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# What Is Literacy? The Power of a Definition

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*People with extensive needs for support represent the last group of people routinely denied opportunities for literacy instruction. One of the major reasons for this lack of opportunity can be related to limited definitions of what constitutes literacy as a whole and reading and writing in particular. This article will explore the way in which definitions of literacy impact literacy opportunities for individuals with extensive needs for supports. We propose a set of core definitional principles and make explicit the assumptions underlying their inclusion. Our hope is that this will lead to a dialogue about how we define literacy and the implications this holds for the lives of people with extensive needs for support. Our work is based on the assumption that all individuals with extensive needs for support are fully capable of benefiting from literacy instruction and further that our field as a whole could benefit from a more optimistic and inclusive approach to literacy instruction. We conclude that the way in which we define literacy is powerful and essential to opening the final frontier of literacy opportunities to include people with extensive needs for support.*

DESCRIPTORS: reading, literacy, moderate/severe disabilities, definitions of literacy

"What is literacy?" is a three-word question that deceptively suggests simplicity, but instead opens up a world of complexity. It is surprising how often the literature discusses research, conceptual frameworks, and approaches to teaching literacy (often characterized as reading and/or writing) without explicitly defining what is meant by these terms. This article will examine the question of what the term literacy means as it relates to all people, including individuals with extensive needs for support, across the life span.

People with extensive needs for support represent the last group of people routinely denied opportunities for literacy instruction. In their excellent examination of the history of literacy opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, Kliewer, Biklen, and Kasa-Hendrickson (2006) conclude that much of the history of literacy for people with extensive needs for support has been characterized by a "narrative of pessimism" (p. 175). The belief that individuals with extensive needs for support cannot acquire literacy skills often results in a lack of opportunity to learn these skills and therefore becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We believe that our field should provide a narrative of optimism based on an assumption of competence for all individuals regardless of label or perceived ability. Explicitly defining and expanding what we mean by the term literacy offers one important starting point for this challenge.

As will become clear, we are not the first to examine the issue of defining literacy for people with extensive needs for support and we will not be the last. We acknowledge there will never be one perfect definition of literacy, but we believe there is value in developing a shared set of core principles that any definition of literacy should encompass. We hope this will lead to a dialogue about the implications these principles hold for the lives of people with extensive needs for support. We conclude that the way in which we define literacy is powerful and will lead to opening the final frontier of literacy opportunities to include people with extensive needs for support.

## Notions of Literacy

In this section. we provide a broad overview of historical approaches to conceptualizing literacy and explore the important relationships between literacy definitions and literacy opportunities.

### *Literacy as a Human Right*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the Experimental World Literacy Program in 1966 and characterized literacy as being a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2008). Luckasson (2006) explained that the human right to inclusive educational opportunities for individuals with extensive needs for support is the same as for individuals without disabilities. She further noted that these rights are nonnegotiable and are "aspects of being human that the social contract must respect" (p. 12).

Lumsford, Moglen, and Slevin (1990) edited a book documenting topics presented at the 1988 Right to Literacy Conference sponsored by the Modern Language

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Association. In the introduction, they state their assumption that "literacy is a right and not a privilege: A right that has been denied an extraordinary number of our citizens" (Lumsford et al., 1990, p. 2). The contents of the book document how historically in the United States certain groups have been denied access to literacy including people of color, women, and the poor. Unfortunately, the lack of literacy access and opportunities for students with disabilities, particularly those with extensive needs for support, has not received the same attention until relatively recently (Goodley, 2007; Kliewer & Biklen, 2007). Specifically, people characterized as having extensive needs for support have historically been viewed as incapable of developing literacy skills. Therefore, literacy instruction has often either been denied them or provided in ways that did not meet their learning needs (Copeland & Keefe, 2007).

Although few would dispute that literacy is a human right, we believe this position opens the door to two critical questions. First, what comprises the "literacy" to which people have a right? Second, do all people, regardless of ability perceived or otherwise, share in this right? We believe that the answer to these questions hinges to a great extent on the definition of literacy being used.

