1 Literacy and a Free Appropriate Public Education

KEY CONCEPTS

- Literacy is for everyone and comes in many different forms.
- Federal mandates support literacy instruction for everyone.
- Several barriers exist that can be overcome concerning literacy instruction for students with severe disabilities.
- Literacy skills enhance one's quality of life in many ways.
- Literacy instruction is as important for students with significant disabilities as it is for everyone.

Literacy may be regarded in myriad ways. Some perspectives of literacy are broad and inclusive in nature, while others are more rigidly defined and exclusive. For example, a strict adherence to the traditional view of literacy as reading print automatically excludes certain students for whom such a skill may never be attained. One might conclude, therefore, that literacy would not be appropriate for such students. What this chapter intends to do is reexamine the definition of literacy and offer a broader definition so that it is most certainly appropriate for *all* students.

WHAT IS LITERACY?

Literacy has been defined as:

> [The] minimal ability to read and write in a designated language, as well as a mindset or way of thinking about the use of reading and writing in everyday life. It differs from simple reading and writing in its assumption of an understanding of the appropriate uses of these abilities within a print-based society. Literacy, therefore, requires an active, autonomous engagement with print and stresses the role of the individual in generating as well as receiving and assigning independent interpretations to messages. (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 142)

When the focus is on visual decoding and comprehending the written word, students who have multiple impairments and are unable to visually access print and understand are precluded from engaging in literacy. If literacy instruction is to be confined to recognizing and interpreting very abstract visual symbols, then those students unable to perceive or make sense of such abstraction are automatically excluded.

There are several levels of literacy, however, with emergent skills having applicability to a wide range of students. Emergent literacy skills, such as the recognition that books exist and have meaning, begin at very young ages. Parents regularly read to their young infants. Although the child may not understand what the spoken words represent, these are the first experiences with literacy that lay a strong foundation for the development of advanced literacy skills. The importance of reading to children as a basic building block to literacy has been well documented (Cunningham, 1995; Sulzby, 1994; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). We would not withhold this experience from children simply because they did not have conventional reading skills. Such skills are neither expected of young children nor needed. Reading can be meaningful and pleasurable on many different levels.

A more encompassing view of literacy than one with a strict adherence to the printed word includes listening and speaking and interacting as well as reading, writing, and spelling and, as such, obviously includes everyone. The relationship between literacy and communication will be more fully discussed in Chapter 2 of this text. However, it is imperative to know that everyone communicates, and therefore everyone can engage in literacy experiences (Mirenda, 1993). When we communicate, we often use symbols to convey our meaning. These symbols can be written down, maintained in a permanent format, and read by others. Effective communication is certainly one critical aspect of literacy.

Another way to broaden our thinking about literacy is to reconceptualize how literacy materials can be adapted to be more inclusive. Although everyone may not be able to adequately access print or be able to express themselves via the written word, other formats may help with accessibility. For students with severe cognitive, physical, and sensory impairments, alternatives to written text are essential. In addition to text, these students can read and write using a variety of forms, such as pictures, objects, parts of objects, and textures. Specifics concerning methods of adapting literacy materials appear in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 4, where they are described within a contextual framework. In general, by expanding literacy activities to include any means of gaining information and in expressing oneself, students with the most severe disabilities are not excluded from these important activities. Literacy is for everyone, and what literacy is should be individually determined for each student with severe disabilities.

LITERACY AND FEDERAL MANDATES IN EDUCATION

Several legislative efforts exist on a national level to support equal educational opportunities for all children. The primary legislation aimed at supporting the educational rights of students having disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and its reauthorization of 1997. Through this legislation, students are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with all the necessary supports and services that would enable the student to benefit from the specialized education. While the intent of the law may be clear, its interpretation and implementation for individual students has proved to be quite challenging. Determining an appropriate education for a given child may have less to do with student goals and needs, and more with the expertise, training, and experiences of team members (Giangreco, Edelman, & Dennis, 1991; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Although no one curriculum could possibly be determined appropriate for all students with disabilities, without a stated appropriate program, extreme variation can occur with what is offered a given student. One educational team could decide that the focus will be on maintaining a student's physical health and safety, while another educational team could decide that a much more academic curriculum is appropriate for the same student. The variability in determining what is appropriate can be significant within a school district and becomes quite pronounced when comparisons are made across states.

