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# Literacy, Autism, and Inclusion

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# LITERACY, AUTISM, AND INCLUSION

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Education Specialist

Bridgett L. Hodges

University of Northern Iowa

December 2012

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# ABSTRACT

Young children with significant developmental disabilities can be taught sophisticated literacy skills and many interventions have been shown effective in the research. However, there is a lack of research that looks at the effect of inclusion on literacy with respect to a single student. This study will investigate the influence of an inclusive, general education classroom on the literacy learning of a student with autism. A participant observer approach will be employed in order to collect the following data: in depth interviews and observations of a single individual over a fifteen hour period, and a qualitative case study design will be used to analyze the data collected.

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A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Education Specialist

Bridgett L. Hodges

University of Northern Iowa

December 2012

This Study by: Bridgett L. Hodges
Entitled: Literacy, Autism, and Inclusion

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable amount of research on autism, especially with its recent rise in prevalence. According to Fombonne (2003) there are 60 individuals out of 10,000 diagnosed with autism. The 2000 census data estimates that there are between 221,301 and 482,846 individuals under the age of 20 labeled as having autism spectrum disorder in the United States. Yet Kliewer (2008) states, "Defining young children with significant developmental disabilities is somewhat tricky" (p. 2). In his book he defined those children as any who qualified for special education services, received state resources because of the degree of their disability, and were often labeled as having autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, Rett syndrome, or a more generic label such as entitled individual or developmental disability. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the same qualifications as Kliewer (2008) and thus will look at research on children with a variety of labels including autism, Down syndrome, mental retardation, and significant developmental disabilities since these individuals are often denied the right to be literate (Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006).

Both autism and literacy can be looked at as social constructions, without solid and stable definitions. This is one of the views presented in the research about autism and literacy. There is not an absolute reality of each idea, but instead the reality is constructed by society's cultural and historical perspectives (Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kliewer & Landis, 1999). How these constructions intersect is especially important in the case of literacy for students with significant disabilities.

Kliewer, Fitzgerald, Meyer-Mork, and Hartman (2004) explained that despite the fact that many individuals with significant developmental disabilities are able to demonstrate literacy skills, they are often not given a chance because they are seen as too cognitively impaired and literacy as it is conceived is beyond their ability. This position has serious and cyclical repercussions for students labeled with significant disabilities. Not doing well at literacy tasks or not having the opportunity to learn literacy can often cause a student to fail at school, since reading is the basis for many subjects and failing reduces opportunities for access to literacy (Kliewer & Landis, 1999). Katims (1996) explained that children with significant developmental disabilities are often found to be read to less often and have access to fewer writing materials at home than their non-disabled peers. It is important for students with autism to be given literacy opportunities.

The research demonstrates that young children with significant developmental disabilities can be taught sophisticated literacy skills (Katims, 2000; Kliewer et al., 2004; Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003) and there are specific interventions suggested for providing more literacy opportunities for students with significant developmental disabilities. Several studies suggest better equipping teachers to teach literacy to all students (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer & Landis; 1999; Zascavage & Keefe 2004). Kliewer and Kasa-Hendrickson (2007) recommend a framework for teachers that can help students with disabilities escape society's harmful constructions: provide an environment where the students participate and are supported in interpreting stories and ideas of others, understand the students as full and valued citizens in the classroom, provide an environment that promotes and nurtures the development of

communicating using text, support the student in developing skills to read, and offer an environment that supports joy in the discovery of writing and reading. Overall, if teachers develop a broader understanding for what literacy means, students with significant developmental disabilities will have more opportunities to be involved in literacy (Kliewer & Landis, 1999). These are strategies that were looked for during this study, as well as any other strategies that may have contributed to the student's development of literacy.

Including students labeled with significant disabilities in the general education classroom has many benefits for literacy education. First of all, inclusion can benefit all students by encouraging peers to explore new ways to express themselves (Kliewer, 2008). According to Kliewer and Kasa-Hendrickson (2007), inclusion can help students with disabilities become literate through setting a good example of a socially just classroom, providing a safe classroom environment, improving communication, expanding technology, and learning through collaboration. All of these areas will help all students, in addition to making literacy more available for students with significant disabilities. Another way inclusion will benefit all students is that teachers will gain more experience being open minded, exploring new and different ways to teach, using different strategies, and improving their management skills (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009). Inclusion has many benefits and calls into question the current social constructions of disability and literacy.

Of additional importance are the research studies that look at the barriers to teaching literacy to individuals with autism. An important barrier addressed by Zascavage

and Keefe (2004) is the attitude of educators and some parents that individuals with significant developmental disabilities cannot become literate. As a result of viewing students with severe disabilities as uneducable, special education curriculum often focuses more on functional life skills than academics (Kliewer et al., 2004). Additionally, children with significant disabilities may receive less exposure to early literacy at home (Katims, 1996). Zascavage and Keefe (2004) did a study that looked extensively at barriers in policy, practice, knowledge, and attitude. In the current study, the researcher observed a student with autism while keeping in mind possible barriers that may have been present.

In this research an intensive case study was completed of an elementary student with autism who was included in a general education classroom. In doing so, the student's literacy skills were observed and how he was being taught and included in the classroom's literate community. This lead to a clearer understanding of how inclusion affected the literacy learning of this particular student. Although a lot of research has been done on these topics, none have focused on the intersection of literacy and inclusion in this way. As is typical with a qualitative case study design, the research became clearer as the study progressed. The research question was as follows: *How does a child with autism experience literacy in an inclusive classroom?*

An obvious limitation with this study is that it is composed of only one individual in one classroom, in one school, and with one teacher. In an ideal world, numerous case studies like this would be put together to form a more comprehensive view of inclusion and literacy for students with autism; this study may be the beginning of a more extensive

grouping of comprehensive case studies. Additionally, when using a qualitative research design there is a likelihood of researcher bias. Lichtman (2010) argues that total objectivity is not possible, so the researcher should be aware of and reflexive about her influence on the research. This bias was accounted for by a reflection journal written in after each day of observation. In addition to being self-aware and reflexive, triangulation was used from observation notes, interview notes, and a reflection journal in order to be certain that all ideas have multiple forms of data for support. Despite these limitations, this study examined what literacy learning looked like for a student with autism included in the general education classroom.

# CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Symptoms of individuals labeled with autism, a developmental disorder that presents itself very early in a child's life, can vary across individuals and throughout their lives. The autism spectrum includes Asperger's syndrome, Rett's syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive development disorder. It often affects an individual's social interaction, communication, and relationship development (National Council Research, 2001). In recent years the number of individuals diagnosed with autism has increased. This could be due to a number of things, including changes in diagnostic criteria or the public's heightened awareness of the disorder, as well as the changing construction of what is defined as autism. Prevalence rates vary depending on the study; however, according to Fombonne (2003) there are 60 individuals out of 10,000 diagnosed with autism. The 2000 census data estimates that there are between 221,301 and 482,846 individuals under the age of 20 labeled as having autism spectrum disorder in the United States. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) served five times as many children with autism in 2006-2007 than 1996-1997 (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009).

Although research exists looking at literacy, autism, and inclusion, there is little research that looks at what literacy looks like for an individual with autism included in a general education classroom. To provide background for the study, this literature review looked at literacy instruction, social construction, the construction of literacy and disability, how the constructs intersect with each other, the importance of literacy for

children with autism, barriers to literacy, current research interventions, and benefits of inclusion in regards to literacy.