## *Definitions of Literacy*

Despite the fact there is general agreement that literacy is a human right, there is no general agreement about the definition of literacy. This is not a new issue to educators. For example, Scribner (1984) commented, "Definitions of literacy shape our perceptions of individuals who fall on either side of the standard (what a 'literate' or 'nonliterate' is like) and thus in a deep way affect both the substance and style of educational programs" (p. 6). We agree that how literacy is defined affects the classroom instruction, community services, and the literacy opportunities offered to students and adults with extensive needs for support. Next, we discuss some representative examples of definitions and their consequences.

### *International definitions*

It is important to consider the definitions of literacy used by the United Nations and other international organizations because literacy is a global, not local or national, issue. In addition, calls for the right to literacy for all peoples come from these groups. UNESCO states that the goal of their organization is to eradicate illiteracy and ensure all people can read and write. Their 1957 definition of literacy stated, "A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his (her) everyday life" (UNESCO, 2008, p. 18). The establishment of the Experimental World Literacy Program in 1966 used what they termed a functional definition, "A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (her) group and community and also for enabling him (her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (her) own and the community's development" (UNESCO, 2008, p. 18). This definition is interesting and distinct from the 1957 definition because it makes clear that literacy in situated in the context of the individual's own community. However, because many countries have no means to assess literacy levels in their countries, global literacy statistics are often based on the answer people give to a question simply asking whether they can read and write (UNESCO).

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports global educational achievement statistics that compare countries to one another in various academic areas. PISA's definition of literacy went beyond decoding and literacy comprehension and used a definition that was more active and interactive, acknowledging the role that the reader brings to written texts. PISA proposed a definition of "Reading Literacy" as "An individual's capacity to understand, use and reflect on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, p. 46). This definition is based on the belief that, "literacy enables the fulfillment of individual aspirations" (PISA, p. 46) rather than both the individual and community benefit as cited in the UNESCO definition. The PISA definition does acknowledge that one benefit literacy may confer is the ability to participate in society.

The UNESCO and PISA definitions of literacy are problematic for individuals with extensive needs for support who often do not read and write in conventional ways. The PISA definition clearly precludes students who cannot use written texts from being included in their assessments of literacy. The danger is that anyone not included will be assumed illiterate. The UNESCO definition could be considered broader as it does place literacy in the context of the community rather than defining literacy at the level of the individual. In addition, UNESCO allows the individual to answer the question of whether they can read and write, leaving open the possibility that other forms of reading and writing, such as augmentative communication, may be accepted rather than applying a uniform standard.

It could be concluded from the above definitions that the United Nations believes that individuals who do not have the ability to read and write conventionally should be excluded from the right to literacy instruction. We do not believe this would be accurate based on other United Nations documents. We use the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990) to make this point. Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states, "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include

freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice" (UNICEF, 1990, p. 4). The inclusion of this article acknowledges that not all people communicate ideas in the same way and that multiple forms of communication should be valued. Article 27 specifically addresses the rights of children with disabilities who "should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community" (UNICEF, 1990, p. 8). Although the terms literacy, reading, and writing do not appear in this document, the right to education for all is clear from Articles 28 and 29. We particularly appreciate the statement that the purpose of education should be "The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNICEF, 1990, p. 9). We propose that it is only by broadening our definition of literacy that the "fullest potential" of students with extensive needs for support can be realized.

### *National Reading Panel*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the history of national attempts to address the issue of literacy in the United States of America. We refer readers to an excellent discussion of this history as it relates to students with disabilities in Kliewer and Biklen (2007). We include here a reference to the most recent national policy regarding reading instruction because the report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000 has had a major impact on reading instruction in the United States over the past decade. The work of the NRP was the foundation of the Reading First legislation that became law as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). The NRP report has been used to provide a framework for examining research on reading instruction for students with extensive needs for support (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006) and literature addressing how to teach literacy skills to these students (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Copeland & Keefe, 2007).

In examining the NRP report, it is interesting that the issue of defining literacy and/or reading was never addressed or discussed. Topics related to reading instruction were identified through regional public hearings; these included the broad areas of alphabetics, fluency, and comprehension. These topics were then used in searching the research literature investigating the reading process and reading interventions. The report of the NRP subgroups (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) organized their findings into five major areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies. The NRP acknowledges that there may be other important topics for reading instruction. The NRP report also excluded from their analysis research studies in which students with disabilities were participants. Unfortunately, these "other topics" and students with disabilities have still not been considered. As a result, the five areas identified by the NRP have become the five essential components that any school receiving funded through Reading First must include in their reading instruction.

