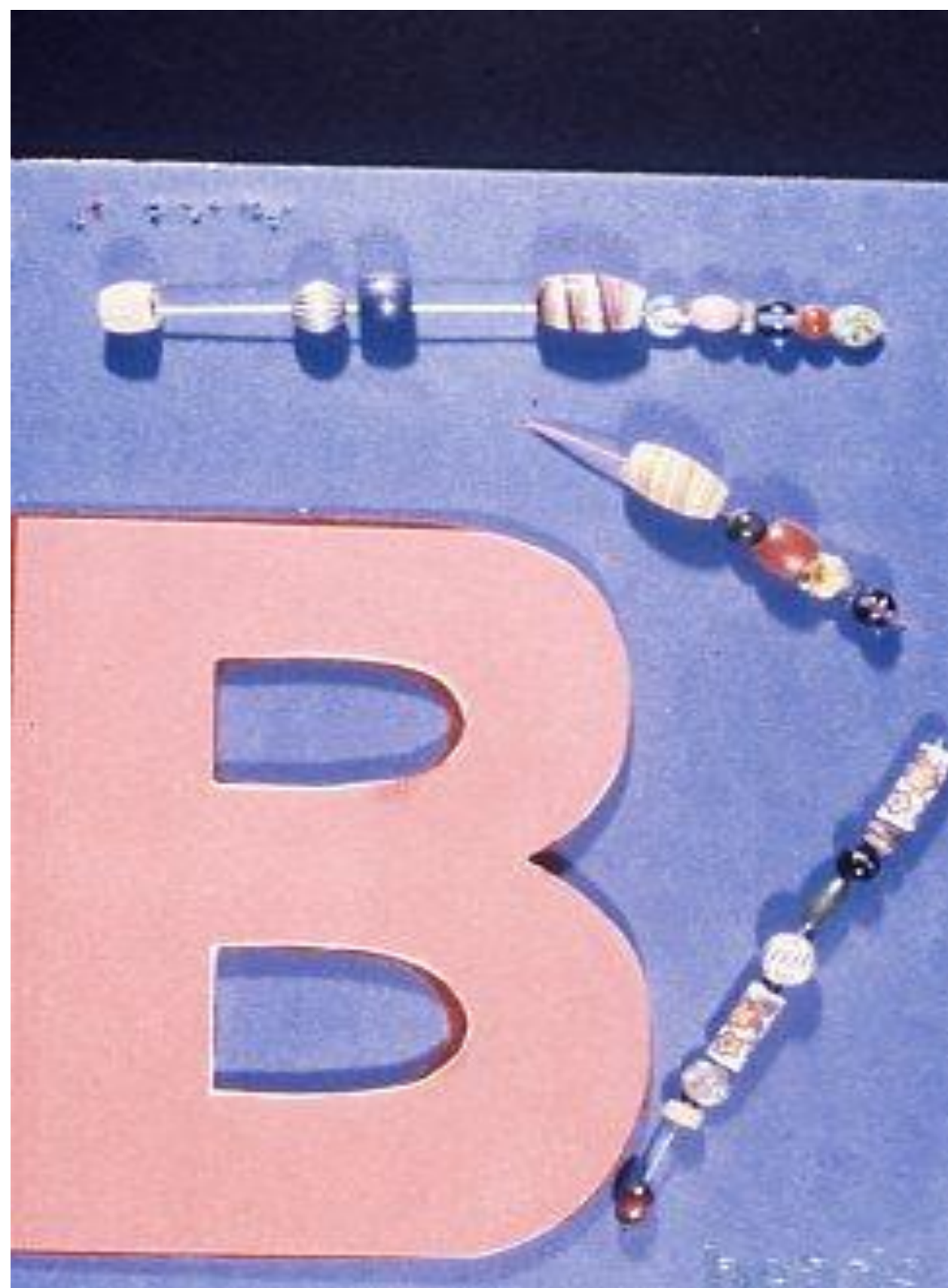
National Federation of the Blind  
1800 Johnson Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21230

### Work Cited

Heward, William L., et al., Exceptional Children. Third Edition. Columbus: Merrill, 1988.