## Literacy Instruction

A key component to the current study is literacy instruction, which will be examined in this section. What is considered effective literacy instruction is controversial and has changed a great deal over the years. The construction of literacy will be discussed later in this review; however, it is important to consider a broader view of literacy instruction as well. A research article by Mandel Morrow and Dougherty (2011) described child-centered models and skills-based models. "Those who adhere to the child centered approach think that learning is best prompted by exploring and experimenting in playful environments" (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). Whereas the skills-based models view the beginning years of school as a time for kids to be explicitly taught early reading and writing skills (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). The following paragraphs will discuss these two models of literacy instruction, the Four Blocks approach to early literacy instruction (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998), as well as literacy instruction for students with communication needs.

Instructors that use child-centered models believe that children learn through their own exploration, social interactions, and play. Classroom centers, which provide opportunities for kids to learn on their own in a variety of ways, were derived from the child-centered approach. The emergent literacy perspective is an example of a child-centered approach and assumes the child begins his literacy learning before attending school. This perspective claims that literacy learning can begin as early as the first year

and occurs in natural settings such as the home, community, and school. The emergent literacy perspective is similar to another child-centered model, the whole language approach, in that they both see learning as meaningful and functional, instruction does not follow commercial materials, literacy is integrated throughout the day, reading, writing, listening, and talking have equal importance, center-based teaching is used, and the importance of a literacy rich environment is stressed (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). Child-centered models are discussed later in the review, as research suggests that they are the best approach to take with students with disabilities (Kliewer, 2008).

Skills-based models of literacy instruction are important to consider as well, since they are often used in the schools today due to recent laws on accountability. "This approach views preschool and kindergarten as a time when children are ready to learn early reading and writing skills that will improve literacy achievement in the future" (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011, p. 5). Reading readiness grew out of skills-based models and includes 4 main areas of skills that teachers are urged to impart onto their students in order to prepare them to learn literacy. The four reading readiness areas are identifying and differentiating rhyming words and sounds, or auditory discrimination; visual discrimination, or identifying colors, shapes, and letters; cutting in a straight line, coloring inside the lines, reading left to right, or visual motor skills; and large motor skills, or skipping, hopping, and walking in a straight line. This approach does not consider experiences or background knowledge children may have that may contribute to their literacy learning (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). Mandating that a child have certain skills before learning literacy may exclude students with disabilities (Kliewer,

2008). Another skills-based model is the behaviorist approach, which claims, "Learning requires direct instruction, time on task, structured routines, and practice" (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011, p. 7). Yet another skills-based model is the Montessori model, which promotes the idea that kids need systematic, sequential training in certain skills. Montessori schools are set up with many centers that have very specific tasks, goals, and steps to follow and do not focus on social and emotional growth (Mandel Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). Finally, the last skills-based model to be discussed is phonemic awareness instruction, which involves explicit teaching. This model is a precursor to phonics instruction and includes understanding that words are made up of letters of the alphabet and understanding the relationship between written words and sounds. In phonemic awareness models, the above skills are thought to be necessary in order to learn to read and write. Skills-based models believe that students need direct instruction in literacy in order to improve their skills.

The Four Blocks approach (Cunningham et al., 1998) uses points from both the skills-based models and child-centered models. This approach was designed to avoid the pendulum swing seen in the field of reading instruction, as well as to avoid grouping students by ability since students have different needs and learn differently. The Four Blocks framework uses the following four historically used approaches to literacy instruction: guided reading, self-selected reading, writing, and working with words. The purposes of guided reading include exposing kids to a variety of literature and teaching comprehension strategies. The authors (Cunningham et al., 1998) suggest that guided reading begin with looking through the book with the teacher's guidance, name items in

the pictures, make predictions, and highlight difficult vocabulary words. After that, it is suggested that the student reads on his own or with a partner, then reads again in large group either with the teacher reading or choral reading, discuss predictions and comprehension, write about the book, and then role playing and acting out the book. The authors suggest, "Children who need help are not left to read by themselves but are supported in a variety of ways" (Cunningham et al., 1998, p. 654). Another one of the four blocks is self-selected reading, when students choose their own books and have opportunities to share and respond to what they read. Children who do not seem to want to read during this time and wander around doing other tasks often do so because they have difficulty reading on their own. Teachers can help these students by assisting in book selection at the students' instructional levels, suggest the students read with adults or peers, encourage repeated readings of books the students have had success with, provide opportunities to read with younger students, and make a variety of books available including informational picture books. Additionally, teachers can inform all students there are 3 ways to read: tell a story from memory of a book already read, read by looking at the pictures, and read all the words in a book. Two elements the Four Blocks framework (Cunningham et al., 1998) uses include guided reading and self-selected reading.

The Four Blocks approach also uses writing and working with words, in addition to guided reading and self-selected reading which were discussed above. The writing section can be seen as a writing workshop and includes the teacher modeling writing and students writing on their own with teacher guidance. After 3-5 good drafts, the students

can finalize their work by sharing it with the other students. Working with words is another concept this approach uses, which includes working on high-frequency words on a word wall, spelling, decoding, and rhyming. The article shared different tactics to use such as building words with manipulative letters, writing a sentence on the board and covering certain sections for the students to guess the word, and practicing words by saying them out loud, clapping the syllables, and writing the words. The 4 blocks can be used as centers during literacy time, can be connected by themed units, and integration can occur throughout the blocks (Cunningham et al., 1998). This approach uses a variety of ideas from both the skills-based reading models and the child-centered reading models. The current study looked at literacy instruction for a student with autism in an inclusive kindergarten classroom, so it is crucial to consider literacy instruction more broadly as views on the topic are constantly shifting in the field of education.

In addition to child-centered and skills-based models of literacy instruction, research also addresses what literacy instruction should look like for students with communication needs, such as students with autism. "Perhaps there is no other group of individuals who highlight the power of literacy more compellingly than those with complex communication needs" (Clendon & Erickson, 2009, p. 77). Three strategies that are suggested for students with communication needs, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, are using a comprehensive approach to instruction, directing an intervention at the individual's highest area of need, and targeting language and literacy at the same (Clendon & Erickson, 2009).

One of the key parts of providing literacy instruction for students with communication needs is using a comprehensive approach instead of just focusing on one area. The Whole-to-Part Model of Silent Reading Comprehension (Erickson, Koppenhaver, & Cunningham, 2006) addresses the reading and writing constructs that should be addressed. These include word identification, language comprehension, and print processing. Previously literacy instruction for students with autism and other developmental disabilities has focused on only one of the constructs instead of considering the whole picture. One example of this is that it has previously been thought that these students are able to memorize sight words but unable to learn to decode unfamiliar words. Because of this idea, literacy instruction has focused on recognizing whole words and not teaching decoding skills (Clendon & Erickson, 2009). Research has since shown that this is not the case; students with communication difficulties can learn decoding strategies (Joseph & McCachran, 2003, as cited in Clendon & Erickson, 2009). The overemphasis on sight words has resulted in not enough attention being paid to the other parts of the reading process such as language comprehension and print processing. Few children with autism have difficulties with decoding one single word, but instead struggle with vocabulary knowledge and receptive knowledge (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006). These students need daily opportunities to build their literacy skills in all areas including sight words, strategies for decoding unknown words, reading comprehension, vocabulary, text structure, and metacognitive strategies. Additionally, frequent opportunities for self-directed reading and writing should be provided in the

classroom (Clendon & Erickson, 2009). Literacy instruction for students with communication needs should focus on not just one area of literacy, but on all areas.