The adequacy of the NRP results for identifying best practices for students without disabilities remains a matter of debate (Browder et al., 2006). The fact that these same essential components have been applied to the teaching of reading for students with disabilities, including those with extensive needs for support, is of even greater concern (Kliewer & Biklen, 2007). Although not explicitly stated as such, the five essential areas make it clear that conventional forms of reading and writing are what comprise literacy. Although some students with intensive needs for support can develop conventional reading and writing skills, our concern is that the legislation founded on the NRP report (i.e., NCLB) and its implied narrow definition of literacy has the potential to lead to inappropriate literacy instruction for students with extensive needs for supports or leave these students out of the literacy picture altogether (Downing, 2005; Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003; Mirenda, 2003; Naraian, 2010; Zascavage & Keefe, 2004). We have personally witnessed both of these outcomes in our work with local school districts as they struggle to comply with the requirements of NCLB.

### *Definitions and perspectives in education*

Definitions of literacy do not occur in a vacuum. We agree with Knoblauch (1990), who cautioned, "Literacy is one of those mischievous concepts, like virtuousness and craftsmanship, that appear to denote capacities but that actually convey value judgments" (p. 74). Knoblauch discussed the sociocultural aspects of definitions he believed went beyond describing skills and were based on assumptions, ideological dispositions, and political influences. Knoblauch discussed four types of literacy definitions. The definitions that emanate from a functionalist perspective emphasize teaching skills that individuals need for daily living as well as complex demands of a changing technological and economic environment. This perspective is embodied in the "back-to-basics" movements that reoccur with regularity and characterize the current climate created by NCLB, which values conventional reading, writing, and math skills over all else in schools. The second perspective Knoblauch describes, cultural literacy, goes beyond viewing literacy as basic skills and includes "an awareness of cultural heritage, a capacity of higher order thinking, even some aesthetic discernment" (Knoblauch, 1990, p. 77). He noted that the danger inherent in this perspective is the favoring of the dominant culture and

language and marginalization of others. Knoblauch identified a third type of definition as literacy for personal growth. Adherents of this perspective argue that "language expresses the power of the individual imagination" (Knoblauch, 1990, p. 78) and advocate for inclusion of enjoyable novels, writing that includes people of color and women, and other ways to engage those perceived as disadvantaged. These three perspectives have dominated singly or in some combination the ways in which educators and policymakers have approached literacy in the schools to this day. The fourth and last perspective described by Knoblauch is critical literacy (Knoblauch, 1990). Knoblauch explains the influences behind critical literacy this way:

> Its agenda is to identify reading and writing abilities with a critical consciousness of the social conditions in which people find themselves, recognizing the extent to which language practices objectify and rationalize these conditions and the extent to which people with the authority to name the world dominate others whose voices they have been able to suppress. Literacy therefore, constitutes a means to power, a way to seek political enfranchisement.... (p. 79).

Knoblauch observed that critical literacy has found its expression in mostly academic circles. Furthermore, he noted that because this perspective of literacy is strongly influenced by Marxist philosophical premises it is viewed as radical and has not been embraced by the educational or political establishment.

Knoblauch's (1990) analysis provides a good overview of the major categories of literacy definitions that have existed in education historically and are still relevant today. It is noteworthy that in his chapter and the book devoted to the right to literacy in which it appears (Lumsford et al., 1990), there is no mention of literacy as it is defined in relation to people with disabilities. The impetus for a broader definition of literacy has primarily come from those working with students and adults with extensive needs for support. We will consider these definitions in the next section.

### *Broader Definitions of Literacy*

As discussed above, the traditional skill-centered, functional, and individually focused definitions of literacy have dominated the educational landscape (Copeland & Keefe, 2007; Katims, 1994; Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Mirenda, 2003). These definitions have resulted in literacy programs built on readiness models and functional approaches for students with extensive needs for supports (Copeland & Keefe, 2007). Although some students with extensive needs for support can achieve conventional literacy skills with appropriate intensive instruction, other students find themselves unable to reach the first rung of the metaphorical "ladder to literacy" as described by Kliewer et al. (2004, p. 378). Kliewer and Biklen described the unfortunate circular logic by which many students with extensive needs for supports are deemed incapable of developing literacy skills and often placed in segregated classrooms settings where they are not provided opportunities to develop literacy skills. The fact that these students do not develop literacy skills is then used as evidence that these students are indeed nonliterate!

