

## **Functional Literacy: What Does That Really Mean?**

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In 1997, I enthusiastically began my career as a public school speech-language pathologist (SLP). Although I realized that I had a great deal of experience to gain, I felt that I had been well prepared to help students develop their listening and speaking skills through a rigorous Masters program and a school-based internship with an extremely knowledgeable supervisor. Little did I realize that a mere 4 years later, my professional organization, the American-Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), would release a position statement calling for SLPs to “play a critical and direct role in the development of literacy for children and adolescents with communication disorders, including those with severe or multiple disabilities” (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2001,

1). Since I had little to no training in this area, I began to explore how reading and writing were being taught to the students with significant disabilities that I served and how I might best support their literacy development.

I worked with a number of teachers who taught in self-contained special education classrooms. When I questioned those teachers about how they approached literacy, the majority of them told me they focused on a functional literacy approach using sight word instruction. I had heard the term “functional” used repeatedly throughout my clinical training, yet I suddenly realized that no one had ever specifically defined it for me. My immediate thought about functional literacy instruction was that if one were to use literacy to function, he or she would need *all* the skills necessary for reading and writing, not just the ability to read sight words. Embarrassed by my

ignorance, I assumed those who were more experienced were also more knowledgeable, and I decided to quietly watch and learn. However, as several years passed, I saw those teachers and students working hard on sight word instruction but to no avail. Although my students were learning sight words, they remained functionally illiterate. As a result, I decided to investigate what was meant by the term “functional,” what it took to read independently with comprehension, and how those two ideas related.

A brief review of the history of special education revealed that the shift towards a functional skills curriculum in the late 1970s was a direct response to dissatisfaction with the developmental approach for students with significant disabilities. In contrast to moving through a prescribed developmental sequence and working on bottom up activities, the functional skills approach was based on students engaging in age-appropriate activities that would ultimately prepare them for as much independence and productivity in their post-school adult lives as possible (Brown, Branston, Pumpian, Certo, & Greunewald, 1979). Brown and his colleagues (1979) defined these functional skills as actions that would need to be performed by another person if the person with disabilities were unable to do them. The premise was that the more functional skills a person developed, the more privacy, independence and control over choices that individual would have as an adult. Functional curricula addressed vocational, home, community, and leisure skills (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2006) as well as the acquisition and use of those skills in the natural environment to ensure generalization (Brown et al., 1979).

On the positive side, the functional approach sought to use school time to engage in age-appropriate activities to prepare individuals with significant disabilities for adult

life. On the negative side, functional literacy instruction was often translated into “reductionist interventions” (Katims, 2000, p. 4), that involved sequenced, hierarchical drill and practice type instruction focused on isolated skills rather than the comprehensive instructional approach provided for students without disabilities. Some of these skills included learning the alphabet, learning letter sounds, word decoding, instruction in sight words, and filling out written forms (Joseph & Seery, 2004; Katims, 2000; Zascavage & Keefe, 2004). In addition, the specific content of functional curricula was undefined and left open for interpretation by the individual teacher, family, and/or IEP team (Joseph and Seery, 2004; Patton, Polloway, & Smith, 2000; Zascavage & Keefe, 2004), with some teams likely being more skilled than others in selecting content.

The ultimate question regarding the skills gained through a functional literacy approach is whether they eventually help the student accomplish the task of reading silently with comprehension. Even the simplest models of reading comprehension propose that an individual must be able to identify words *and* comprehend language in order to make meaning from connected text (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). At best, it appears that functional literacy activities may help students develop some limited word identification skills. However, working on sight words, word decoding, the alphabet, and/or letter sounds in isolation does little to develop the student’s ability to decipher words encountered outside of the instructional context, nor do those activities target the development of language comprehension. This observation is confirmed when we look at the literacy learning evidence base for individuals with significant disabilities. It is clear that sight word instruction is highly effective in teaching students to recognize a small vocabulary, but there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that this information

generalizes beyond words that are taught directly or that this information is used functionally (Browder & Xin, 1998).

In contrast, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that when provided with systematic comprehensive instruction, students with significant disabilities can acquire some measure of literacy (Erickson, Clendon, Abraham, Roy, & Van de Carr, 2005; Erickson, Koppenhaver, Yoder, & Nance, 1997; Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999; Pershey & Gilbert, 2002). A comprehensive literacy approach includes instruction in a variety of word identification strategies, vocabulary development, comprehension, fluency, writing, and opportunities to independently read and/or explore a wide array of self-selected texts. Rather than learning specific words or memorizing information through drill and practice, the comprehensive approach teaches students strategies that can be used to read and write not only what is taught directly, but to decipher and comprehend unfamiliar text as well.

In returning to my original question concerning the true meaning of the term “functional literacy,” I decided to investigate one more resource by looking up these two words in the dictionary. The definitions are very straightforward. According to the American Heritage College Dictionary (1997), *functional* is defined as “capable of performing” (p. 551), and *literacy* is defined as “the ability to read and write” (p. 792). If you combine these definitions, it seems reasonable to describe functional literacy as the capability of reading and writing at a level proficient enough to conduct one’s daily affairs. Unfortunately, the isolated sight word reading, word decoding, and alphabet instruction that have become associated with a functional literacy curriculum will not accomplish this goal. Those limited areas of focus simply do not address all of the word

identification and language comprehension skills that one needs in order to independently read with comprehension, let alone when this type of instruction is delivered in a drill and practice manner. In order for or an individual to develop a level of literacy that can be used in a functional or independent manner, he or she must receive the multiple components of comprehensive literacy instruction described above.

Given the limited amount of instructional time that teachers have every day, we must consider whether it is better to teach our students isolated skills and behaviors that may be acquired quickly but often do not generalize, or take the time to teach them strategies that can be used as tools to further their own literacy development. No one would expect a child without disabilities to learn to read and use literacy functionally by receiving what has come to be termed “functional literacy” instruction in special education. Why would we expect students with significant disabilities and greater learning challenges to learn to read in this truncated manner?

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