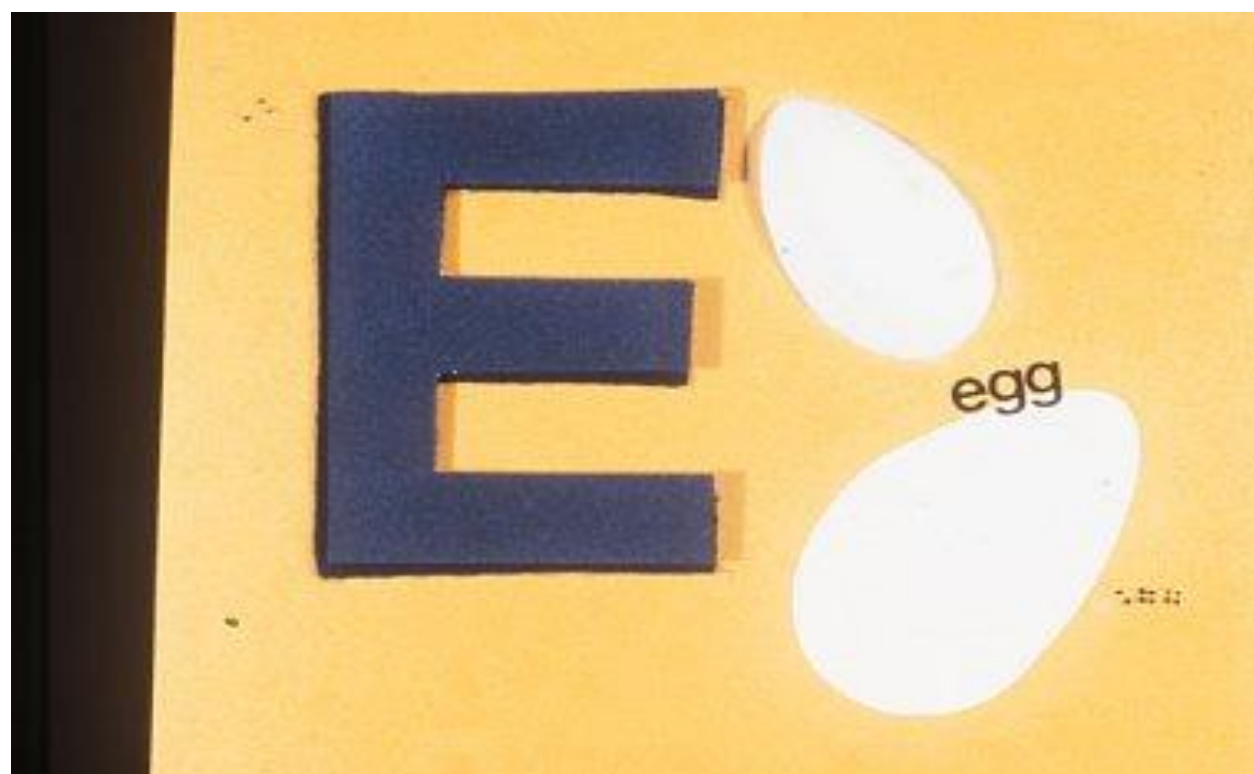


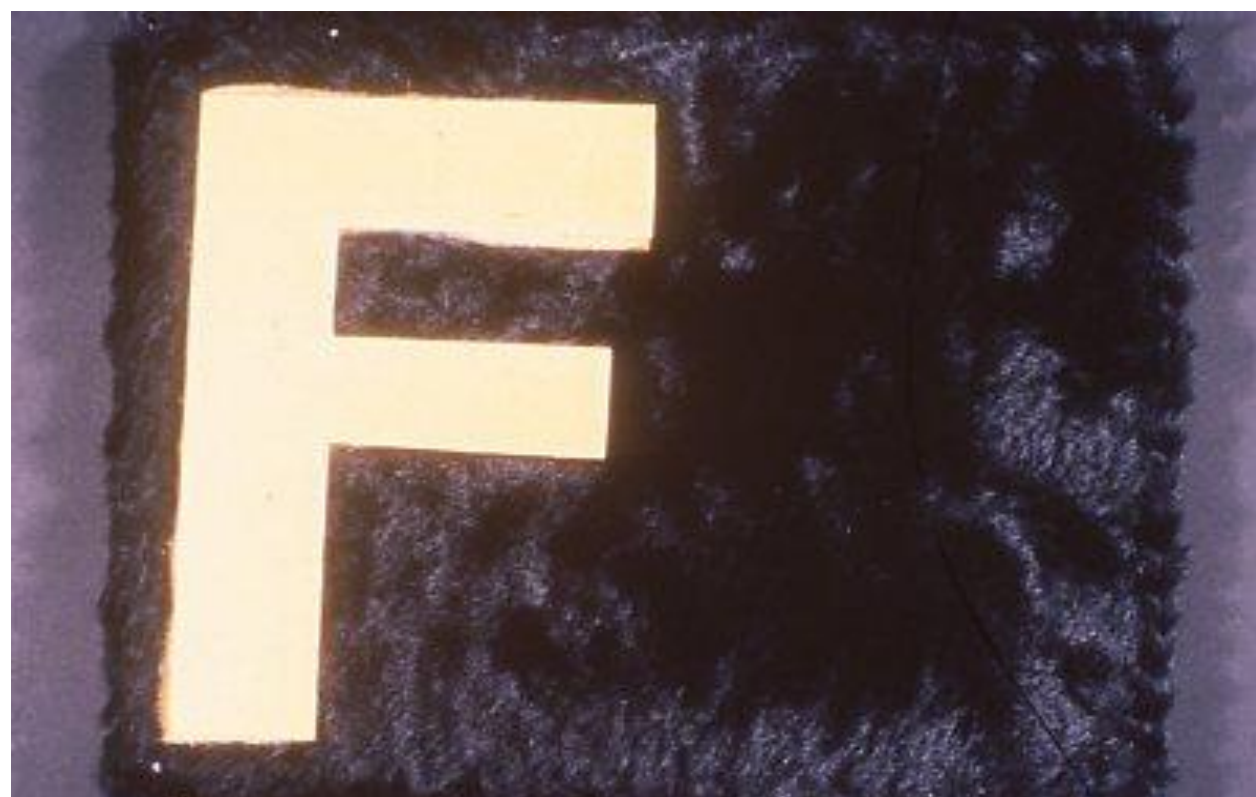




