
Foreword

LITERACY IS LIBERTY

This book would not have been written just 10 years ago. If it had been written, it certainly would not have been published. As June Downing points out in this unique book, literacy considerations for students with significant disabilities are new, novel, and still not commonplace.

You see, students with disabilities have been systematically excused from literacy instruction. Early in the history of special education, students with significant disabilities did not even attend school. When they did, they were educated in segregated schools and classrooms, and their curriculum and instruction were not based on the core curriculum of the school. In fact, students with significant disabilities spent a great deal of their instruction day engaged in isolated skills instruction.

Over the years, and with lots of advocacy from parents and some educators, students with significant disabilities began to spend increasing amounts of time in regular classrooms. Even so, the field did not focus on literacy instruction. As Downing points out, this is likely due to the expectations people had for students who experienced significant disabilities. The field focused on gaining access to general education classrooms, with supports and services. This required significant attention to answering the question of why students with disabilities should be educated with peers without disabilities. Over time and as students with significant disabilities accessed the core curriculum, we began to notice that students were exceeding our expectations. In fact, they were displaying reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (e.g., Kliever, 1998; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999).

Today the research is clear: Inclusion works. As Downing notes, access to general education classrooms and the core curriculum has become a given in the education of students with significant disabilities. As a result, the field stands prepared to address a most pressing issue: literacy.

x ● Teaching Literacy to Students With Significant Disabilities

June Downing is the perfect person to tackle this pressing need. She has a wealth of knowledge and has been involved with the field of special education as a teacher, researcher, and leader. She is known for her ability to translate complex issues into common practice. She understands the needs, wants, and desires of people with significant disabilities. But most important, she knows that literacy brings liberty. Without providing students with significant disabilities access to the written word, we deny them the world. Said another way, literacy is power—power to control your own life and influence the world around you.

Teaching Literacy to Students With Significant Disabilities: Strategies for the K–12 Inclusive Classroom makes an important contribution. First, Downing challenges the accepted definition of literacy. She extends the work of Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000), who challenged the classroom standard of literacy and suggested that there are multiple literacies that students use both in and out of school. Downing extends their conceptualization and the common definition of literacy even further by exploring the various ways that students can and do use information to make meaning of the world.

Second, Downing explores the changes that must be made in the educational system if we are to ensure that “no child is left behind” and that every student really does have access to highly qualified teachers who believe that they can learn. This is no short order. Downing understands that every member of the educational community has a role to play if we are to accomplish this goal. She also provides specific guidelines for us to follow as we begin to provide students with significant disabilities access to literacy instruction.

Literacy instruction is the third area in which Downing makes a substantial contribution. While this book challenges accepted theories and explores the research base, it does so much more than that. This book is practical. Readers—from family members to teachers to related services staff to administrators—will develop and extend their understanding of quality literacy instruction for all students, including those who have historically been left behind. Strategic teaching is important, as we know that “teachers matter and what they do matters most” (Fisher & Frey, 2004, p. 1). In other words, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the teachers—general and special education—are likely to be the most important predictors of the success a student has in learning literacy. Again, Downing demonstrates her understanding of this and provides a wealth of information regarding the ways that students can become literate.

The final area in which *Teaching Literacy to Students With Significant Disabilities: Strategies for the K–12 Inclusive Classroom* meets a unique need is in evaluating progress. Too often, general and special educators do not

know what to do when students fail to make progress. This book articulates a system of support for teachers and students as we implement instructional plans. This system is clear and will likely result in a laserlike focus on ensuring that students with and without disabilities become literate thinkers who contribute to our society.

In sum, I invite you to read between the lines and infer that this book is unique and important. June Downing has challenged our assumptions about and expectations for students with significant disabilities. She has also provided direction for meeting these new expectations. June clearly believes that all students must participate in regular classrooms with their peers without disabilities and that students with significant disabilities must have access to quality literacy instruction. In fact, nothing less than the freedom and liberty for all of our students depends on it.

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