



A summary of the article

# What Is Literacy?

## *The Power of a Definition*

**Elizabeth B. Keefe** and **Susan R. Copeland**

University of New Mexico

**This article first appeared in TASH Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities.**

TASH is an international grassroots leader in advancing inclusive communities through research, education and advocacy. Founded in 1975, we are a volunteer-driven organization that advocates for human rights and inclusion for people with the most significant disabilities and support needs—those most vulnerable to segregation, abuse, neglect and institutionalization. The inclusive practices we validate through research have been shown to improve outcomes for all people. Visit [www.tash.org](http://www.tash.org) or contact [info@tash.org](mailto:info@tash.org) for more information.

# Literacy?

## What is Literacy?

### *The Power of a Definition* a summary

By Elizabeth Keefe and Susan Copeland

#### A new way to think about Literacy

To be **literate** means that you can share your thoughts with others in a way that they will understand you. Sharing your thoughts with others can be done in many different ways. Some of the ways that you can share your thoughts with others include writing, speaking, gestures, facial expressions, pictures, symbols, and technology—just to name a few.

To be **literate** also means that you can take in information in many of those same ways.

Your chance to become literate may depend on what others decide literacy should look like.

*The purpose of this article is to 1) examine the historical definitions of literacy, 2) to explore the impact of the literacy definitions on individuals who require extensive supports to participate in literacy instruction, and 3) to propose a definition of literacy that is founded upon core principles of inclusion. The authors base their literacy definition on the assumption that all individuals in need of extensive supports are capable of benefitting from literacy instruction. Furthermore, the authors assert that the understanding of literacy held by professionals may determine the opportunities for individuals who require extensive supports to engage in the literate world.*

## Notions of Literacy

### **Literacy as a Human Right**

Throughout history, individuals described as needing extensive supports to become literate have often been characterized as being unable to develop literacy skills. As a result, literacy instruction has often been denied to them or, the literacy instruction that was provided to them did not meet their specific needs (Copeland & Keefe, 2007).

**People who need a lot of support to become literate have not always been given that chance.**

### **Definitions of Literacy**

The authors believe that participation in the literate community is a human right. However, the way the community defines literacy may determine classroom instruction, those who will be able to participate in classroom instruction and literacy opportunities for students and adults with extensive needs for support.

**Literacy is important for all people. However, the way other people decide what literacy should look like may help or hurt the chance for some people to become a part of the literate community.**

### **International definitions**

Many definitions proposed by international organizations leave out individuals who need extensive supports to participate, because they do not recognize alternate forms of communication. The authors support the definition of literacy proposed by UNICEF (1990) which, acknowledges that not all people communicate ideas in the same way and that multiple forms of communication should be valued.

**UNICEF believes that it is important to understand that people all over the world may use different ways of sharing their thoughts with others and being understood by others.**

### **National Reading Panel**

In the United States, conclusions reached by the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000 about reading instruction, have had a great impact on the methods used to support literacy in the nation's schools. Specifically, the findings reported by the NRP provided the foundations on which many of the standards of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) were formed. However, the NRP did not define literacy or reading per se, rather five major areas of reading instruction were researched: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies. Due to the NRP's report and the NCLB legislation that followed the

report, any school district desiring funding for literacy instruction needed to address the five major areas. The narrow definition of literacy provided by the NRP report and resulting legislation, may have led to inappropriate literacy instruction practices for students who require extensive supports or may have left them out altogether.

### **Definitions and perspectives in education**

Definitions of literacy for some imply not abilities of individuals but value judgments about individuals (Knoblauch, 1990). Knoblauch discussed four types of literacy by considering the social and cultural influences at play when defining literacy.

- The functionalist perspective-this perspective places an emphasis on the skills-based teaching necessary for daily living as well as technology literacy. The characteristics of this definition can be seen in the No Child Left Behind movement.
- The cultural literacy perspective-this perspective views literacy beyond basic skills to include higher order thinking skills.
- The literacy for personal growth perspective-this perspective suggests the use of teaching materials that are personally enjoyable for the individual.
- The critical literacy perspective-this perspective views literacy in terms of the social conditions in which individuals find themselves at a particular time. Literacy is viewed as a means of personal and group empowerment and a way to seek political meaning for the individual or the group.