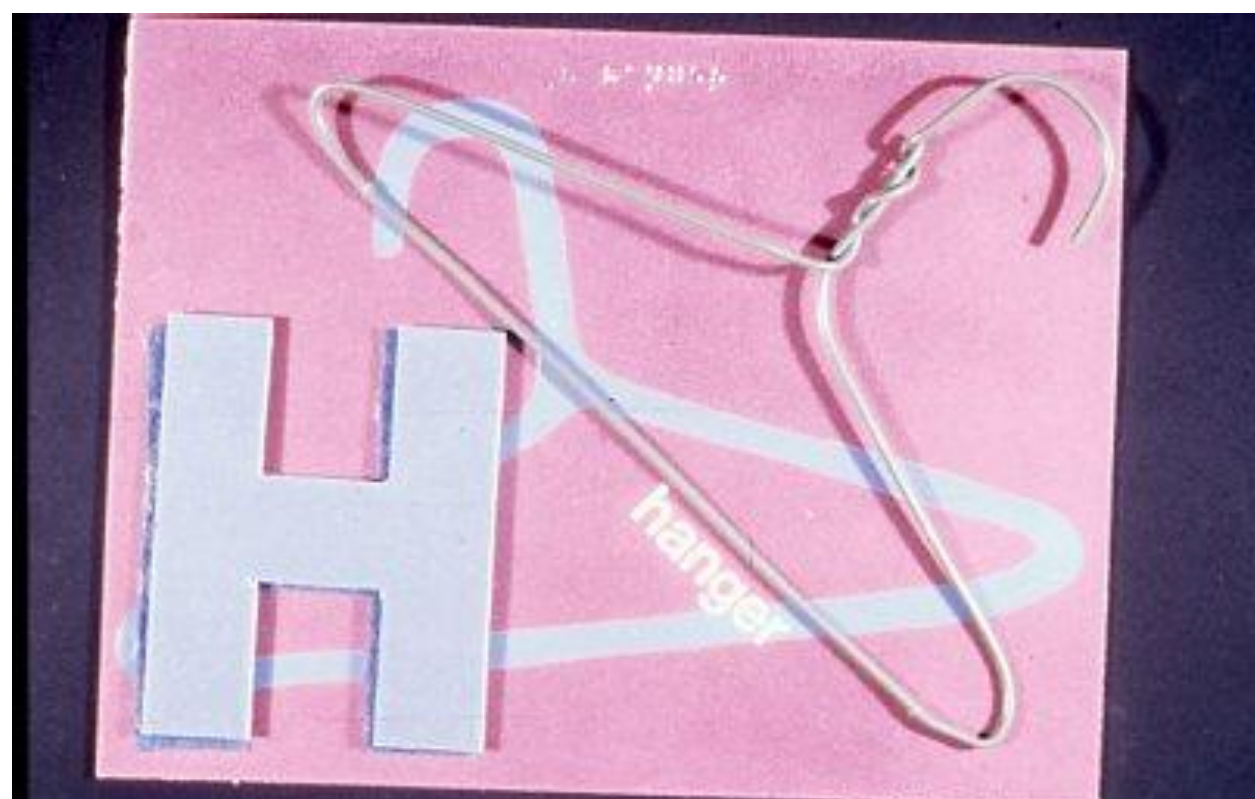