In addition to comprehensive literacy instruction, students with communication needs benefit from interventions that focus on their highest area of need and from being taught language and literacy simultaneously (Clendon & Ericckson, 2009). The Whole-to-Part Model (Erickson et al., 2006) can be used to assess students and determine under which construct their highest area of need falls. Teachers and speech language pathologists can work together to determine the student's highest area of need and which team member will work on an intensive intervention to target that area. Additionally, it is important for students with communication needs to have both language and literacy addressed together. An example of a strategy that integrates language and literacy simultaneously was shared in research by Erickson (2005), called the Personalized Key Words Strategy. This strategy helps students with decoding and includes teaching students the meaning of certain keywords that are chosen, how to read and spell the keywords, and how to use the known keywords to read unfamiliar words. The keywords are chosen with the particular student in mind, personalized to his interests and needs. Ways to teach the keywords include using a word wall and structured writing. Using a comprehensive approach to literacy, intervening directly with the individual's greatest area of need, and targeting language and literacy at the same time are critical in teaching literacy to students with communication needs.

Social Construction

Before looking at the construction of literacy and disability, we will look more broadly at the construction of social ideas. Searle (1995) wrote, "In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist" (p. 7). Social construction theory states that reality is socially constructed and social ideas which many consider factual are actually quite subjective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Some examples of social constructions given by Searle (1995) include money, property, governments, and marriages. Although money is taken very seriously and is very important in our society, it only exists because members of society created it. Without the institution of money a five-dollar bill would be meaningless. Another example of a major social construction is freedom (Berger & Luckman, 1966). What it means to be free varies in different countries and has changed over the years. Gallagher (2006) stated, "…What we take as factual knowledge and reality are our own renditions of the way things are" (p. 517). Most individuals take reality and what they think they know for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The structure of social reality is meant to be invisible and unnoticeable; individuals in society are raised to take constructions for granted (Searle, 1995).

Despite the fact that America boasts equality, our culture has a great deal of inequality and society has ways of legitimizing this social inequality. For example, African American individuals have often been labeled as undisciplined, lazy, and promiscuous. Similarly, people with disabilities have been thought of as unproductive, unable to develop socially or cognitively, and prone to depression (Adkins, 2003).

Characteristics like these are given to minority individuals in society in order to justify why they are often treated unfairly and unequally.

Lane (1997) stated, "…Social problems are constructed in particular cultures, at particular times, in response to the efforts of interested parties" (p. 153). Some examples Lane (1997) gives of these constructions are alcoholism, homosexuality, and child abuse. Over the years, how each social issue was defined has changed. For instance, there have always been parents who hit their children, but it has not always been called abuse. Additionally, alcoholism was not always considered a disease. Homosexuality was widely considered a sin against the church, then a mental illness, and now a personal matter. These are just some examples of social constructions, which can lead to groups of individuals being labeled and then treated differently as a result of those labels. Ferguson and Ferguson (2000) stated that ideas like disability and literacy are social constructions; they are bound to a certain time period and culture and are constantly renegotiated by members of society. One of the most important constructions to look at for this study is society's construction of literacy, which has a tremendous effect on young children labeled with autism.

## Construction of Literacy

Kliewer (2008) wrote, "These contesting frameworks indicate that no single, absolute, all-encompassing, or agreed-on definition of early literacy exists" (p. 26). The definition of literacy has changed considerably over the years. At one time, being literate was defined as being able to sign one's name and over half of the adult populations in even the most industrialized European countries could not perform this task (Kliewer et

al., 2004). Because society valued labor over education and often children would work all day instead of attending school, teaching literacy to children was rarely considered. As a shift in society occurred to mandate school attendance for all children, literacy became more important. Now literacy is looked at differently still, with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; PL 107-110) and the pressure for children to learn to read earlier and earlier (Kliewer, 2008). As the construction of literacy continues to change, it seeks to account for diverse learners and changing technologies (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Kaderavek & Rabidoux, 2004; Kliewer et al., 2004). When literacy is looked at as ever changing instead of as a fixed entity, more individuals are able to participate (Kliewer, 2008; Koppenhaver, Coleman, Kalman, & Yoder, 1991; Watson, Layton, Pierce, & Abraham, 1994).

Kliewer (2008) stated, "Conventionally, literacy remains strictly aligned with alphabetic print that allows an author to systematically encode ideas and convey those ideas across time and space to an audience able to decode the text" (p. 15). Watson and his colleagues (1994) also explained, "For 70 years, 'reading readiness' was the prevailing view on how children develop literacy, and this legacy is still apparent in many educational settings today" (p. 136) There are two conventional approaches to literacy: emergent literacy, which focuses on written and verbal literacy being intertwined and developing naturally, and basic skills-phonics, which focuses on skill and drill and direct instruction. In the emergent literacy framework, educators were not concerned with early literacy; it was believed that literacy would develop organically when children were provided with a developmentally appropriate environment. However, in the late 1990s

concern began to grow about the state of literacy competence in American children. Due to the pressure to increase reading skills in students, there came a push to teach the alphabetic principle and phonics to preschoolers. This resulted in the basic skills-phonics model replacing the emergent literacy model as the more dominant model (Kliewer, 2008). Basic skills-phonics includes four major components: phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, oral language, and spelling (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; pl 107-110) has especially emphasized this phonics based approach. The first component of the basic skills-phonics approach, phonemic awareness, is seen as one of the most important steps to literacy, and as one of the beginning rungs in the ladder to literacy.

A conventional approach to literacy often includes this ladder to literacy model (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer et al., 2004). The climb towards literacy begins in infancy and gradually gets more complex as it builds to mastery. A key point in this model is that the individual needs to master basic skills before moving forward and this can be a problem for children with significant disabilities. Often, children with significant disabilities are considered unprepared or unable to climb the literacy ladder, so they are not given a chance (Kliewer, 2008; Koppenhaver et al., 1991; Watson et al., 1994). Kliewer (2008) and Watson and his colleagues (1994) argue that this limiting approach particularly keeps individuals with significant developmental disabilities from becoming literate through other means such as narratives, sign languages, reading recipes and newspapers, problem solving, and other forms of less conventional literacy, which are often not made available to them because they do not master phonics. In order to escape

the limiting approach that is described above, we need to have a more flexible construction of literacy. Just as society constructs ideas in the first place, these ideas can and do change over time.

When individuals understand literacy as concurrent, students with significant developmental disabilities are able to participate in a literate environment. Instruction and access to literacy opportunities change when educators recognize all types of literacy, including paging through a picture book, conversing, listening to a teacher read aloud, using sign language, scribbling, and illustrating ideas (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). Reading, writing, listening, and speaking begin before formal literacy instruction and continue to develop. These are considered beginning literacy behaviors and children learn to read and write through processes influenced by their environment (Katims, 1996).

A teacher in one study (Kliewer et al., 2004) focused less on traditional text in her classroom and more on the many different modes children use to express and understand stories that come from their own experiences. For example, literacy can be taught through acting out skits, reading aloud, passing notes, and even talking to one another. Additionally, early literacy can be seen in the students' pretend play and story telling. Although this may not always look like reading as one might expect, it is still a form of literacy and is therefore very important. What constitutes story telling can vary greatly; it may involve a grocery shopping list or a schedule of the day's events (Kliewer & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2007). Being in a rich literacy environment is important for all students and the amount of literacy can be increased when teachers have a broader construction of what is considered literacy. How literacy is constructed affects how students become

literate; this study examined the literacy of one student with autism as it related to his inclusion in a general education classroom.