It is Knoblauch's belief that the first three perspectives of literacy have determined the methods typically used to promote literacy in schools.

The results of a study conducted by the National Reading Panel in 2000 were used to create the ways literacy is being taught to children in schools and measured through No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As a result, students who need a lot of help to become literate may not be getting that help.



## **Broader Definitions of Literacy**

The functionalist or skills-based definition of literacy is used primarily in schools. The problem with the functional approach is that it does not teach literacy skills that might enlarge a student's world such as reading for pleasure or responding to an email from a friend (Copeland & Keefe, 2007).

Some have attempted to create broader definitions of literacy especially for students who require extensive supports.

For example:

- Literacy as activities that involve accessing, using, and communicating about anything—in print or image media format, not limited to materials available only through sight or hearing (Downing, 2005).
- Literacy as “print or its equivalent” (Erickson & Hatton, p. 265)
- Literacy that happens while interacting with others within the community (Koppenhaver, n.d., Stokes, 1998).
- Literacy as a social phenomenon, a social achievement (Kliever, et al., 2004).
- Literacy as local understanding—recognizing that there is educational value in the communication among members of a group who may have been historically ignored such as individuals who require extensive supports (Kliever & Biklen, 2007).

Finally, Kleiwer (2008), through his research with individuals who require extensive supports, has come to define literacy as, “the construction (which includes interpretation) of meaning through visually or tactually created symbols that compose various forms of text” (p. 106).

There are different ways people think about literacy. Each way of thinking about literacy will affect people differently.

Four different ways to think about literacy are:

1. **Literacy** as teaching the basic skills of reading and writing
2. **Literacy** for developing thinking skills
3. **Literacy** for enjoyment
4. **Literacy** so that people can be successful at school, work, and in the community



# A Proposal for Literacy Definition Core Principles

Since October of 2008, a group of 12 teachers, students, and community providers have been working together to explore the issue of literacy for individuals who require extensive supports. Called "Literacy: All Children Empowered" (LACE), the group identified as a core issue, lack of literacy opportunities for individuals who require extensive supports. The group believed limited literacy opportunities resulted from narrow interpretations of literacy.

## Purpose

Acknowledging that literacy exists on a continuum and develops across an individual's lifetime, the authors propose a set of core definitional principles for literacy that embody the following purposes.

1. Acknowledges the current social cultural climate for skill-based instruction and therefore explicitly states that literacy goes beyond skill identification to encoding social cultural judgments (Knoblauch, 1990).
2. Encompasses all modes of communication (e.g., Downing, 2005; Koppenhaver et al., 1995; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003)
3. Views literacy as a social phenomenon (e.g., Scribner, 1984; Kliewer & Bilken, 2007; Koppenhaver, n.d.) and should not be limited to individual skills
4. Uses these principles as guides for instruction, research, and policy decisions

## Core Definitional Principles

The five core definitional principles for literacy proposed are:

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.

(Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 97)

Keefe and Copeland hope that the proposed definitional principles will assist others in coming to the "consensus that individuals with extensive support needs must be welcomed as full and active participant into the literate community" (p. 97).

## A Pilot Study

To address a gap in the literature related to the understanding of literacy and the need for literacy instruction for students with extensive needs for support beyond elementary school, the authors conducted a study. The intent of the research study was to gain an understanding of the definitions of literacy that guided research and practice. The authors found that many differences existed in the ways people defined literacy although most agreed that all individuals could benefit from literacy instruction. Furthermore, research participants agreed that literacy instruction should take place across all ages.

All people are able to gain literacy skills. Literacy skills look different for different people. Learning to be a part of the literate world builds up over a lifetime.

Becoming a part of the literate world...

- Is a right of all people
- Lets people connect with other people
- Can happen for all people
- Can help people to interact in the world that they live in
- Means that it is the job of all people to learn that there are many different ways of being a part of the literate world

# 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.

All students should have access to conventional and expanded literacy learning opportunities.

Evidenced-based practices, required by NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) with regard to literacy are limited, unless they include the understanding that people with extensive needs for support across the lifespan can develop literacy skills and participate actively in their communities (Browder, Mims, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Dezell, & Lee, 2008; Katims, 1994; Kliewer et al., 2004; Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995; Mirenda, 2003, Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999).