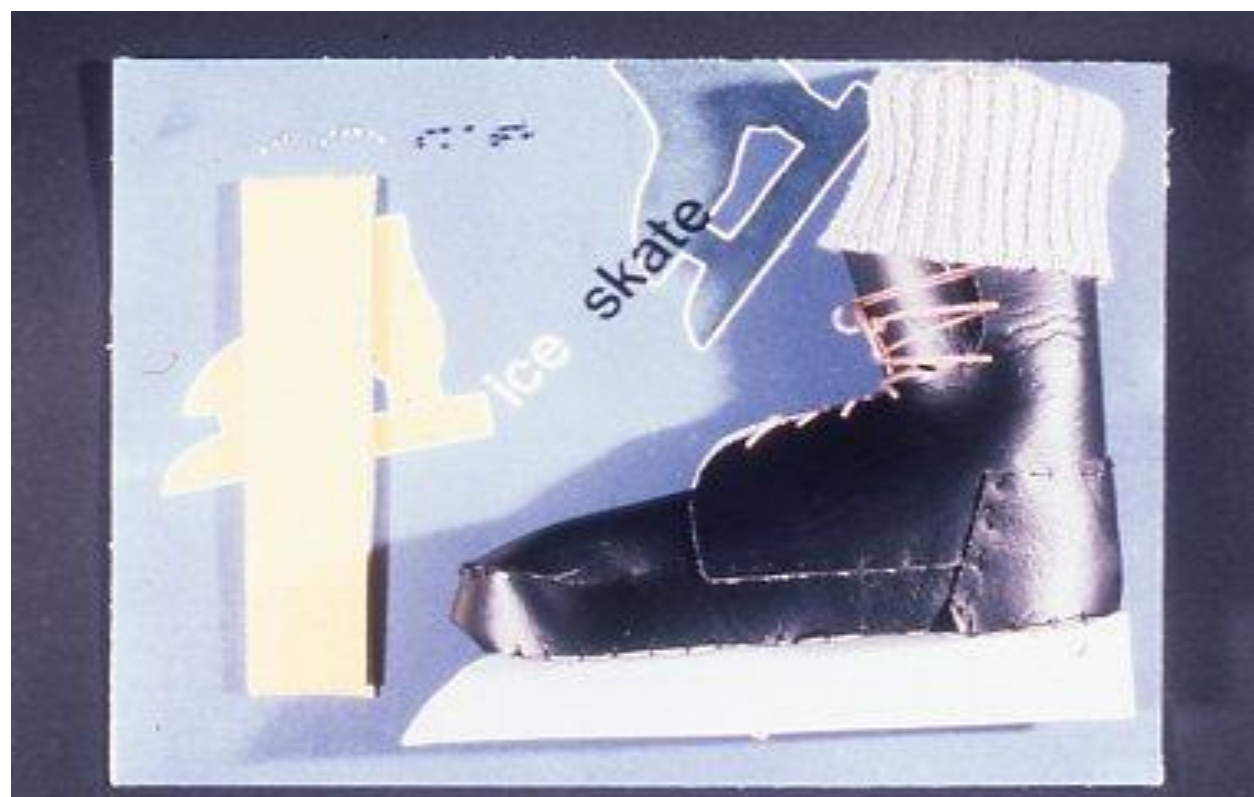


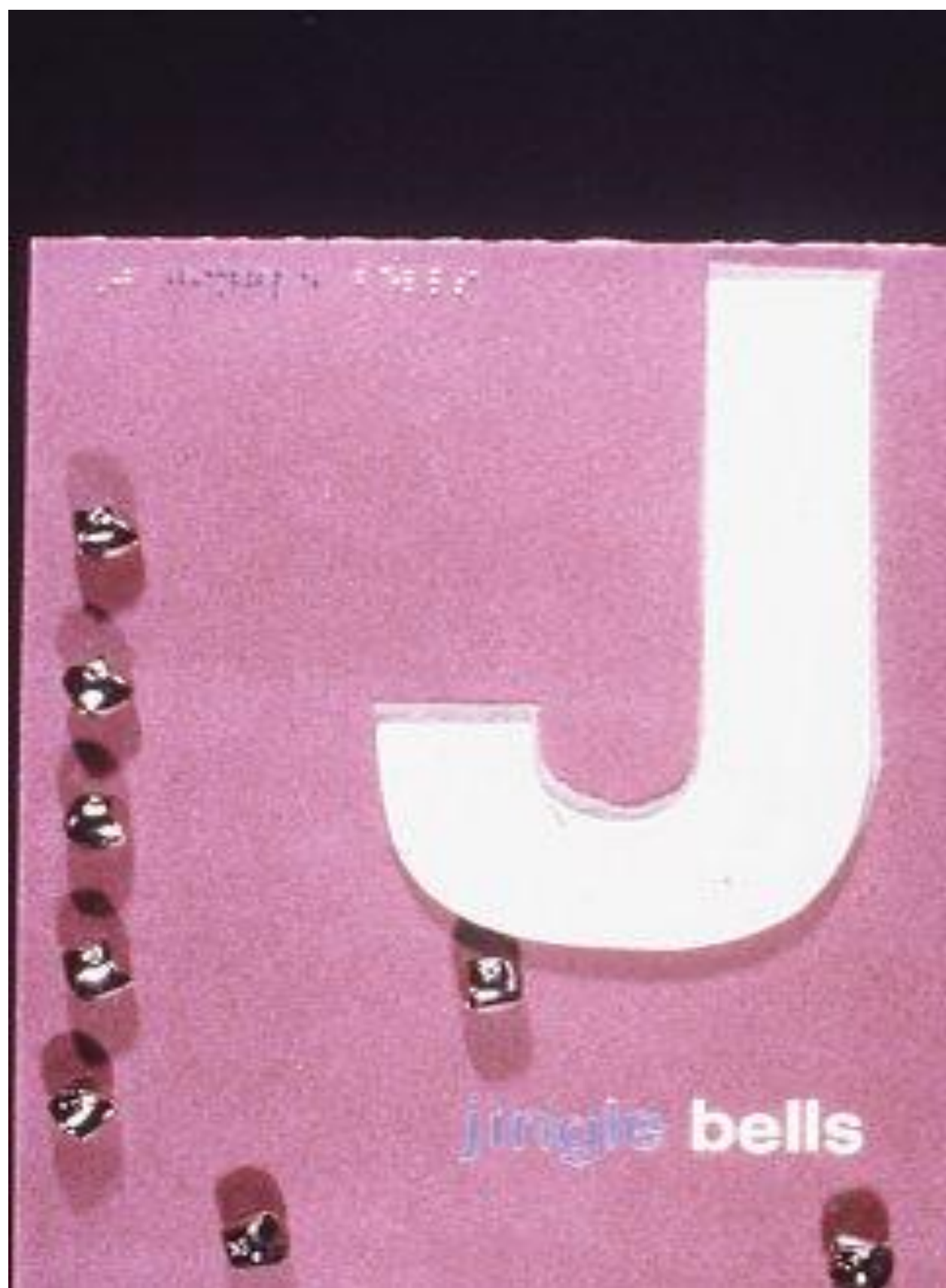