## Construction of Disability

"In contemporary American society, the term disabled evokes certain images and expectations and the individual so labeled is likely to be viewed as an object of pity or, if among the rare success stories, praised as a heroic figure" (Adkins, 2003, p.1). When an individual has a disability, he is considered to have something wrong with him. People with disabilities are seen as needing to be fixed; they are seen as the source of the problem when in fact disability could be looked at completely differently. Instead, perhaps people with disabilities can be seen as a minority of the population who have differences, just as everyone else has differences. Lane (1997) made a case that deaf individuals do not have a disability at all but instead are a minority of the population that have a different way of communicating. If society deems deaf people and other individuals labeled as having disabilities as deviant, it actually helps reinforce the social norms. Any behavior that is outside of what society considers normal is then considered inferior. Additionally, this process helps maintain the existing social order of modern American society by disempowering one group and empowering another (Adkins, 2003). In summary, society has a way of constructing social ideas that benefit some people, typically the majority, and harm others, typically the minority.

The view of disability as a social construction is prevalent in the research about autism and literacy. There is not an absolute reality of each idea, but instead the reality is constructed by society's cultural and historical perspectives (Broderick & Kasa-

Hendrickson, 2001; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kliewer & Landis, 1999). Often times, this construction might not be accurate. For example, society looks at individuals with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in a way that does not involve literacy. Society often considers these individuals as illiterate and without the skills to learn to be able to read (Kliewer & Landis, 1999). In fact, many special education teachers share the idea that these students lack the ability for literacy, which limits opportunities for students. Kliewer and Landis' (1999) research showed that viewing children with severe disabilities in this way was frequent, and many of these students' individualized education plans (IEPs) did not have goals addressing the use of written language.

Some researchers have looked specifically at the social construction of autism. It is a common thought that the diagnosis of autism will often come with the diagnosis of mental retardation. "Leading authorities declare 75% of persons classified autistic as retarded, linking severity of symptoms with cognitive level" (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p. 166). Kasa-Hendrickson (2005) wrote, "The conventional thought is if one moves in bizarre ways or does not speak, then there must be diminished thinking ability" (p. 56). Researchers are unable to understand the behaviors and communication of individuals with autism, so they hypothesize about their mental abilities. The student is labeled as having mental retardation not because of his actual thinking ability, but due to a lack of evidence about his ability to think (Biklen & Burke, 2006). This is another example of disability as a construction; often times we are unable to truly know the mental capacity of an individual with autism but we use the constructions of autism and disability to form our thoughts on the matter.

## Intersection of Autism and Literacy

As a result of the social constructions of disability and literacy, students with severe disabilities are often viewed as uneducable, and special education curriculum often focuses more on functional life skills than academics (Kliewer et al., 2004; Koppenhaver et al., 1991; Watson et al., 1994). Based on these current constructions, professional beliefs often lead to the conclusion that children with significant disabilities require more narrow programs and activities than their non-disabled peers. As the severity of the disability increases, options and opportunities often decrease (Kliewer et al., 2004; Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). Kliewer and Landis (1999) state that when literacy is taught to this population of students, it is often focused on functional skills such as reading directions or a shopping list. Kliewer and his colleagues (2004) compare this inequity to the way slaves were seen as lesser individuals without the ability to learn. While our society has reformed considerably in the way we view people of different races and ethnicities, improvement needs to be made in the way we view those with disabilities. Biklen and Burke (2006) compared this inequity the issues Helen Keller faced. Because she was blind and deaf, she was presumed to have mental retardation. After working with Anne Sullivan and being taught in different ways, she was able to excel in literacy. Similarly, research has shown that individuals with autism can become literate if given the chance and the proper circumstances (Katims, 2000; Kliewer et al., 2004; Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). That is, if one sets aside the constructions of disability and literacy and instead looks at each individual, there will be more opportunities for everyone to become literate.

In one study (Biklen & Burke, 2006) the researchers interviewed a high school student with autism; due to the construction of disability this student was not given a chance at literacy for many years. Although the student can now communicate through typing, he did not always possess this skill. When describing his earlier days without communication, he expressed his frustration with being treated like a baby. He said that he could see the words that he wanted to say in his brain, but was unable to move his lips to say them out loud. The student said the following when expressing his frustration that he was being taught to tie his shoe instead of to communicate and read:

> Make my mouth work as my hands; can you idiots not see my struggle to tell you I have so many answers to the questions you place before my face? Isn't tying the speech to my mouth from my brain more critical to life than making a piece of cotton secure? (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p. 171)

The label of mental retardation, socially constructed as incompetent, limits and separates students with significant disabilities from their peers and educational opportunities, despite the fact that there have been numerous contributions refuting this idea (Grandin & Scaniano, 1986; Williams, 1992; Blackman, 1999; Mukho-Padhigay, 2000; Rubin et al., 2001; Jaconson, 2002, as cited in Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). Mirenda (2003) explained that despite the fact that many individuals with significant disabilities are able to demonstrate literacy skills, they are often not given a chance because they are seen as too cognitively impaired. The barriers created by the intersection of the construction of literacy and disability intrude on students' lives by keeping them from learning literacy.

## Importance of Literacy

Not doing well at literacy tasks can often cause a student to fail at school, since reading is the basis for many subjects (Kliewer & Landis, 1999; Koppenhaver et al., 1991). Kliewer and Landis (1999) state that failing at reading can be "a life-sentence of reduced opportunity and restricted choices" (p. 13). Likewise, for those with significant disabilities the opportunity to participate in a literacy education may allow them to connect with the world. Participation also increases opportunities for students to be included in general education classrooms, seek employment, gain peer acceptance, see things from another perspective, and apply abstract thinking (Kaderavek & Rabidoux, 2004; Zascavage & Keefe, 2004). Increasingly, literacy is being recognized as a critical skill for individuals with significant disabilities. Kaderavek and Rabidoux (2004) state that literacy can help broaden exploration of the environment, facilitate interactions with peers, provide means for personal expression, and understand text.

Kliewer and his colleagues (2004) describe a subterranean youth culture, which consists of cliques, gossip, and ganging up that is separate from adult influence. Literacy helps students with significant disabilities become involved in this culture. One example was presented where the girls in a classroom ganged up on the boys. They designated a particular area as girls only and even created signs as reinforcers. One girl with a disability was included and was able to help defend the fort. Similarly, a boy with a significant disability was a part of the boys' side and helped steal the sign. This was one form of literacy that helped students feel like they were a part of the rest of the class, and demonstrates that including children with significant disabilities in literacy education can

be beneficial. When the social constructions of literacy are kept rigid and individuals with disabilities are not allowed to participate in literacy, these individuals miss out on a great deal of things their peers benefit from. The role of literacy in students' ability to belong at school reinforces the role of the barriers created by the social construction of disability and literacy.

## Barriers to Literacy

There are many barriers that prevent students with significant disabilities from becoming involved in the literate world. Even as these students are included in the general education classroom, they are often excluded from literacy activities such as pretend play, story telling and acting (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). It is the often the construction of literacy and disability that lead to students labeled as disabled being left out of literacy activities. When we have a limited view of what it means to have a significant developmental disability, we do not think that these students would be able to participate. How can we expect students to become literate if they are not given the opportunity?