Literacy instruction must be emphasized beyond elementary school because 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).

The assumption of capability of students with extensive needs for support, rather than segregation from the general curriculum, can increase access to literacy opportunities and enhance the opportunities for participation in the literate community (Kliewer, et al., 2004).

What people believe about literacy affects how we relate to others.

All students should have the opportunity to receive literacy instruction in a way that is meaningful for them.

NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) see literacy in terms of reading and writing only.

Literacy instruction should last throughout your life.

It should be understood that all students are able to join the literate world. All students should be included in and not segregated from literacy opportunities.



# References

- Boudreau, D. (2002). Literacy skills in children and adolescents with Down syndrome. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15, 497-525.
- Browder, D., Mims, P., Spooner, F., Ahlgrim-Dezell, L. & Lee, A. (2008). Teaching elementary students with multiple disabilities to participate in shared stories. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 33, 3-12.
- Copeland, S. & Keefe, E. (2007). *Effective literacy instruction*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Downing, J. (2005). *Teaching literacy to students with significant disabilities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Erickson, K. & Hatton, D. (2007). Expanding understanding of emergent literacy: Empirical support for a new framework. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 10, 261-277.
- Erickson, K & Koppenhaver, D. (1995). Developing a literacy program for children with severe disabilities. *Reading Teacher*, 48, 676-684.
- Farrell, M. & Elkins, J. (1995). Literacy for all: The case of Down syndrome. *Journal of Reading*, 38, 270-280.
- Katims, D. (1994). Emergence of literacy in preschool children with disabilities, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 17, 58-69.
- Kliewer, C. & Bilken, D. (2007). Enacting literacy: Local understanding, significant disability, and a new frame for educational opportunity. *Teachers College Record*, 109, 2579-2600.
- K Kliewer, C., Fitzgerald, L., Meyer-Mork, J. Hartman, P., English-Sand, P. & Raschke, D. (2004). Citizenship for all in the literate community: An ethnography of young children with significant disabilities in inclusive early childhood settings. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74, 373-403.
- Knoblauch, D. (1990). Literacy and the politics of education. In A. A. Lumsford, Hl. Moglen, & J. Slevin (Eds.), *The right to literacy* (pp. 74-80). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Koppenhaver, D. (n.d). *A primer on literacy and developmental disabilities*. Chapel Hill, NC: Center for Literacy and Disabilities Studies.
- Koppenhaver, C. & Erickson, K. (2003). Natural emergent literacy supports for preschoolers with autism and severe communication impairments. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 23, 283-292.
- Koppenhaver, D., Pierce, P. & Yoder, D. (1995). *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 4, 5-14.
- Mirenda, P. (2003). "He's not really a reader...": Perspectives on supporting literacy in individuals with autism. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 23, 271-282.
- Moni, K. & Jobling, A. (2000). LATCH-ON: A program to develop literacy in young adults with Down syndrome. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 44, 40-49.
- Moni, K. & Jobling, A. (2001). Reading related literacy learning of young adults with Down syndrome: findings from a three year teaching and research program. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 48, 377-394.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Ryndak, D., Morrison, A., & Sommerstein, L. (1999). Literacy before and after inclusion in general education settings: A case study. *The Journal of Association for Persons With Severe Handicaps*, 24, 5-22.
- Scribner, S. (1984). Literacy in three metaphors. *American Journal of Education*, 93, 6-21.
- Stokes, W. (1998). Defining literacy. *Currents in Literacy*, 1. Retrieved from [http://www.lesly.edu/academic\\_centers/hood/currents/v1n1/defliteracy.html](http://www.lesly.edu/academic_centers/hood/currents/v1n1/defliteracy.html)

A summary of the original article

**What is Literacy?  
The Power of a Definition**

Liz Keefe, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of New Mexico

Susan Copeland, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
University of New Mexico

reprinted with permission from TASH for the workshop

**Meaningful Participation in  
Literacy Instruction across the Curriculum:  
Making It Happen**



Presented by the  
**PEAL Center**  
September 28, 2012  
Pittsburgh Marriott North  
Cranberry Township