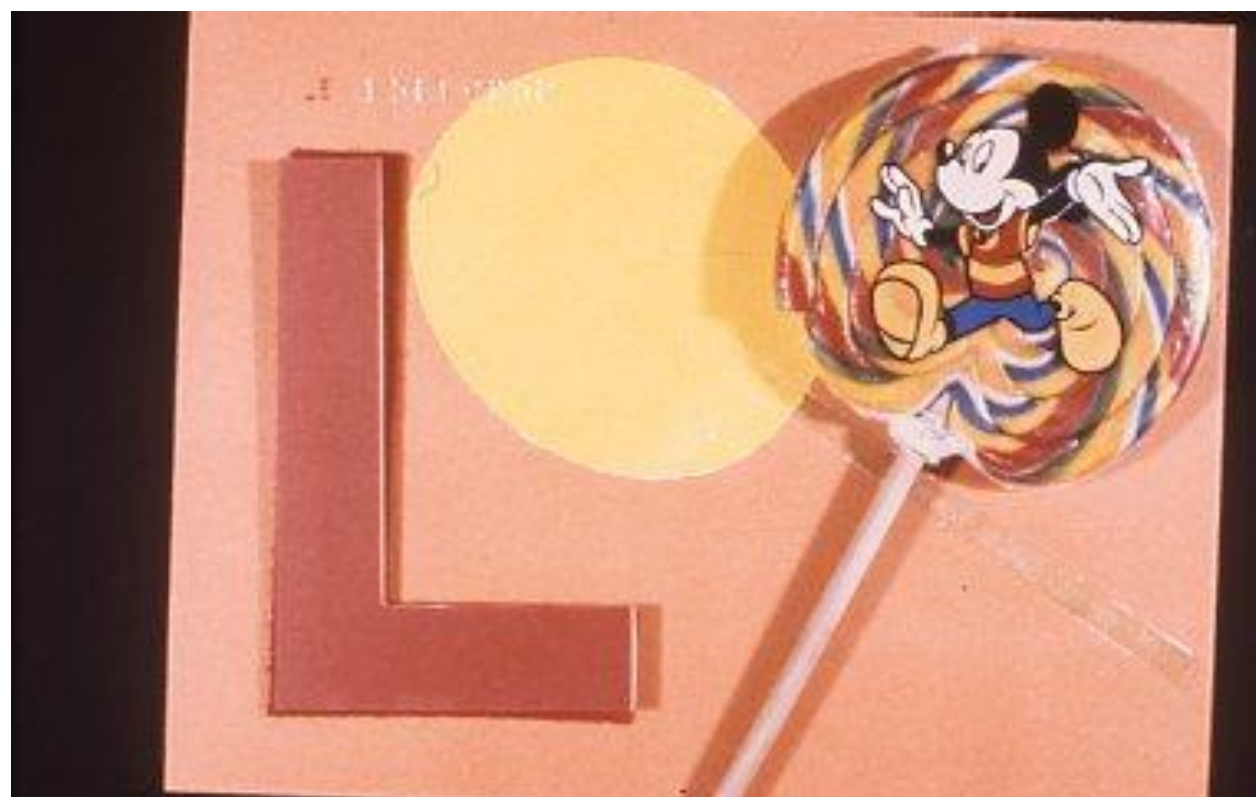