Students with significant disabilities are sometimes offered fewer opportunities at home as well. Katims (1996) explained that these young children are often found to be read to less often and have access to fewer writing materials at home than their non-disabled peers. The social constructions of literacy and disability are serious barriers for individuals with disabilities; these barriers put limits on what individuals with disabilities are allowed to do and thus on who can be literate. This study looked at at one individual with autism to see what literacy meant for him, and how these constructions affected him.

Katims (2000) looked at textbooks used to prepare special education teachers to see how much literacy and academics are mentioned in book chapters about teaching students with mental retardation. The researcher found that these textbooks lack information regarding academic characteristics, assessment procedures, and instructional procedures. The difference was highlighted by doing a similar analysis on the same textbooks for their chapters on teaching students with learning disabilities. Compared to only 13% for mental retardation, 71% of the chapters on learning disability contained information pertaining to academics, assessment, and instructional procedures. Based on the historical information as well as the textbook analysis, the author concluded that the dominant approach regarding students with mental retardation is a behavioral approach, which includes an out of context, reductionist orientation featuring drill and practice of isolated literacy skills (Katims, 2000).

Zascavage and Keefe (2004) conducted a qualitative study that looked at literacy and students with severe speech and physical impairments (SSPI), including students with autism. More specifically, the researchers sought to answer the question, "What are the primary opportunity barriers to literacy education for students with SSPI as perceived by parents, teachers, university faculty, and administrators?" (p. 224). The authors hypothesized that the reading levels of individuals with SSPI could improve if they were given appropriate learning opportunities. They interviewed twenty individuals (parents, teachers, university faculty, and administrators) involved in the educational decision-making process for students with SSPI. The researchers and their assistants methodically

analyzed the interviews with four barriers in mind: policy, practice, knowledge, and attitude.

The researchers first described policy barriers that may interfere with students with SSPI learning literacy. This category was broken into funding for assistive technology and segregation of students with SSPI. Many of the administrators that were interviewed believed that a lack of funding for technology in the schools is a barrier to teaching reading to students with SSPI. The researchers stated that case histories have demonstrated a correlation between assistive technology use and literacy in individuals with SSPI (Steelman, Pierce, & Koppenhaver, 1993, as cited in Zascavage & Keefe, 2004). Often times it is difficult to get funding for assistive technology and this presents a problem. With more resources, students with autism would be able to have access to assistive technology, which may also increase their accessibility to literacy.

In addition to policy barriers, the researchers also looked at barriers that are established through practice (Zascavage & Keefe, 2004). Many of the university faculty members interviewed believed that methods of instruction used in the public schools present a problem for teaching literacy. The article described "reading readiness prerequisites," (p. 229) which is the idea that certain skills need to be present before a student can even begin to be taught to read. One faculty member described a child that is unable to turn the pages to read and suggested that in this case someone else can turn the pages for the child once she is taught to read. Parent and faculty participants listed a lack of instructional time as a barrier for literacy. According to respondents, in many cases the majority of a school day is spent transitioning from one activity to the next, working on

medical needs and therapy; little time is left to devote to teaching literacy. Faculty participants suggested transdisciplinary programming as a solution to this time problem. All of the individuals that work with a student with SSPI could work together to teach literacy, and reading could be woven throughout the child's day. A way to achieve transdisciplinary programming is by preparing all service providers to teach literacy, which will provide a more unified education for students with SSPI. Overall this will require a change of the constructions of literacy and a resulting change in priorities of teachers.

The participants of the study also expressed concern regarding a lack of information for effectively teaching students with SSPI. Teachers are often not trained well in assistive technology, which is important in teaching literacy to students with disabilities who may not be able to communicate without it. Additionally, some teachers take alternative routes to receiving a degree in special education which may not require them to take classes in teaching literacy. One way to help solve this problem is to work on improving teacher education programs. In addition to the knowledge barrier described, barriers are also present with regard to attitude. The researchers used the participants' responses to come up with four themes regarding attitude barriers to literacy: (a) value, (b) educational placement, (c) curriculum, and (d) expectations. Within the participants' responses the researchers consistently noticed situations involving "ableism," which is described as a form of discrimination against those with disabilities. Participants stated that they came across a general lack of value for teaching literacy to SSPI.

Lastly, the researchers examined curriculum choice as a possible attitude barrier. Many faculty participants described the feeling that many families and teachers do not see literacy as important for students with SSPI, so a curriculum without academics is chosen. Frequently special education curriculum will focus on teaching students life skills and functional skills, instead of academics, likely due to how society constructs disability. The article states, "The notion that literacy is unnecessary, lacking in importance, and frivolous for students with SSPI, but important and meaningful for able-bodied student population, is discriminatory and reflective of an ableist mindset" (Zascavage & Keefe, 2004, p. 231). This issue is only made worse by keeping students segregated. When students with SSPI are placed in a special school or a special classroom the attitude is often much different than if the students are in a general education classroom. Lastly, the researchers examined curriculum choice as a possible attitude barrier. Many faculty participants described the feeling that many families and teachers do not see literacy as important for students with SSPI, so a curriculum without academics is chosen. One faculty stated, "I mean, this is 2002 and we are still seeing kids putting pegs in a pegboard. Now tell me, what's the purpose of that?" (Zascavage & Keefe, 2004, p. 232). This relates to the construction of disability; a possible reason students are putting pegs in a pegboard is because of how society sees those with disabilities and how the society defines literacy only as phonetic reading.

The study by Zascavage and Keefe (2004) showed that students with SSPI face many challenges when it comes to learning literacy. Although the study was limited to only twenty participants, it still presented a good picture of the barriers that affect the

literacy of many students labeled severely disabled. To provide better opportunities for students with SSPI, the study suggests setting higher standards for teachers so they are able to teach literacy to all students and understand how to work with assistive technology, as well as integrating literacy with the services students with SSPI receive throughout the day. Fortunately there are strategies with research support that allow countering these barriers.

## Current Research Interventions

Within the current research interventions to improve literacy for students labeled with significant developmental disabilities, this paper will discuss two of the major necessities: local understanding and presuming competence (Kliewer, 2008). Kliewer (2008) said, "Local understanding moves beyond the common dehumanizing, distant, or institutionalized labels, definitions, and expectations historically associated with significant developmental disabilities" (p. 9). Teachers with a local understanding have the idea that all students deserve the right to be literate (Kliewer & Landis, 1999). A student with autism, Sean, was described by Kliewer and Landis (1999). He loved books and was given the opportunity to look through them throughout the school day. Unfortunately, Sean drooled a lot and when it got on the book he was reading he would rub and scratch at it trying to get the spit off of the book. As a result, he ruined many books. Instead of the teacher blaming Sean and taking the books away from him, the teacher worked on a solution with a speech therapist. They helped make Sean more aware of his drooling and helped him hold the book away from him to prevent it from getting wet. Eventually it was not a problem. In another instance, Sean began scribbling in the

books he read. Once again, the teacher demonstrated a local understanding and did not simply take the books away. Instead she redirected his behavior by giving Sean a journal to write in while he was reading. Seeing her student as competent had a dramatic effect on his experience in the classroom. This openness can be useful to all teachers, especially those who have students with autism in their classroom.