Functional approaches to literacy for students with extensive needs for supports have the benefit of at least providing access to literacy opportunities, but these opportunities may be limited by what is assumed to be "functional" for this group of learners. As indicated by Browder et al. (2006) in their review of research on reading instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, functional sight word approaches have dominated the research in the area of reading for this population and propose a need for a wider range of research. Copeland and Keefe (2007) agree and conclude, "This (functional) approach does not teach students literacy skills that might allow a broader and richer range of literacy experiences such as reading for pleasure or acquiring the writing skills needed to e-mail a friend" (p. 3).

The relevance and utility of skill-based, individualized definitions of literacy for students with extensive needs for supports has been challenged over the past two decades. Some definitions of literacy broaden the conceptualization of what comprises "reading" and "writing" (e.g., Alberto, Fredrick, Hughes, McIntosh, & Cihak, 2007; Koppenhaver, Pierce, & Yoder, 1995). One example of how this might have an impact is Downing's (2005) definition of literacy which includes activities involving accessing, using, and communicating about anything in print or image media format and which is not limited to material accessed through sight or hearing. Similarly, in proposing a framework for emergent literacy for students who are visually impaired, Erickson and Hatton (2007) refer to literacy as occurring in relation to "print or its equivalent" (p. 265). This creates literate possibilities for students with visual impairments that would also apply to some students with extensive needs for support who have challenges accessing traditional forms of print.

Another example of the expansion of the literacy definition is viewing literacy not only as an individual trait but something that occurs in interaction with other members of the linguistic community (Koppenhaver, n.d.; Stokes, 1998). This does not imply that individuals with extensive needs for support will not become independent readers, rather it emphasizes the point that literacy occurs within a social milieu and therefore should not be defined as solely referring to individual literacy skills in isolation. Unfortunately many literacy goals for students with extensive needs for supports are

decontextualized and reduced to those skills that can be delineated as an individual program goal.

Other broader definitions emerge out of the belief that literacy is a social phenomenon. For example, Scribner (1984) commented that, "Most efforts at definitional determination are based on a conception of literacy as an attribute of individuals; they aim to describe constituents of literacy in terms of individual abilities. But the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a social achievement" (p. 7). Kliewer et al. (2004) also discuss the social nature of literacy and note that "the meaning of the term *literacy* and the inferences cast by the term *literate citizen* shift across time and place" (p. 377). Kliewer and Biklen (2007) proposed that the concept of "local understanding" was critical to framing of what literacy is for students with extensive needs for supports. They define local understanding as "the communal recognition that educational value and participation may be ascribed where history has primarily supported dehumanization and segregation" (p. 2581). The result of this perspective is the assumption that all learners are citizens in the literate community (Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Kliewer et al., 2004). Kliewer (2008) shared a definition of literacy that emerged from his research, "I have come to define literacy as the construction (which includes interpretation) of meaning through visually or tactually crafted symbols that compose various forms of text" (p. 106).

As a whole, the broader views of literacy discussed in this section assume capability and open up literacy opportunities for students with intellectual, physical, motor, and sensory challenges. It is important to note that broadening the definition of literacy is not intended to replace conventional notions of reading and writing, rather it is to make sure that the definition of literacy is not limited to these less accessible forms of literacy. It is from the synthesis of traditional, critical, and broader definitions of literacy that we developed our core definition areas proposed in the next section.

## A Proposal for Literacy Definition Core Principles

Since October 2008, we have been collaborating with a group of 12 teachers, students, and community providers who are committed to exploring the issue of literacy for people with extensive needs for support. We call this group "Literacy: All Children Empowered (LACE)." At our first meeting, the group brainstormed and discussed possible areas for our work together. One of first issues that emerged was the lack of literacy opportunities for many individuals with extensive needs for supports. The group concluded that most teachers were working from a definition of literacy that was too narrow and this resulted in low expectations and limited opportunities for students with extensive needs for support (Copeland et al., 2010). LACE members decided to begin to explore the definitional issues by getting input from their students with and without disabilities, colleagues, family members, and so forth. For example, some LACE members put up sheets of paper at various locations (e.g., university and school) and asked passers-by for input on how they defined literacy. LACE members brainstormed and discussed literacy definitions based on this input, their own experiences, and the literature in this area. From this work, LACE members developed a working definition of literacy that has guided the work of the group (Copeland et al., 2010).