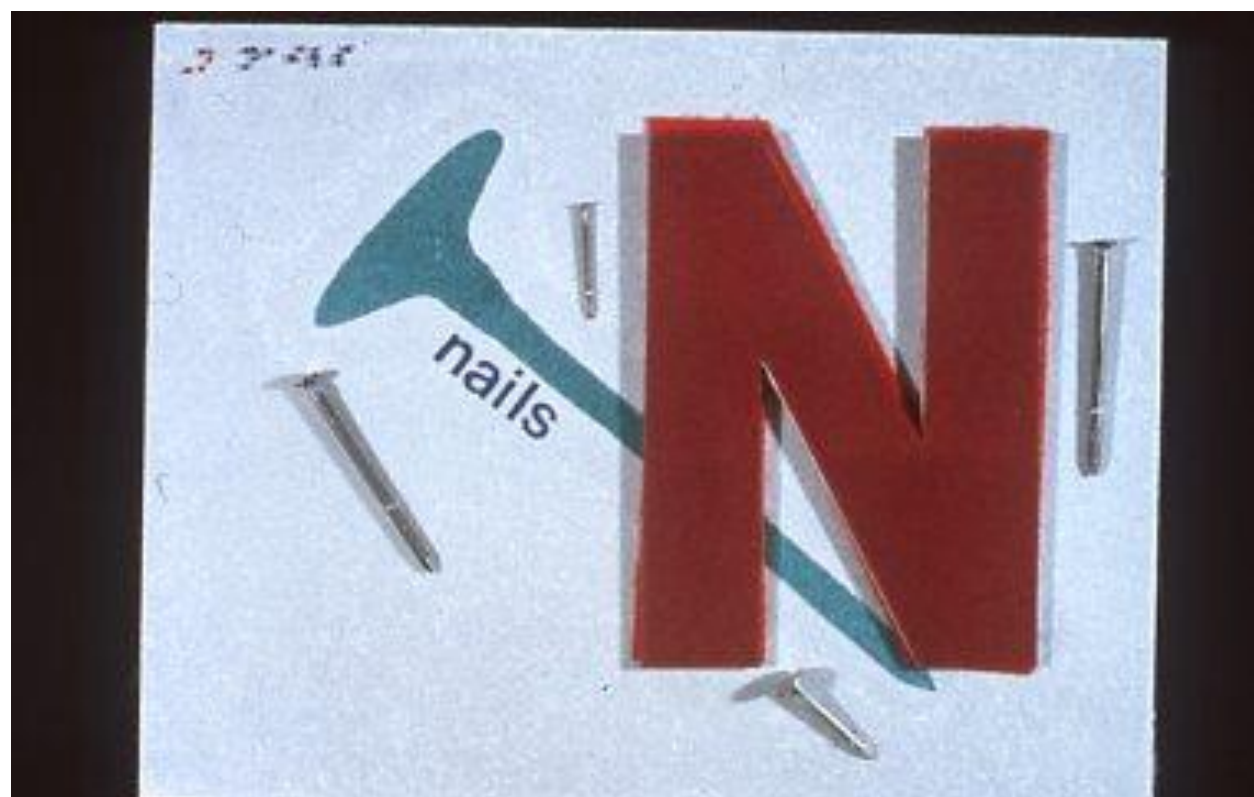


macaroni



macaroni

