
Introduction

Students with the most severe types of disabilities often are prejudged as incapable of participating and certainly benefiting from a number of fairly common life activities. The more severe the disability, the more typical is the reaction. Others around these individuals may predetermine that due to physical limitations, sensory impairments, limited cognitive abilities, and minimal communication skills, going places and doing things may not be enjoyed. For instance, it may be assumed that taking a child who is totally deaf and blind with significant other disabilities to the local zoo would not be beneficial to the child. The question, "What is he going to get out of this?" is raised. As a result, the student may miss out on a number of meaningful experiences or miss experiences that could have been meaningful. One of those experiences and the focus of this book is the range of experiences that equate with literacy. Students with severe disabilities have limited access to literacy activities and instruction. They may have had limited access to the many experiences that lay a foundation for literacy activities as well. Given the critical importance of literacy for students' learning, the situation cannot continue to exist.

This book is written specifically for special educators and paraeducators who are responsible for teaching students with severe disabilities, aged preschool through adulthood. Since a basic premise of this book is that students with severe disabilities will be educated in general education classrooms with their peers with no disabilities, the intended audience for this book also includes general educators who will have such students as members of their classes. To fully accept ownership of their students with severe disabilities, general educators, regardless of the grade level they teach, will need to understand how these students can benefit from various literacy activities. The intent of this book is to provide teachers with this information. Of equal importance, this book hopes to support the efforts of parents and family members as they strive to obtain the most effective and meaningful educational program for their children. The information in the following pages is designed to encourage family

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members to continue their literacy activities with their children and to serve as a catalyst for new activities and experiences that might support their children's learning. Having this information may support them in their advocacy efforts for their children.

Although not the main objective of the text, the information provided strongly supports the movement toward educating students with their same-age peers without disabilities. For the purpose of this text, inclusive education is considered full-time placement in the age-appropriate classroom(s) that the student would attend if not disabled. Physical placement alone is not the goal, but rather the curriculum is adapted and modified to meet the unique needs of each student having a severe disability. Support is provided through highly qualified special educators, trained paraeducators, adapted materials, modified expectations, and a philosophy of acceptance of human differences. This preference for an inclusive educational environment is based on research supporting the benefits for all children (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002) and the dearth of research supporting a separate educational system based on ability. In fact, a comprehensive search of the literature for research that demonstrated the effectiveness of a segregated placement as compared with an inclusive placement for students with severe disabilities yielded no such documentation (Falvey, Blair, Dingle, & Franklin, 2000). Therefore one basic assumption of this text is that students of all ages and ability levels are learning together in supported inclusive environments.

In general, the purpose of this text is to highlight literacy instruction for students with severe disabilities and demonstrate the many ways that these students can gain access to literacy activities. To do so, adherence to a strict definition of literacy is not conducive, and a much broader and all-encompassing definition will be used. This book will attempt to offer some suggestions for broadening perceptions of literacy to be more inclusive of all students. Specific strategies and examples are provided throughout the book, which may prove helpful to a number of students. However, each student is unique and will require individualized intervention to be most effective. While just an initial effort, it is hoped that the ideas presented in the following pages will serve to further the literacy movement.

The target population for this book includes those students of all ages who have so frequently been excluded from most literacy experiences. These students typically have a moderate to profound level of intellectual impairment and may have very severe and complex communication challenges. In addition, students are likely to have visual, hearing, and/or physical disabilities. They may have health impairments and behavioral challenges as well. These additional disabilities may be mild or severe. The result of these multiple and complex disorders can make learning quite challenging, although certainly not impossible.

Although the book primarily addresses the needs of this population of students, suggestions for literacy activities and literacy skill development may be equally applicable to a much broader range of students. Furthermore, the examples and strategies suggested in this book target the school day. However, many of these suggestions have application to the home environments and should be implemented there as well. Ideally the ideas presented in this text will encourage the reader to experiment with different literacy experiences and activities with a large number of students who struggle to access and understand their world.