In addition to an appropriate education, IDEA clearly states the necessity of ensuring access to the core curriculum for all students. Obviously,

the core curriculum entails considerable literacy, with national standards highlighting expected competencies to be attained at different grade levels. The implication is that all students regardless of ability level should be receiving literacy instruction as part of that access to the core curriculum requirement. As with the mandate for appropriate education, however, there is no clear direction provided as to how to ensure access to the core curriculum for those students who do not display conventional literacy skills. Therefore how access to the core curriculum is interpreted also varies widely across student teams, school districts, and states. Furthermore, where a student receives his or her education has a major impact on gaining access to the core curriculum. For example, findings from a study of 33 middle school students with intellectual impairments revealed that they were much less likely to work on tasks related to the core curriculum in self-contained segregated classrooms than in general education classrooms (Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003). Therefore while the national mandate strongly supports all students accessing the core curriculum with the accompanying high expectations, minimal guidance exists to determine what that might look like for a student with complex and multiple disabilities.

As teachers and family members struggle to determine what an appropriate education is for a given student, valued social outcomes should be considered. Carpenter, Bloom, and Boat (1999) recommend that four socially valid outcomes of self-esteem, self-determination, empowerment, and joy be used to guide education practices. Being literate in today's society strongly supports the attainment of these valued outcomes for all individuals. The manner in which literature is defined by teachers and other team members will need to be broadened so that literacy content and activities are made accessible and appropriate for all students. Then the team can develop an individualized educational program with measurable goals and objectives that reflect what literacy skills will be learned by the student and how the student will demonstrate mastery.

Literacy is considered a critical lifelong skill that serves as a benchmark for future educational and vocational success (Gurry & Larkin, 1999; Kliewer & Landis, 1999). As such, a strong emphasis has been placed on teaching all children to read and write before they leave school. Different federal programs have been implemented with the specific purpose of raising academic expectations for all students, with specific emphasis on improving literacy skills (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994; No Child Left Behind, 2001). Given this importance and the profound impact literacy can play in an individual's life, it is hard to imagine an appropriate educational program for a student with disabilities that does not involve at least some focus on literacy.

As written in 1994, Goals 2000: The Educate America Act targeted specific goals for all students to achieve. The specific goal for literacy stated that every adult would be literate and possess the skills and knowledge to successfully compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). This stated goal recognizes the importance of literacy acquisition for all individuals. Unfortunately, this education act did not articulate how every adult would become literate or what exactly being literate meant, especially for students with severe disabilities.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, originally known as The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provides a legal mandate to ensure that all students are learning and that schools are responsible for that learning. As a component of this law, *Reading First* is a national initiative to train teachers how to promote literacy for all young children. Federal funding has been provided to support this initiative. While the premise of NCLB affirms the value of education and of learning for everyone, certain requirements of this act call into question its applicability to those students who have the most significant disabilities. For example, the requirement that *all* students read at a certain grade level does not seem to take into account those students for whom traditional literacy mastery is not attainable. There are students who, while being quite capable of learning, may not be able to access or understand abstract literacy skills in either print or braille. Does this mean that they are excluded from the No Child Left Behind Act? Does this legislation need to be renamed, or the intent of the law modified and restated?