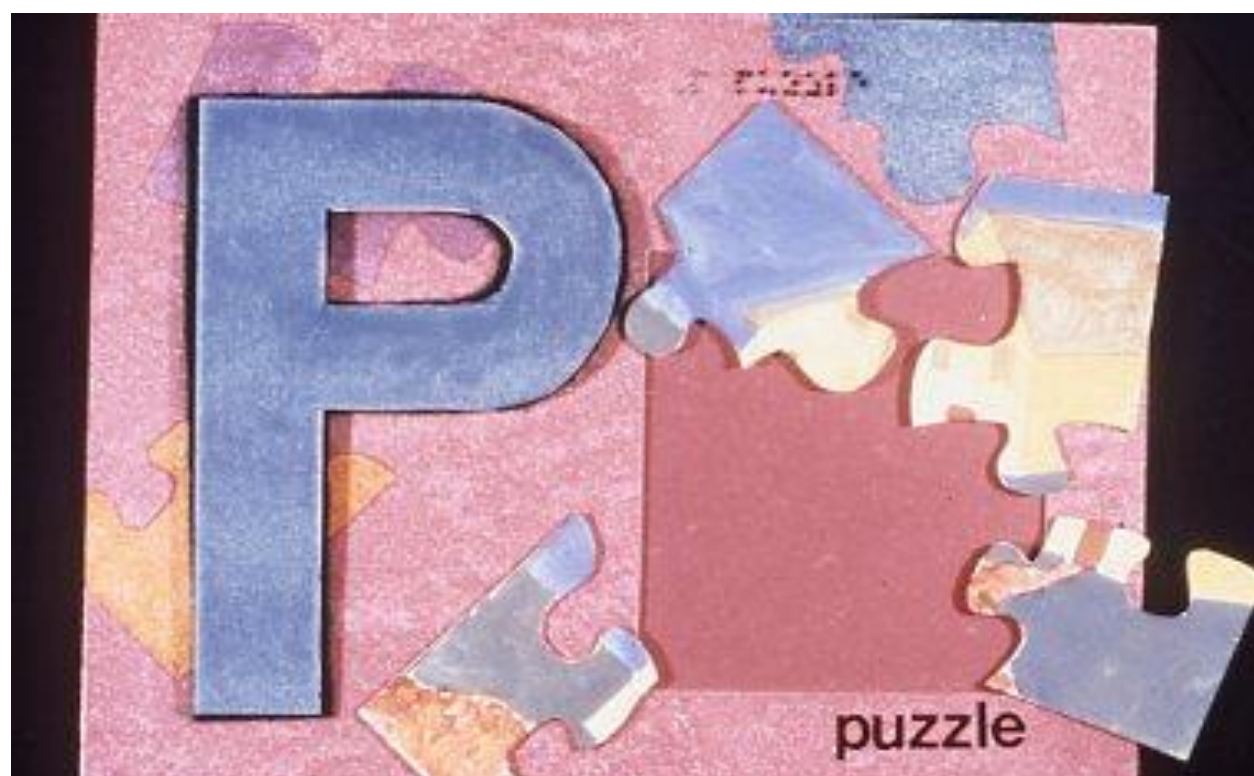
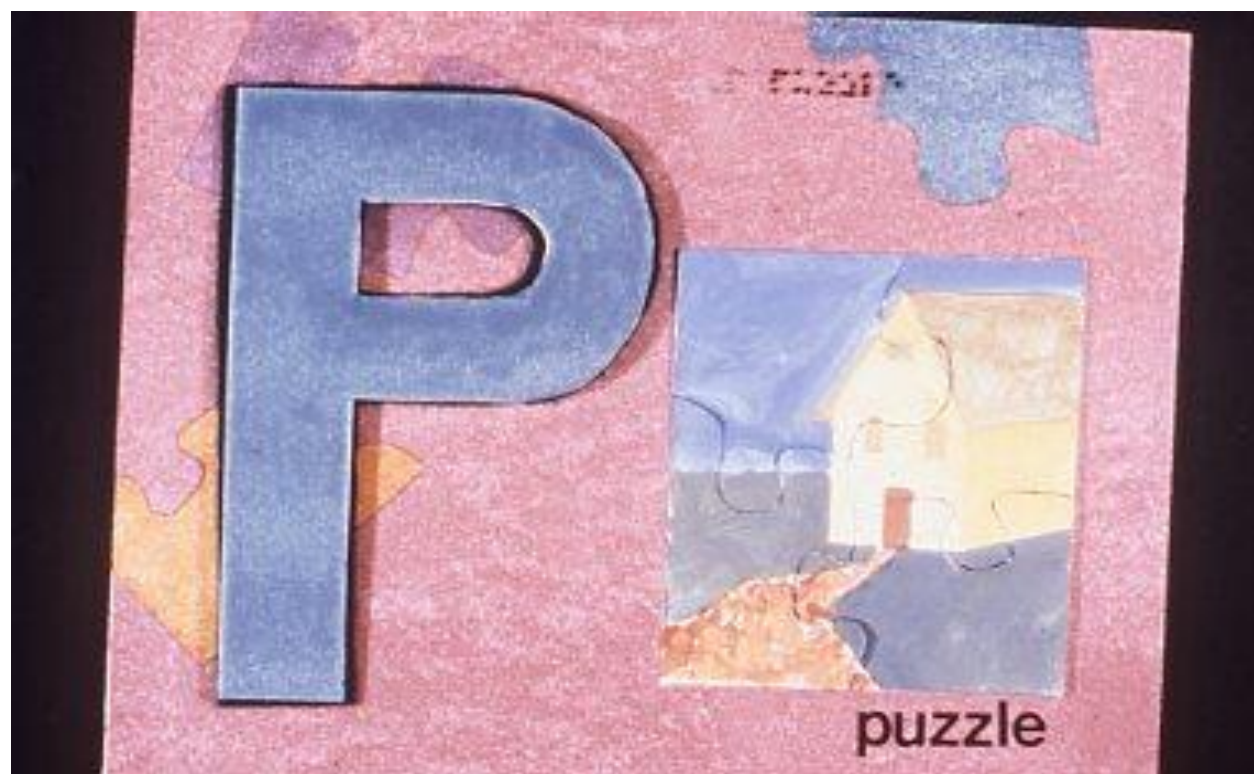






