

## Myth:

### Functional Literacy is enough for people with disabilities

#### Introduction



"Functional literacy is enough for people with disabilities." You may have a gut reaction to this statement that is positive or negative. But before we dive into the truth of it, let's talk about what functional literacy is. For individuals with disabilities, functional literacy often focuses on skills that are necessary for safety and community involvement such as:

- Recognizing community signs such as Do Not Enter, Exit, Restroom.
- Following recipes.
- Reading labels on medications and cleaning products.
- Signing your name.
- Adding basic information to applications and medical records.

If that is functional literacy, is that enough for people with disabilities? Let's look at another definition. In 1978, UNESCO's General Counsel defined functional literacy this way:

"A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development."

This definition reminds us that the need for literacy skills surrounds us in all our environments:

- As family members, we must give and receive information about schedules, carry out personal and home care, pay bills, etc.
- Correspondence through text or email allows us to initiate and maintain relationships, as well as share and receive information from professionals.
- Every job requires a level of literacy skills to read safety information, enter data, review contracts, or any number of other tasks.
- Living safely in the world requires that we follow recipes, read labels, obey community signs, and read maps.

However, UNESCO's definition brings to light another very important aspect of literacy: development. We immediately think of literacy as vital in formal educational environments, but the definition does not limit development to academics. Reading allows us to develop knowledge about people, places, experiences, and processes. Through writing, we can share our feelings, plan activities, work out difficulties, and set goals. Literacy helps us to develop academic skills but it is also a means of growing relationally, creatively, economically, and emotionally.

If UNESCO's definition of functional literacy were accepted everywhere, we might agree that functional literacy is enough for people with disabilities, but why stop there? Literacy offers us more than effective functioning and development; it offers us pleasure, a sense of discovery, and a sense of connection to others.

Why must people with disabilities be limited to literacy as a means to an end? Let us encourage people with disabilities to use their literacy skills (regardless of the level) to enjoy the written word. Let's offer opportunities with needed support to:

- Read about enjoyable topics in books, magazines or online.
- Write poetry.
- Make up stories.
- Play word games and do word puzzles.
- Explore new places and ideas.
- Learn more about the human experience.

As Dr. Seuss wrote, "The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Functional literacy is not enough for people with disabilities.

#### References

Seuss, D. (1978). *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* New York, NY: Random House

UNESCO (2006). *Understandings of literacy. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006 Education for All: Literacy for Life.*

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