According to this federal law (NCLB), all teachers must be highly qualified in the subject matter they teach. Unfortunately, the law is not clear on what constitutes "highly qualified" for teachers in special education who teach a variety of subject matter (usually kindergarten through 12th grades). Specific skills that would identify mastery in subject matter for teaching students with severe disabilities have not been delineated. For example, it is not known what skills in literacy instruction would represent a highly qualified educator of students with significant disabilities who do not engage in literacy activities in a conventional manner. What kind of test would educators need to pass to demonstrate competency prior to teaching? According to a national survey to special education directors, not one respondent felt that teachers were well prepared to teach literacy skills to students who were nonverbal (Heller, Fredrick, Dykes, Best, & Cohen, 1999). This is a troubling statistic, since a high-quality teacher is considered the single most important factor in students' learning (Mainger, Deshler, Coleman, Kozleski, & Rodriguez-Walling, 2003).

If NCLB really applies to all students, as its name implies, then efforts must be taken to realize that literacy acquisition may take different forms and involve different instruction for different children. Those creating legislation designed to include all students must be made aware of the diversity expressed by our student population so that they don't inadvertently exclude some. While accountability is a critical issue in education, setting standards that automatically exclude a certain population of students (and their teachers) does not make the mandate inclusive. At the same time, students with the most significant disabilities should be expected to achieve and to make progress toward meaningful goals (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001). They should not be excluded from high expectations. Different standards that truly apply to all and acknowledge the diversity in our student population are needed. No child should be left behind, and legislation must be carefully written that reflects this philosophy.

BARRIERS TO LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

Several barriers exist to hinder the acquisition of literacy skills for students with significant disabilities. While perhaps unpleasant, these barriers should be addressed so that efforts can be made to circumvent them and focus our energy and time on the process of bringing literacy instruction to those who have been most often deprived of it. Since it is always easier to use a barrier as an excuse for inaction, significant effort will be needed to create avenues around these barriers. The first step may be to recognize that they exist. In the following pages, attention is focused on some of these barriers.

Attitudinal Barrier

Perhaps the greatest barrier is the temptation to place the blame for lack of literacy skills on the child and theorize that the child is too disabled to acquire these skills and cannot benefit from instruction. The belief that literacy was not even an option for certain individuals due to the presence of a disability has been well documented (Barudin & Hourcade, 1990; Fossett, Smith, & Mirenda, 2003; Kliewer, 1998; Locke & Butterfield, 1998). This attitude removes all responsibility from the shoulders of those supporting the child and forces the child to prove the right to access this type of instruction. However, legal mandates make it clear that no child has to prove himself or herself capable of learning. That is assumed. What is required are creative strategies to help the child learn despite disabilities that can make this challenging. Instead of believing that these individuals

cannot learn and cannot benefit from literacy activities, we must affirm the opposite and then determine ways to make this possible. The unexpected discovery of literacy skills of individuals having severe disabilities through a systematic prompting strategy known as "Facilitated Communication" stands as testimony to the dangers of presumed incompetence (Kliewer, 1998; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). See the sidebar for information on this somewhat controversial strategy.

What Is Facilitated Communication?

Facilitated Communication (FC) is an intervention strategy designed to support the communication efforts of individuals who are essentially nonverbal with limited unaided communication (Biklen, 1993; Crossley, 1994). Characteristics of FC include physical support/resistance at the hand, wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, or shoulder; emotional support to encourage attempts by the individual; and the expectation that the individual can and will communicate using some type of communication device (e.g., alphabet/word board, computer with keyboard, picture board). While physically supported to control errant movements (e.g., tremors, flailing hands, perseveration on a letter or a word), the individual points to letters, words, and/or pictures to state a message.

The controversy surrounding FC concerns the question of authorship. When individuals first use FC to communicate, physical support/resistance is typically provided at the hand, which raises the concern regarding who actually is creating the message (Green & Shane, 1994). Although the goal of FC is to fade physical support as soon as possible, the concern is that those providing facilitation may, in fact, be manipulating the individual's hand and creating the messages. The somewhat sudden engagement in skilled communicative interactions by individuals who had previously not displayed such purposeful and interactive behavior raises suspicion regarding authorship.

