



“Without being able to read, what's literacy mean to them?": Situated beliefs about literacy for students with significant disabilities



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Decisions about literacy are influenced by assumptions about students' potential.
- In special education settings, teachers sort students based on orality.
- Assumptions about potential are based on students' orality and behavior.
- Low teacher self-efficacy leads to limited literacy opportunities.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 December 2016
Received in revised form
12 April 2017
Accepted 2 June 2017

Keywords:

Literacy
Teachers' thinking
Teachers' beliefs
Special education

ABSTRACT

Beliefs about students and pedagogical knowledge have been identified as key barriers to accessible general education content and contexts for students with significant disabilities. In this case study of a high school special education literacy class, I examine definitions of literacy, expectations about students, and self-efficacy in the process of teaching literacy to students with significant disabilities. Team members expressed disjointed understandings about the purpose of literacy, lacked pedagogical knowledge, and had poor self-efficacy. Beliefs about “high” and “low” students, defined by students' orality, affected team members' perceptions about the feasibility and priority of literacy for various groups of students.

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1. “Without being able to read, what's literacy mean to them?": situated beliefs about literacy for students with significant disabilities

For students with significant disabilities, who have intellectual and developmental disabilities requiring intensive, individualized instruction, modifications, adaptations, and supports to access grade level content (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2016), literacy can be elusive. Approximately 1%, or more than 500,000 K-12 students are identified with a significant disability. Literacy is a pathway to language for students with significant disabilities, who often require symbol-based augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to communicate. Defined as the ability to read, write, listen, and speak in everyday contexts (Gee,

2001), an absence of literacy means an absence of the ability to articulate basic wants, needs, thoughts, and feelings (Erickson, Koppenhaver, Yoder, & Nance, 1997), as well as to obtain and act on information in a self-determined manner (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013).

Research has demonstrated that students with significant disabilities' literacy skills can improve given targeted, language-rich instruction in general education contexts (e.g., Hudson, Browder, & Wood, 2013), and literacy instruction in segregated contexts (i.e., special education classes or other activities in which only students with disabilities are present) is typically limited in scope, diversity of materials, and language experiences (Ruppap, 2015; Ruppap, Fisher, Olson, & Orlando, in press; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011). Despite a solid and growing research base supporting grade-aligned literacy instruction in general education contexts, more than 93% of students with significant disabilities in the United States are excluded from general education settings (Kleinert et al., 2015). More importantly, reading

The author would like to thank Janet Gaffney and Taucia Gonzalez for their thoughtful feedback on previous versions of this manuscript.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.003>

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and expressive communication skills are significantly and positively correlated with placement in less restrictive settings such as general education classes (Kleinert et al., 2015). Thus, students who have intellectual disability and poor literacy skills are disproportionately denied access to the general education contexts where they are most likely to gain those skills. Within special education contexts, there is emerging evidence that students with the most significant disabilities are segregated further, through implicit or explicit denial of opportunities to respond and exclusion from instructional activities. For example, Kurth, Born, and Love (2017) observed instruction in self-contained classes and found that students with the most significant needs for support and who had complex communication needs were the least likely to be engaged in instruction. Further understanding about how teachers and other staff enact instructional practices, especially in relation to literacy, will help to disrupt the social systems that reproduce exclusion and a denial of a free and appropriate public education for students who lack language or access to communication.

1.1. Curriculum and contexts for students with significant disabilities

The roots of inclusive education began in the 1960s with the normalization movement in Scandinavian countries, the United States, and Canada (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2011). Since the 1970s, when students with disabilities were first legally guaranteed an education in the United States, curriculum for students with significant disabilities has progressed from a developmental model, which focused on skills based on students' "mental ages," to a functional model, which focused on individualized and practical goals to increase independence in post-school environments (Shurr & Bouck, 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, the functional model was the dominant approach to curriculum development for students with significant disabilities (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, & Shrikanth, 1997; Shurr & Bouck, 2013). As students accessed general education environments it became apparent that they were not also offered access to the general education content, and that curricular content should reflect these inclusive environments (Shurr & Bouck, 2013).