Kliewer and Landis (1999) give an additional example of local understanding and openness. Josh, a nine year old labeled as having significant mental retardation, was another student described in the article. Despite his label, the teacher felt certain that Josh could read. Instead of excluding him from literacy in the classroom, the teacher had Josh participate in their reading group. He was placed in the highest group of readers because they were the most capable of helping him and had the most interesting discussions. By having a local understanding of Josh, the teacher gave him the opportunity to build upon his literacy.

Another aspect of local understanding recommended by Kliewer and Biklen (2001) is relationship building. The construction of disability often suggests that children with significant developmental disabilities cannot form relationships or become attached to people (Biklen & Burke, 2006). The researchers in one study (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001) wrote a research synthesis including descriptions, observations, and interviews of six individuals with significant developmental disabilities, which emphasized that intimate relationships between students and teachers as well as children and parents or caregivers can provide individuals with a local understanding of students with significant developmental disabilities. Local understanding comes out of caring relationships in

which both participants value each other's competence. Often those who have this relationship with a child with a significant disability are able to pick up on more subtle cues of literacy. One example described is when a child with autism nodded his head and others who saw this might have thought of it as meaningless but the mother knew it was a sign that the child was interested and trying to engage. Kliewer and Biklen (2001) stated, "Intimacy promoted the symbolic and literate capacities of individuals clinically labeled as severely impaired" (p. 4). This may be helpful for practitioners to know when working with students with autism, and in order to promote literacy with these students.

An additional method of local understanding a teacher can use to help teach literacy to a student labeled with a significant disability is to be prepared for a struggle (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). The author described an instance when a teacher was prepared for a child to have difficulty. One student with autism who usually did well in class was having a bad day. Although the student typically typed his answers to the teacher's questions on a keyboard, this day he refused to do so. The teacher decided to give the student a break and have him try again later. She did not assume that he could not do the task, but understood that it is not always going to come easily. Another student, Jen, was described in the same study and also usually did well in the classroom; however, the teacher stated that Jen was having difficulty in gym class. She acted out and refused to participate with the rest of the class. The teacher was prepared to work through the struggle by figuring out what supports Jen was lacking in gym, instead of assuming Jen needed to be removed from the class. When teachers practice local understanding,

students labeled with significant disabilities will have more opportunities to become literate.

Another important component to promoting literacy for students with significant disabilities is to presume that they are competent learners. "The notion of presuming competence implies that educators must assume students can and will change and, through engagement within the world, will demonstrate complexities of thought and action that could not necessarily be anticipated" (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p. 168). Kliewer and his colleagues (2004) investigated how students labeled with significant disabilities are supported as competent citizens of the literate community by interviewing teachers. One teacher in the study stated that literacy means taking students seriously at every level, including their experiences, emotions, and interests. Another teacher said that it is impossible to predict what a child is capable of, so she assumes a child is able and goes from there.

Kasa-Hendrickson (2005) conducted a qualitative study looking at how a group of teachers are able to presume competence and dismiss the widespread belief that children with autism have mental retardation and are unable to be literate. The researcher spent two school years collecting data at two different schools. She observed the classrooms of four teachers who had been trained in special education as well as general education. The teachers were selected using purposeful sampling and had previous experience working with students with autism. The teachers taught in inclusive classrooms that included students with autism. The researcher's main finding is not to add to the best practices of teaching students with autism, but instead is meant to, "focus on how teachers construct

students as competent when those immediately around them, and more largely the society we live in, construct those very students as incompetent" (p. 59).

A respite care provider, Carol, was interviewed about a sixteen year old with autism named Steven with whom she worked (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). At school Steven was not considered a reader and his IEP consisted of functional life skills goals; however, at home and with Carol he was an avid reader. He was fascinated with butterflies and discovered a lot about them through reading. When Carol first met Steven, she assumed he could read even though he read books differently. He would place several books in front of him and look at all the books at once. Because Carol believed Steven could read, she began taking him to the library so he could access more books about butterflies. This is an example of how presuming competence and viewing all students as learners expands students' literacy.

> By presuming the competence of people who do not always demonstrate it in traditional ways, the teacher is then freed to approach the learner with thoughts and practices that would lead her/him to engage the student in meaningful academic opportunities. (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005, p. 67)

Another aspect of presuming competence was indicated by Katims (1996); it is important to have a literacy rich environment for students with significant developmental disabilities. Because of the construction of disability, often students with disabilities are seen as unable to be a part of a literate environment. Katims (1996) did a study with four students with mental retardation and found that they were able to improve their literacy skills by being in literacy rich classrooms with a variety of literacy opportunities presented to them. Another study (Kliewer et al., 2004) described a student, Damien, with autism who was able to participate in a variety of literacy activities, including muffin

making, computer learning games, and pretend play. These were centers that the teacher set up for the students, and the authors described Damien in the muffin making center. Damien and another student worked together to follow the recipe the teacher had created for muffins. It was evident in the researcher's observations that Damien was able to read the list and understood what to do. When the other child measured out the wrong amount, Damien corrected him. This illustrated Damien's understanding of the recipe that he had read, demonstrating a clear example of reading comprehension. These are examples of how students with disability can access literacy if the construction of disability is discarded, their competence is presumed, and they are given the opportunity to be in a literacy rich environment.

By presuming the competence of their students, widening the construction of what it means to have a disability, and understanding their students as literate citizens with their own ideas and stories, teachers can rethink how they look at performance and participation (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). A young girl with autism participated in the classroom opening by flapping her hands and shaking her head back and fourth. Her teacher stated that the student was listening just as other kids do, even though her listening looked differently. This teacher was able to keep an open-minded view about what paying attention and listening looks like to this young girl. This is just one way teachers can expand their views of competency in children with autism (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005).

Another way that one can presume competence and reexamine the constructions of literacy and disability is to focus in on what each student with a disability is interested

in. Although society's construction of autism may imply that an individual with autism may not able to be literate, often literacy can be accomplished by looking at what the child is passionate about. While providing a supportive environment that encourages joy in the discovery of writing and reading, teachers can capitalize on students' unique interests (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). An example presented was of a student with autism who loved weather. The teacher showed him the weather section of the newspaper and the student began carrying around a newspaper and looking at the weather section. Additionally, the teacher began introducing books related to weather to the boy. Kluth and Darmody-Latham (2003) also recommend using a variety of ways to teach students with significant disabilities. One recommendation is using visual supports, including graphic organizers, concept maps, pictures, and flow charts. The authors also recommend singing, dressing up in costumes, using art, and reading aloud. All of these tools, which can be used to help presume competence, may help children with significant disabilities, including autism, become engaged in literacy, and also will alter help alter society's construction of disability (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003).

An example from one study (Kliewer et al., 2004) also looks at presuming competence by focusing on the student's unique interests as a way to teach literacy. The study looks at a boy with autism named Jamie, who was highly interested in maps and globes. The Korean student teacher chose to give a presentation about her country and asked Jamie to help by demonstrating to the rest of the class where Korea was on the globe in comparison where the students were. This activity instilled confidence in Jamie since he excelled at geography and helped include him in the classroom. It also helped

include him in the rest of the discussion about Korea. Examples like this show how important it is to presume competence, include students with significant disabilities in literacy rich environments, and look at disability in a different way (Kliewer et al., 2004).