However, a certain degree of influence exists whenever instruction occurs with individuals who require substantial support to learn new skills. Often a student's hands may be physically guided to a device to request assistance when it appears that this is what the student needs. Brown, Gothelf, Guess, and Lehr (1998) question whether it is possible to teach individuals with profound disabilities any skill without at least somewhat influencing their behavior. The intent of FC as a support strategy is never to guide the individual's hand, forcing them to create messages, but rather to follow their movements and provide the necessary physical stability so that they can make use of this technique. As with any intervention strategy, techniques can be improperly applied. However, some individuals using FC as a means of communication have advocated for its continued use (Goddard, 2002), and some research exists to support its continued use as a viable strategy for some individuals (Cardinal, 2002). Using FC with individuals has as its premise the expectation of competence—the belief that all individuals can communicate. In this regard, it is consistent with the premise of this book, that all individuals can and do communicate and can benefit from literacy instruction.

Low Expectations

A familiar partner of negative attitudes is low expectations. Unfortunately, students with the most significant disabilities often face low expectations by those providing care and services. These students are not expected to read or write, and those types of goals may not emerge during educational planning. The emphasis may be on taking care of the student's health care needs, feeding the child, positioning the child, and making sure that the student is safe and clean. While certainly necessary considerations for all children, such "goals" fall far short of our legal mandates to leave no child behind.

When literacy instruction has been considered for students with moderate disabilities, the focus has been on reading "survival" words (Browder & Lalli, 1991; Katims, 2001). Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine what are survival words for individual students who may spend considerable time being drilled on words like *danger, poison,* and *warning* and never really encounter such words in their daily environments. How will mastery of such words improve a student's quality of life, as more meaningful reading can do? Furthermore, unless the student is taught these words when and where they occur, problems with generalization of the skill may make it meaningless. For example, one student known by the author could recognize the words *boys* and *girls* and *men* and *women* consistently when presented on flash cards. However, this same student did not know which restroom to enter and could not recognize these same words on restroom doors. More important, there are more valuable benefits of reading that can lead to a lifetime of personal enjoyment, such as reading through photo albums of past events or flipping through the pages of a favorite magazine.

Students will achieve to our expectations if provided the right type of support. It is imperative, therefore, that we maintain high expectations for *all* children and ensure that we are constantly challenging children to learn. Students with significant disabilities certainly will not acquire literacy skills (and other academic skills) if we do not expect them to or provide them with opportunities to do so. If we perceive them to be incapable of learning, then they may easily meet that expectation. For example, a teacher makes it clear to a paraprofessional to keep books and other reading materials away from a particular student because he will destroy them. Occasionally, the student does get his hands on a book and does proceed to tear it apart. This confirms the teacher's expectations, and she issues a stronger precaution to the paraprofessional to see that this doesn't happen again. No effort is made to understand the student's behavior with the book. Perhaps he wants to read and is frustrated because he can't. Perhaps he recognizes that he is the only student in this class who is not allowed

access to reading (and writing) material. Perhaps he has never been taught how to handle a book and the enjoyment that a book can bring. Instead of being denied access to literacy materials, he needs specific instruction in how to make good use of these materials. Without this instruction, he will not have the opportunity to learn what he may most desire. As Katims (2001) states, "We need to overcome our lack of literacy optimism for students with mental retardation" (p. 171). We need to raise both our expectations for these students to read and our expectations for our teachers to teach.

Limited Opportunities

Literacy builds on our life experiences, which is why it is imperative to provide children with multiple experiences to support their learning. Children with severe physical impairments may lack experiential learning due to the difficulty they have walking and physically exploring their environments (Blischak, 1995). When children have significant disabilities that may involve the multiple impact of physical, cognitive, and sensory impairments, the ability to explore and learn from this exploration may be even more hampered. To compound the problem, experiences can become limited as care providers question the value of these experiences. Instead of supporting the child's involvement in varied experiences on an ongoing basis, the decision may be made to keep the child at home, where he or she is most comfortable. Unfortunately, such a decision further handicaps the child, making it more difficult to acquire and understand basic concepts.