The United States' legislative requirement for access to the general curriculum in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)*, and standards-based instruction in *No Child Left Behind (2001)*, promised to change the lack of focus on general education content for students with significant disabilities. Accordingly, research in the area of access to general education content for students with significant disabilities has been increasing (Shurr & Bouck, 2013) however, placements of students with significant disabilities in general education contexts in the United States have been stagnant or decreasing over the past eight years (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2015). Because students are most likely to benefit from general education learning opportunities in general education contexts, the decreased emphasis on inclusion is concerning. Therefore, research has been focused on identifying ways to facilitate access to general education content in general education contexts (Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008).

1.2. Literacy decision making for students with significant disabilities

Contextual factors and individual teachers' beliefs and knowledge affect teachers' decisions about literacy for students with significant disabilities. Overall, research suggests that teachers are unaware of strategies to provide grade-aligned literacy instruction in general education classes, and they likewise express skepticism

that academic literacy instruction should be prioritized over life-skills literacy (such as identifying hot and cold water faucets, or common community signs, Timberlake, 2014). Teachers' attitudes toward literacy for students with significant disabilities seem to be nested within their overall epistemological beliefs about students with disabilities (Bock & Erickson, 2015). However, teachers' beliefs and knowledge are socially situated and directly influenced by their workplace contexts (Ruppap, 2015; Rosenholtz, 1989; Timberlake, 2016).

Ruppap, Gaffney, and Dymond (2015) examined the literacy decision-making processes of 4 teachers of students with significant disabilities and found that a combination of self-efficacy, expectations, experiences, and beliefs about students were filtered through their school district administrative context as they made decisions. However, the study did not focus on decisions vis-a-vis the social context of the classroom. Large teams of people support students with significant disabilities, and in special education classes, there is often a high ratio of adults to students (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Kurth et al., 2017). The adults collectively contribute to the classroom culture. How teams go about implementing an initiative designed to improve the content and manner of literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities has not been explored.

2. Theoretical framework

The purpose of this study was to understand how team members' expectations, definitions, and self-efficacy were expressed during literacy instruction within the context of a segregated special education class in which the policy of "access to the general curriculum" was driving a major curricular shift. Kozleski et al. (2011) explained that, across history and international borders, inclusive education is often mediated by the implicit and explicit societal goals of education, including the definitions of learning and understandings about differences that are promoted officially and carried out in classrooms, and access to a variety of resources (e.g., human, material, intellectual, capital). According to Holland and Lave (2001), studies of *history in person* can illuminate how "enduring struggles and historical subjectivities are mediated through local, situated practice" (p. 29). Here, I examine a community undergoing change (i.e., the team of educators) to understand how locally situated practitioners appropriated historical struggles (i.e., inclusive education and access to the general curriculum), responded to official district policies and structures (i.e., availability of resources and space), and interpreted these socio-cultural factors through their own practices (i.e., within conflictual space(s)).

To understand how the team members' expectations, definitions, and self-efficacy were affecting their teaching decisions within this context, I drew upon Clandinin and Connelly's (1996) conceptualization of *teachers' professional knowledge landscapes* in the analysis of interview and observation data. Clandinin and Connelly explained that teachers' knowledge landscapes are characterized by "stories," of which two are relevant for the current study. *Sacred stories* are the official messages about reform and initiatives that come from outside the classroom. *Secret stories* are the ways teachers actually work within the classroom. I used this lens for analysis, particularly attending to the interplay between the secret stories of the classroom and the sacred story of inclusion and access to general curriculum content given the policy-driven nature of the curricular change. Clandinin and Connelly explained that teachers' stories are constructed in classroom practice and, often, teachers struggle to define their use of knowledge because it is so intricately woven with the moment-to-moment action of the classroom, their prior experiences, and the theoretical basis for

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