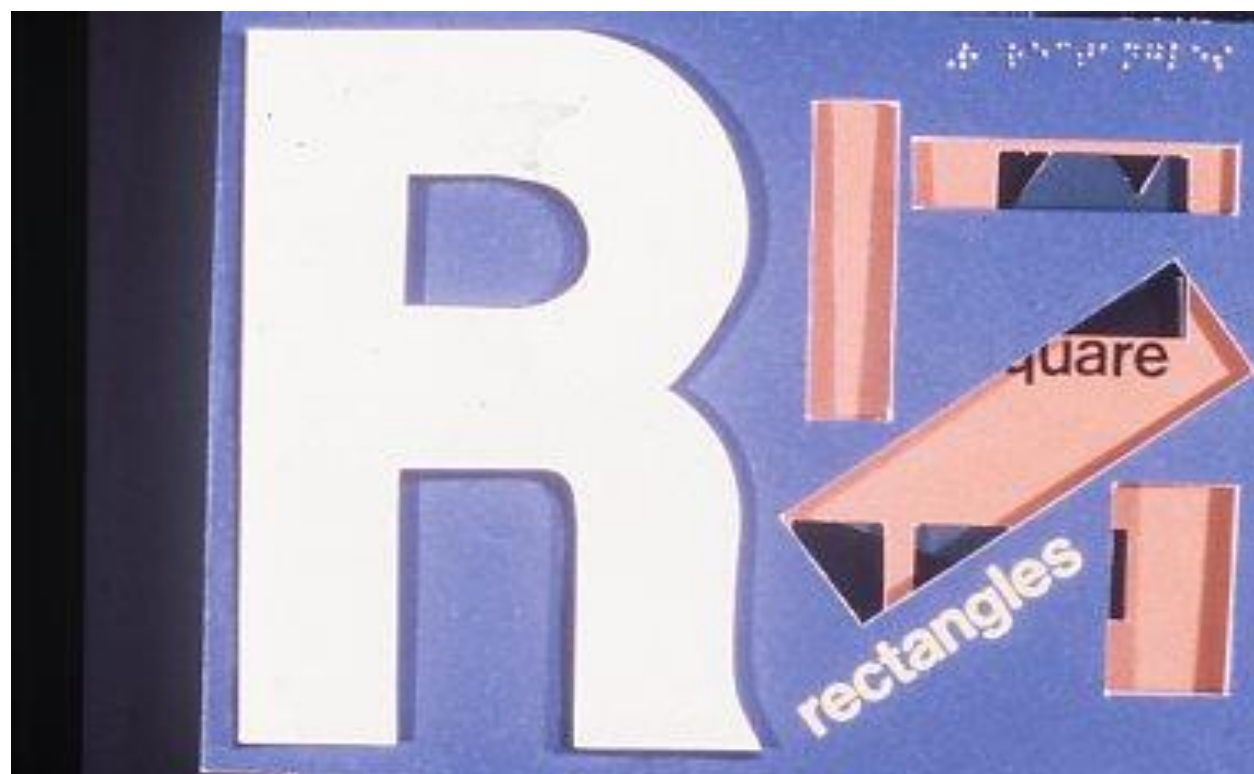




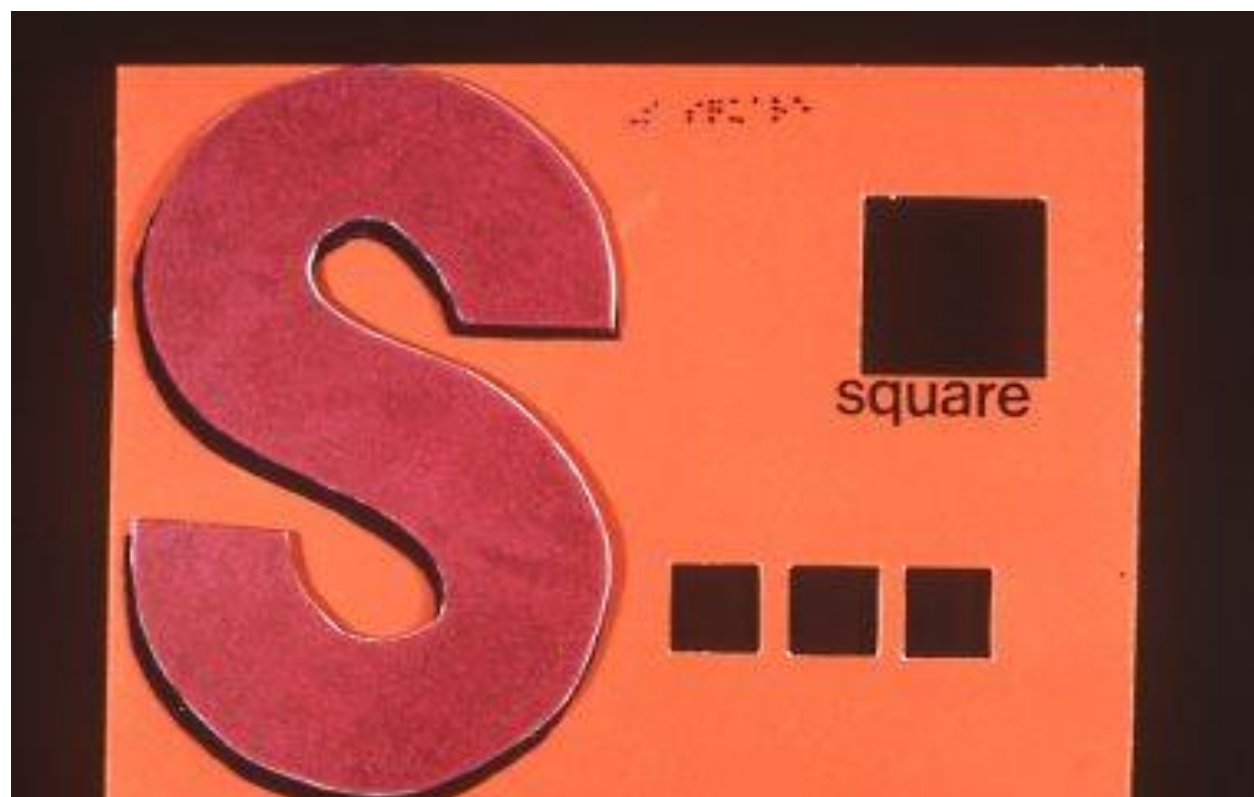




















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