The importance of reading to children at home as a strong foundation for literacy skills development has been well supported in the literature (Cunningham, 1995; Sulzby, 1994; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Yet the amount of time that family members spend reading to a child with a disability, especially a severe disability, is considerably less than the time families spend reading to a child who does not have disabilities (Light & Kelford Smith, 1993; Marvin, 1994). A short attention span or the inability to see pictures, hear words, or respond consistently to these efforts may explain this finding. Perhaps the inconsistent response of these children discourages the parents, causing them not to want to spend much time in such activities. Family members may not have the time to engage in literacy activities as often as other families because they must devote considerable time and attention to meeting basic physical and health needs.

Even at school, students with significant disabilities appear to be overlooked when it comes to literacy opportunities. Several researchers have examined classroom experiences for students with moderate to severe disabilities and have reported minimal opportunities for these

students with regard to literacy. Teachers perceived these students as not being sufficiently capable to benefit from literacy activities (Katims, 2001; Kliewer, 1998; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999). The emphasis on developing a linear sequence of isolated skills (e.g., letter naming, letter-sound association) before accessing meaningful literacy seemed to keep students from more meaningful literacy instruction (Ryndak et al., 1999).

Limited Means of Accessing Literacy

Even if children with significant disabilities are given the opportunity to engage in literacy experiences, if they do not have the means to interact during these experiences, they cannot demonstrate what they know. Often children with significant disabilities do not have speech or a solid language base, so that sharing experiences, understanding stories, and talking about them are challenging. These children cannot easily interact with others during literacy activities, such as reading a book, due specifically to their disabilities (e.g., pointing to pictures when arms and hands have limited movement due to a severe physical disability). Children with multiple disabilities who are deaf may see the pictures but may be unable to hear the story being read. Their understanding and enjoyment of stories may be greatly reduced as a result.

Parents of children who use augmentative communication devices report having lowered expectations for their children to ever acquire true literacy (Marvin, 1994). Ensuring meaningful access to literacy experiences will be featured in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book and so will not be discussed in depth here. However, the critical need to ensure that children with significant disabilities have a means of active engagement in literacy experiences is a main objective for those supporting these students (Fisher & Kennedy, 2001). Alternate strategies and adapted materials will be needed to help students be meaningfully involved.

Limited Time

One very realistic barrier to literacy learning for students with severe disabilities is the limited time that teachers have to adapt and design appropriate literacy materials for their students. When students are unable to access standard materials used by their peers without disabilities, teachers must create the necessary and often highly individualized material. Special educators must first collaborate with general educators to determine what topics are to be studied and what materials will be used as part of the core curriculum and daily lesson plans. They must then adapt worksheets, book chapters, book report forms, newsletters, and

whatever else will be used to improve their students' understanding of the information and to provide them with an appropriate means to demonstrate this understanding.

Considerable time is required to ensure accessibility to the core curriculum, especially for those students with the most significant and complex disabilities. As the content becomes more abstract and is presented at an increasingly fast pace (as in secondary schools), the responsibility of adapting all necessary materials can become overwhelming. The increased number of teachers that need to be involved in this collaborative process at the secondary levels adds to the difficulty. Finding the time to collaborate, plan together, and determine a strategy for meeting individual student needs is essential (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003). Some suggestions for addressing this dilemma are presented in Chapter 3 of this text. Each educational team will need to determine the most effective means of making literacy accessible given their own unique situation.

The Age Factor

Finally, there is a feeling that if children do not acquire literacy skills by a certain age, then efforts at further literacy activities should not be attempted. Students may end up with a few years in elementary school where they have a chance to demonstrate their literacy skills. Such thinking is evident for students with and without disabilities, so that students who do not acquire reading and writing skills during the elementary years will find themselves without access to specific instruction in these areas in later years. However, some studies of adults have refuted this type of thinking and provided some evidence that it is never too late to open the world of literacy for an individual. Ryndak et al. (1999) demonstrated the development of literacy skills with a high school student after she had been moved from a self-contained setting and placed in general education. Stromer, Mackay, Howell, and McVay (1996) taught an adult with moderate intellectual impairments and a hearing impairment to spell by matching pictures to printed words using a computer and a choice of letters. Brady and McLean (1996) found that some adults with severe mental retardation learned to state the word by reading the accompanying pictorial symbol. Gordon Pershey and Gilbert (2002) were successful in teaching a woman of 35 to gain meaningful literacy skills after 7 years of instruction. They reported that the skills she acquired improved her quality of life by enhancing her enjoyment, increasing her participation, and allowing her to communicate more effectively with others. Teaching meaningful literacy skills is important no matter the individual's age. Determining what to teach and how to do this in a manner that is relevant