Kasa-Hendrickson (2005) wrote about a teacher who presumed competence of a student with autism who took an interest in the presidents. A situation is described where the boy, David, wanders off during instruction in order to stare at a poster of the presidents at the back of the classroom. Although the boy is non-verbal and has not been known to read, the paraprofessional knelt next to him and began reading the names of the presidents. In another incident, the teacher saw the boy looking at an article in the newspaper about the presidential election. Because she had suspicions that he might be able to read, she paid close attention to how he looked at the article. Not only did he appear to be scanning the article as if reading it, but he turned to the page the article continued on and finished reading it. This story is an example of one particular teacher who found a situation where her student demonstrated competence. Instead of simply reprimanding the student for leaving his desk during instruction, the teacher and paraprofessional fostered his interest. Additionally, the paraprofessional engaged in student-led teaching and assisted David in participating in a literacy experience (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). The student's teacher and support staff assumed he was literately competent.

Another example of a teacher presuming competence is the story of an eleven-year-old student, Rebecca, who was described in a research article by Kliewer and Biklen (2001). She came from a segregated classroom into an inclusion setting in a general

education classroom. The teacher asked the other students in the classroom to brainstorm ways to include Rebecca. One group had the idea of writing notes to Rebecca. The teacher was skeptical at first but went with it, and their idea worked. All of the students were passing notes to Rebecca asking her questions about her interests and who she liked in the classroom. This improved Rebecca's literacy and social skills and only worked because the teacher did not require Rebecca to prove literate competency before including her in the activity (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). Activities such as this can help students with autism be included in the general education setting as well as become more literate; additionally this is an example of inclusion being successful.

Kliewer and Kasa-Hendrickson (2007) recommend that the following 5 actions, which fit within local understanding and presuming competency support literacy in students with significant developmental disabilities: (a) providing an environment where the students participate and are supported in interpreting stories and ideas of others through books, conversation, pretend play, structured and informal play, and academic activities; (b) understanding the students as full and valued citizens in the classroom with their own ideas and stories; (c) providing an environment that promotes and nurtures the development of communicating using graphic symbols; (d) going by the idea that writing begs reading, so support the student in developing skills to read the graphic symbols of others; and (e) offering an environment that supports joy in the discovery of writing and reading. In order to make literacy available for students with autism, we will need to adjust our idea of what it means to be literate and what it means to have a disability and actively work toward presuming competency and having local understanding.

## Benefits of Inclusion for Literacy

Some of the research interventions, such as local understanding and presumed competence, are also characteristics of inclusive settings, which have been found to promote literacy for students labeled with significant disabilities (Kliewer, 2008). In one qualitative study (Zascavage & Keefe, 2004), 3 of the 4 faculty participants and 5 out of the 7 administrator participants expressed their thoughts that segregation presents a difficulty for teaching literacy to students. The authors used a powerful phrase, "Inclusion promotes literacy" (p. 228). That is, by segregating students with severe disabilities in separate classrooms or schools, their literacy learning is put in jeopardy. For example, many segregated classrooms and schools do not teach literacy but instead focus on life skills and functional skills. Also, being in an inclusive environment with peers that are reading at grade level often will be encouraging for students with SSPI.

Kliewer and his colleagues (2004) stated, "Inclusive education appeared to be fundamental to the literate citizenship of children with significant disabilities" (p. 32). In an interview, a high school student with autism explained that being in a segregated classroom surrounded by others with his same quirks would only make his sensory sensitivities higher (Biklen & Burke, 2006). This would cause difficulties not just for him, but for everyone in his segregated classroom. Inclusion immerses students in the literate community and therefore is the ideal way to educate a student with a significant disability.

Including students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms benefits all students; their presence encourages teachers to explore new ways of teaching

and encourages peers to explore new ways of sharing their thoughts and intentions. Kliewer and Kasa-Hendrickson (2007) found 6 areas in which all students benefit from inclusion. These areas are (a) social justice, (b) safe environments, (c) communication, (d) technology, and (e) collaboration. First, students benefit from receiving the message that all students belong and often students taught in inclusive classrooms become more empathetic of others. This means that all instruction including literacy instruction is open and accessible to all students in the classroom. Students also benefit from having a safe environment where they feel comfortable asking for help and realize that all students may struggle; feeling secure at school will help students because literate even when they have difficulties. Communication is another way that students benefit; they learn how to communicate with those who use nontraditional forms of communication, which can give all students more literacy skills. Students in inclusive classrooms are often exposed to new technology such as tilted writing board, electric wheelchair, and dynavox, which increases their literacy learning and vocabulary. Lastly, the researchers state that collaboration is often a critical part of inclusive settings and all students are encouraged to work together as a part of a team. Collaboration can help all students learn more and in different ways, and for students who may not be able to master traditional literacy skills this opens more doors (Kliewer & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2007).

One example is a student with significant disabilities named Sean who had problems scribbling in books. The teacher's solution was to provide him with a journal and have him write in it while he was reading. As a result, the whole class got into journaling about the books they were reading (Kliewer & Landis, 1999). Inclusion is not

just about learning to be tolerant of others, although that is one benefit. Inclusion can also promote expanded conceptions of literacy. An eleven-year-old nonverbal student with autism, Rebecca, was integrated into a general education classroom. The teacher asked the students to brainstorm ways to include Rebecca and one group of students came up with the idea of writing her notes. Rebecca's presence in the classroom not only helped her peers learn a new way to communicate, but also gave them practice in writing. Both are highly valued literacy skills (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001).

Inclusion can encourage students and teachers to value multiple ways of participating in classroom life. For example, a teacher reading aloud to the class might be difficult for kids with autism but also challenging for any student. Therefore, having a child with autism in the classroom will increase the amount of other activities that are done in addition to reading aloud. Another example involves incorporating the students' interests into the curriculum. Children with autism frequently have specific interests that they are taken with, such as the student mentioned above that loved butterflies or the one who excelled at maps. When the teacher includes these interests in the lesson plans it will include the students with significant disabilities, but it also involves introducing a new topic to the rest of the class (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009).

Inclusion can also benefit teachers. For example, lesson plans tend to focus on tasks students should complete instead of what the students should learn and this is not an optimal strategy. Often when a student with autism is included in the classroom a teacher has to alter lesson plans and expectations and focus more on what needs to be learned instead of the activities that will be done (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009). This expands

a teacher's teaching strategies and also helps her students. Additionally, including students with significant disabilities in the classroom may cause teachers to re-think the way they teach. "We have both known numerous teachers, including some late in their careers, who reported being rejuvenated professionally by the inclusion of students with autism in their classes" (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009, p. 555). Inclusion might also improve a teacher's classroom management skills. For example, if a classroom tends to be unstructured and the noise level is high, many students might be distracted even if they do not show it. However, a student with autism might begin screaming or acting out in other ways, causing the teacher to re-examine how the classroom is run. Inclusion has many benefits, and done well it calls into question the current social construction of both disability and literacy. The current study looked at at how the strategies used with a student labeled with autism effected his literacy education in an inclusive setting.

## Conclusion

Biklen and Burke (2006) say, "The idea of 'normal' is itself a social construct and can be altered, shifted, and transformed" (p.173). Likewise, literacy and disability are constructions that our society has built upon and changed over the years, and they can limit individuals. It is important to keep this in mind when considering how the terms are currently used and enacted in the classroom. The particular constructs of literacy and disability often introduce barriers to the literacy of children labeled with significant developmental disabilities, including those with autism, leaving them out of the literate community through no fault of their own (Kliewer, 2008). Even when included in the general education classroom these constructs may lead children with significant

developmental disorders to be excluded from the literacy activities that go on in the classroom (Kliewer, 2008). Fortunately, this is not the way things must remain as social constructions are fluid and constantly change.