### *Purpose*

Our purpose here is not to propose *the* definition of literacy for individuals with extensive needs for supports. We agree with Knoblauch that literacy is indeed a "mischievous concept" (Knoblauch, 1990, p. 74) and with Kliewer et al. (2004) that definitions of literacy will always change with time and place. With Koppenhaver et al. (1995), we acknowledge that literacy exists on a continuum and develops across an individual's lifetime. Also, we agree with Koppenhaver et al., Kliewer and Biklen (2007), Downing (2005), and others in totally rejecting the notion of a literate/nonliterate dichotomy. Finally, although it is important to acknowledge and relate our work in the area of reading for students with extensive needs for support to the NRP areas of instruction, we do not believe that these provide a sufficient framework within which to define literacy that is inclusive of all students.

Given this set of beliefs, it would not make sense for us to propose a single definition of literacy. We think that any effort to define literacy for all people in all places and times is doomed to failure. Instead, our purpose here is to offer a set of core definitional principles that embody the following purposes. First, these principles make explicit the assumptions on which any broader definition of literacy should be based on at this particular point in our history. As Knoblauch (1990) noted, any definition of literacy goes beyond skill identification to in fact encoding sociocultural judgments. Therefore, we must make our sociocultural judgments explicit. Second, these proposals broaden literacy to encompass all modes of communication as recommended by many professionals in the field who work with students with extensive needs for support (e.g., Downing, 2005; Koppenhaver et al., 1995; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003). Third, these principles assume that literacy is a social phenomenon (e.g., Scribner, 1984; Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Koppenhaver, n.d.) and should not be limited to individual skills—no matter how broadly these individual skills are conceptualized. Fourth, these principles can guide instruction, research, and policy decisions. Finally, we hope this paper can form the basis for further dialogue and improvement of these principles themselves.

### *Core Definitional Principles*

We propose the following set of five core definitional principles for literacy:

1. All people are capable of acquiring literacy.
2. Literacy is a human right and is a fundamental part of the human experience.
3. Literacy is not a trait that resides solely in the individual person. It requires and creates a connection (relationship) with others.
4. Literacy includes communication, contact, and the expectation that interaction is possible for all individuals; literacy has the potential to lead to empowerment.
5. Literacy is the collective responsibility of every individual in the community; that is, to develop meaning making with all human modes of communication to transmit and receive information.

Through proposing this set of core principles, we have attempted to make our assumptions and purposes explicit. We endeavored to write the core principles clearly and avoid educational jargon. We hope that this will lead to fruitful discussion about this topic and a consensus that individuals with extensive support needs must be welcomed as full and active participants into the literate community.

### *A Pilot Study*

Our work developing these core definitional principles has influenced our teaching and research. For example, we noticed that many participants in our classes and professional development workshops held very traditional conceptions of literacy and often questioned the relevance of literacy instruction for students with extensive needs for support beyond elementary school. We also found that one important area missing from the research literature concerned the question of how educators, self-advocates, and family members define literacy for individuals with extensive needs for supports in their daily lives and work. We believed this was a gap in the literature that must begin to be addressed because of the clear relationship between the way in which literacy is defined and the literacy opportunities provided to individuals with extensive needs for support, as discussed above. Given these observations, we determined to conduct a pilot study to explore the ways in which those involved in and impacted by literacy instruction for individuals with extensive needs for support define literacy (Keefe & Copeland, 2010). Our intent was to ask, first, how professionals, self-advocates, and family members define literacy for students with extensive needs for support and, second, how professionals, self-advocates, and family members rate the importance of literacy instruction for individuals with extensive needs for support across the lifespan.

We found there was tremendous variability in the ways in which literacy was defined. Overall, we were somewhat surprised by the strong influence of conventional definitions of literacy on many of our respondents' definitions of literacy. Many of our proposed core definitional principles were directly or tangentially addressed in the participant responses. We were pleased to find that despite the variation in how the questionnaire respondents defined literacy, there was strong agreement that all people can benefit from literacy instruction. Further, there was strong agreement that literacy should be a priority across all ages. Our pilot study suggests that we have a lot of work to do to establish a consistent set of core principles that must be included in any definition of literacy.