and interesting to the learner should be the focus, and not the age of the individual.

LITERACY AND QUALITY-OF-LIFE ISSUES

Literacy impacts every aspect of our lives from infancy through adulthood. No one can question the importance of literacy for independent adult behavior. Rather, literacy skills are a critical component of an independent adult life. The lack of literacy is considered characteristic of school failure—a failure to learn (Kliewer & Landis, 1999).

Literacy acquisition can have a profound impact on quality-of-life indicators such as self-esteem, self-determination, independence, information gathering, the ability to learn, and enjoyment. Such quality-of-life indicators are equally important for students with significant disabilities as they are for individuals with no disabilities.

Self-Esteem

Being perceived as literate promotes a positive self-image. Being able to gather information from written material and create messages for others gives the impression of competence. Young children enjoy holding books and pretending to read long before they have mastered conventional reading skills. The same can be said for students with significant disabilities. Students seem to strive to imitate their more capable peers. For example, a student with severe and multiple disabilities, who was deaf, nonverbal, and used a wheelchair, liked to hold a pencil or pen and make marks on her papers in all of her general education high school classes. Her efforts to look like her peers were so important to her that she would resist the use of adapted materials (pictorial information) that would be more meaningful. Engaging in literacy activities connotes a level of maturity and positive feelings of self (Gordon Pershey & Gilbert, 2002). Supporting a student's development of self-esteem is one critical by-product of literacy learning.

Self-Determination

Learning to take charge of our lives and have control over critical factors is essential to most individuals. Children at a relatively early age strive for control by demanding preferred foods, toys, or activities and vehemently rejecting decisions made by their parents. Making choices and making those choices known to others are critical components of learning self-determination. Choices involving simple aspects of daily life, such as what to wear, toys to play with, and food to eat, serve as the foundation

for learning how to make more complex choices, such as where to live, how to make a living, and whom to live with. The acts of reading, writing, and communicating interplay in the development of self-determination.

Unfortunately, students with severe disabilities, given their limited communication skills, have a difficult time making their preferences known (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Individuals with significant disabilities may not know their options or even what options exist. They may be unable to obtain information from the written word and are dependent on others for information. In fact, in a national survey, Wehmeyer and Metzler (1995) revealed that individuals with mental retardation have very little control over their lives. Learning to recognize symbols (written text, pictures, objects) allows individuals to identify what is possible and then make decisions that indicate their preferences. Literacy skills that involve listening, communicating, reading, and writing are essential to the development of self-determination in individuals with significant disabilities.

Independence

The abilities to listen and comprehend, communicate effectively, read, and write allow a certain degree of independent performance that would not be possible without these skills. When language is understood (in whatever format), it is possible to act on the information provided (if it's within physical abilities). An overreliance on others to do things for you is avoided. For students with significant disabilities, one goal of education is to increase independence by teaching reading and understanding directions (e.g., pictorial, objects) to perform tasks (Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003; Copeland & Hughes, 2000). For example, being able to discern a restroom sign increases a student's potential for meeting personal needs without being directed by another person. Being able to recognize desired software or music CDs allows the student to obtain preferred activities and act on this preference without seeking assistance. Being able to follow pictorial/written directions to make Pizza Hut sauce at work avoids the need to be supported by a job coach or coworker. Independence via literacy is thus a goal for everyone, not just those with conventional literacy skills.

