

Literacy Skill Development for Diverse Learners

“Educators limit future opportunities if they make an a priori assumption not to teach reading to some students because of the nature or severity of disability” (Browder, D. et al., 2006, p. 393).

Reading is a subject that needs no promotion. No one has to be sold on the merits of teaching reading to typical children. However, this is not the case for many children who have learning differences. Those opposed to teaching reading to students who have developmental disabilities argue that it is a waste of time because these students don’t understand what they read, and it isn’t really reading if it is not phonics-based.

In reconsidering our expectations for literacy skill development, we need to liberate students with learning differences from traditional reading measurements and methods, where the desired outcome is proficiency in technical reading skills. Traditionally, **vertical goals** are set for higher grade-level scores. Using this model, students may experience failure, and in some cases, failure results in termination of reading instruction. Even if a student does not fail and is able to attain higher levels of reading skills, this approach may not be beneficial to the child if the grade level for reading is considerably higher than the child’s level of comprehension.

Instead of **vertical goals** for attaining higher levels of reading skills, students should have **horizontal goals** that expand on how they use and enjoy reading. Horizontal expansion of reading skills has an ongoing effect on communication and on building competencies that lead to independence and success in a range of situations. As students apply reading to communication, social skills, school subjects, and recreational reading, reading grade level will gradually increase, but this increase is not the measure of reading success (Oelwein, 2002).

“If teachers dismiss the literacy ladder and adopt the ‘web model,’ students won’t need to acquire a certain skill set before being invited to participate in the curriculum and instruction in general education classrooms; learners won’t be expected to develop, behave, and learn in the same ways; and individual differences in learning will be supported and appreciated” (Kluth, 2003, p. 139).