## Implications for Practice, Research, and Policy

What we believe about literacy affects our practices and thus the opportunities to learn that we do or do not provide individuals. So, it is important to discover what we in the field believe literacy to be and how we view its importance across the life span. Our definition of literacy will affect what we teach, to whom we provide instruction, and how long we continue to provide opportunities to participate in the literate community both in school and beyond school. The impacts of a literacy definition go beyond instructional practices to the areas of research and policy.

It is important to caution once more that in recommending a broader definition of literacy, we are not suggesting that individuals with extensive needs for support are incapable of learning conventional reading and writing skills or that instruction in conventional reading and writing should not be offered to some students. It would be ironic if the recommendation for a broader definition of literacy came to be used as a further justification for denying reading and writing opportunities to individuals with extensive needs for support! On the contrary, we advocate that all students should have access to conventional and expanded literacy learning opportunities.

Policy and research often intersect to impact instructional practices in schools. NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) require evidence-based practices to be used in schools, but their definition of research is limited to the kinds of studies that are often not informative or applicable when conducting studies including individuals with extensive needs for support (for a fuller discussion of this issue, see Delano, Keefe, & Perner, 2008/2009). When the definition of literacy is broadened, research has clearly indicated that people with extensive needs for support across the lifespan can develop literacy skills and participate actively in their communities (Browder, Mims, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Lee, 2008; Katims, 1994; Kliewer et al., 2004; Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995;

Mirenda, 2003; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999). We believe it is critical in the current policy climate to continue to provide evidence of capability and successful literacy practices and to continue to challenge traditional definitions of literacy for people with extensive needs for support.

Literacy instruction is often viewed as something that occurs in elementary grades. For example, NCLB has the goal that all students will be reading by third grade. In a Canadian study, Trenholm and Mirenda (2006) surveyed 224 parents of children of all ages with Down syndrome regarding current literacy skills of their children and instruction and activities provided for their children. Parents reported that after age 12 (approximately sixth grade) there were both fewer opportunities at home to acquire reading and writing skills and fewer opportunities for literacy instruction at school for their children. Evidence that literacy instruction may not be emphasized beyond elementary schools is particularly concerning because researchers have found that adolescents and adults with intellectual disability may actually be more likely to benefit from literacy instruction than younger children (e.g., Boudreau, 2002; Farrell & Elkins, 1995; Moni & Jobling, 2000, 2001). Browder et al. (2009) recently proposed a model of literacy instruction that makes clear that literacy instruction in school should be provided across all ages. Any definition of literacy must make it clear that literacy is important at all ages.

IDEA (2004) requires that all students have access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment. No exceptions are made for those with certain types of disability or by age level. Traditional conceptualizations of literacy have resulted in the segregation of students with extensive needs for support and a lack of opportunity to develop literacy skills or access the general education curriculum (Katims, 1994; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003; Mirenda, 2003; Ryndak et al., 1999). In contrast, the assumption of capability and resulting access to literacy can lead to greater participation in socially valued activities and the literate community (Kliewer et al., 2004). A great example of the possibilities was provided by Duff (2006) who demonstrated how differentiation of instruction at the secondary level could open the doors for students with extensive needs for support to study Shakespeare successfully with their peers. In fact, the social nature of literacy makes it imperative that individuals with extensive needs for support be included in their communities to have the opportunity to develop their literacy skills. The articles by Forts and Luckasson (2011) and Morgan, Cuskelly, and Moni (2011) in this issue eloquently demonstrate how literacy skills and inclusive opportunities can truly enrich the lives of people with extensive needs for support and their friends across the life span.

We hope this article will lead to a more optimistic narrative to guide the ways in which we provide literacy instruction to all students regardless of perceived ability or labels. We cannot allow people with extensive needs for support to be denied access to literacy opportunities for even one more day. We believe that the definition of literacy used by educators, policy makers, researchers, individuals with disabilities and their families must be one that will presume ability and therefore lead to higher expectations, increased access, and more inclusive educational opportunities for all people.

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