Information Gathering

One of the easiest and most convenient ways of gathering information is to read. Information is available in many different formats and assists us to get places, assemble items, order from a menu, obtain movie tickets, determine what's on TV, and numerous other tasks. Accessing information and giving information to others occur almost continuously throughout each day. Furthermore, individuals of all ages rely on available information

portrayed in a number of ways in every environment. Young children may quickly recognize the signs advertising their favorite stores. They can read pictographic maps at the zoo and urge their parents to go to specific locations. They read cereal boxes and wrappers containing favorite foods and look for these same items when out shopping with their families. Young adults can peruse the newspaper to recognize a movie advertisement and make the request to go see the movie. Teaching all children to recognize the information that abounds in their environments and how to act on it are critical life skills that will aid them in their adult lives.

Organization

Literacy skills support an individual's ability to organize aspects of life. We use labels to file papers and put like items together. We write and read our daily schedules, take notes of things we need to do, and mark off those that are completed. We may alphabetize CDs, recipes, and file folders of important papers. We keep lists of phone numbers of family and friends close by to facilitate quick access to these people. All of these very practical examples of literacy use help make our lives easier and more manageable. Such organization skills also are of value to individuals having severe disabilities who need support to better understand their world and anticipate what is to come. For example, a student with significant disabilities may be able to accept a supported employment position at a music store and use the recognition of like symbols to place the same artist's work together. Numerous vocational positions depend on the ability to recognize similar symbols and organize accordingly.

Learning

Learning occurs through interactions with others. Learning occurs at any age, involves all subjects, and is lifelong. The impact of literacy on learning is obvious. Knowing how to read (whether in the conventional sense or not) opens the doors to every subject matter that is of interest. We learn from reading conventional text, accompanying pictures, and listening to others read. Through written expression, we can seek out additional information and receive feedback on what we have learned. The more efficient the literacy skills, the greater the opportunity to learn. Continued learning builds on what we have attained. For example, a 10-year-old boy with severe intellectual impairments, profound bilateral deafness, and myopia (nearsightedness) experienced snow during a hike in the mountains with his family. These experiences were captured in photographs and sent to school, where they were sequenced into a story with written text. Later in the year, when reading a story that involved snow and a

snowman, this student grew excited, pointed repeatedly to the picture of the snow, then pointed up, put his head back, and spread his arms out, mimicking a reaction to snow falling on his face. He had learned the concept of "snow." All students have the same rights to learn and therefore the same right to literacy instruction.

Entertainment

Literacy allows us to read for pleasure, interact with others socially, and express ourselves in very creative ways. Literacy allows us to amuse ourselves alone and with others. We can share important aspects of ourselves with others who are important in our lives. We share experiences and build relationships. We can spend many hours reading books, doing crossword puzzles, sending e-mail messages, and accessing the Internet. We are amused by reading comic strips and joke books. We send greeting cards to friends and family, take photographs, and organize these artifacts in albums to preserve memories. The need to engage in meaningful leisure activities is important for all individuals and is particularly critical to those students who are limited in their abilities to physically explore and engage in certain activities. Having access to literacy materials enriches our lives by giving us pleasure.

WHY TEACH READING TO STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES?

Reading provides an autonomous means of obtaining information and gaining enjoyment. In addition, reading can facilitate social relationships as we discuss what we have read with one another. Each person reads for a variety of different reasons at different times. What is read is also individually determined. The reasons for reading are the same whether or not there is a significant disability present. Reading opens doors to the world and, as such, cannot be denied to those individuals whose complex disabilities will make learning to read a bit more challenging.

Recognizing its importance for *all* students, regardless of labels and real or perceived limitations, is essential for all teachers and families. Therefore finding ways to bypass barriers to learning (and teaching) literacy is imperative. Broadening the definition of literacy to include the building blocks of social experiences and different ways to represent these experiences (e.g., pictorial, object) makes it possible to include all students in learning literacy. In essence, as Katims (2001) asserts, teachers will need to define literacy individually for each student. In this way, we can ensure that no child is left behind.