Research has shown the importance of inclusion for all students (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2007). There are examples of how these interventions work in limited cases for an individual student but extended case studies of students specifically labeled as autistic in an inclusive setting designed to support literacy are not found. This study looked specifically at how strategies in an inclusive setting played a part in the literacy experiences of one student with autism. By doing an intensive case study I answered the question: *How does a child with Autism experience literacy in an inclusive classroom?*

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODS

## Participants

The main participant was an elementary school student labeled with autism who is included in a general education classroom. Additional participants were the student's classroom teacher, student teachers and practicum students in the room, and his classmates.

## Data Procedures

### Design

The study was conducted using a qualitative case study design. Qualitative research uses an inductive strategy, which means that it examines the whole picture, takes place in a natural setting, and sets out to get the ideas and feelings of the subjects (Lichtman, 2010). This is appropriate in this study because one individual's ideas, feelings, and experiences were focused on. According to Lichtman (2010) a case study is an in-depth examination and should be used in order to focus on one individual case and not in order to generalize. The goal of a case study is to get detailed descriptions of a particular case, and in this study the case will be one individual student. This design was chosen in order to get as much narrative, descriptive information as possible about the main participant, his learning environment, and his literacy while being included in a general education classroom. Because the case study design allows the researcher to focus in on one entity it allows for a plethora of in depth information to be discovered on the subject.

Data Collection

The main form of data collection in this study was participant observation. The data was collected over the course of three months during the school year, totaling 15 hours of observation. The 15 hours of observation included approximately 2 to 3 hours per day of observation per day and approximately 1-2 days per week during the spring semester. The researcher used interviews in addition to participant observation. Both the special education and general education teachers were interviewed; this included both formal interviews and informal interviews. The two formal interviews were approximately one hour for each teacher, and the informal interviews occurred naturally after observation sessions for approximately 5 to 10 minutes and at least 10 times for each teacher. Data will be recorded in field notes, which the researcher took during each observation session. Lichtman (2010) says, "...Much of qualitative research, whatever approach is used, acknowledges the role of the researcher as a filter through which data are collected, organized, and interpreted" (p. 116). Therefore, the researcher did not try to reach objectivity, but instead was aware of the subjective nature of this study and was reflexive through the research process. The researcher was not interested in objectivity, but in presenting a coherent and well-reasoned account. Lichtman (2010) states, "The process of reflexivity engages the researcher in reflecting on her assumptions and beliefs about the research process. This helps make biases apparent, which allows their influence on the research to be understood" (p. 123). The researcher did this by constantly reflecting on her influence and explaining the research process and decisions from her point of view (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000). Additionally, the researcher used

triangulation through observation notes, interviews, and reflection journals in order to increase the credibility of findings (Lichtman, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and was done systematically by separating the transcribed field notes into themes that emerge throughout the process of data collection. "Analysis…proceeds by breaking narrative data down into smaller pieces and then reassembling them into sets or groupings that illustrate some small number of core themes or patterns" (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000). This was done in order to bring order and understanding to the data. Lichtman (2010) suggests that there is no agreed upon way to analyze qualitative data, and that most researchers collect data and analyze the data simultaneously. The researcher used constant comparison, which is an analytic strategy devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method was used in order to systematize the analysis as much as possible. Lichtman (2010) recommends a six-step process: "Initial coding, revisiting initial coding, developing an initial list of categories or central ideas, modifying your initial list based on additional rereading, revisiting categories and subcategories, and moving from categories to concepts" (p. 204)

Researcher's Stance Towards Topic

One of the benefits of qualitative research is that the researcher brings a set of beliefs and attitudes to the topic and certain lenses with which she looks at the data. In this case, 2 main factors that affected the researcher's viewpoint on the topic include her K-12 school experiences and her graduate school experiences. One's own school experiences can have a huge impact on how one views the world, and specifically views

other schools and classrooms. The following paragraphs will describe the researcher's school career and how it affected her view of the current topic.

To begin with, the researcher's K-12 education has impacted the lens with which she views the topic of students with disabilities, inclusion, and literacy. The researcher started out her education in a small parochial school. Because the school did not have special education services, students with special needs did not typically attend. This limited the researcher's exposure to different types of students. After 5 years of schooling in the parochial setting, the researcher began her public school education for grade 6 through high school. She was in gifted education programs, so once again did not have much interaction with students with disabilities or students with differing ability levels. When the researcher did see students receiving special education students, it was those with the most significant needs who were hidden away in classrooms in the basement. Additionally, the students receiving special education services the researcher typically encountered in high school had significant behavior difficulties and she had negative experiences with them, which caused her to be afraid of them. As a result of the lack of exposure and negative experiences, the researcher began graduate school with the idea of special education as a place where students went and students with disabilities as having something wrong with them. The researcher did not fully understand that special education were services that certain students received, and that students receiving the services had varied ability levels. Overall the researcher's K-12 school experiences shaped her to think of special education more as a place than a service, students with

disabilities as having something significant wrong with them, and students with disabilities as people to be feared.

Although the researcher had limited experience with individuals with disabilities, she received her master's degree in education through a school psychology program and took classes that discussed the social construction of disability, labeling, and inclusion. The primary ways in which the researcher's viewpoint was affected by her graduate program include the school psychologist's focus, the practicum experiences, and her lack of teacher education classes.

To begin with, the researcher's graduate program focused on school psychology and most of the classes were taught by professors with a school psychology background and experiences. The history of school psychology has included a considerable amount of testing, especially cognitive assessment, in order to entitle students for special education. Therefore, the researcher took classes on cognitive assessment and theory and was taught that it is clear-cut who does and does not have a disability. Additionally, a lot of the reading for the program had a behaviorist influence, so the researcher viewed the point system in the classroom as a good thing. Without this training the researcher may not have viewed certain teaching techniques used in the classroom, such as positive reinforcement, in the same way. The researcher was taught the skills needed to be a school psychologist; someone who comes into the classroom to observe, do assessments and interviews, and work with a team to determine if the child has a disability and qualifies for special education. While these skills are useful in their own way, they do offer a different, outsider perspective on students with disabilities.

Additionally, the researcher's experience in the schools was determined by the practicum experiences she was assigned. She had limited experience with inclusion because it was never fully used in any of her practicum experiences. Because the researcher had only read about inclusion, she had a hard time grasping exactly what it would look like in the classroom. One example of inclusion the researcher was exposed to during a practicum was of a student with significant needs in a small, rural school. The student was in the 1st grade classroom with the other students, but had his desk blocked off in the back of the classroom and was taught by his full time classroom associate. Because of this experience, the researcher had some cognitive dissonance when it came to inclusion. She knew that inclusion was not a place and was the idea of including all students, but did not know what to expect this would look like and felt unsure if it was true inclusion she was seeing in this study. However, the researcher brought with her the definition of inclusion being when all students, with and without disabilities, are included in the general education classroom. The researcher also had the experience of shadowing a school psychologist at a special school, which consisted solely of students with significant disabilities. Many practices that went on at the school, such as a student with behavior difficulties being kept in a time out room all day, influenced the way the researcher thought. Not that the researcher agreed with these practices, but it was one of the only times she spent with students with significant disabilities. As a result, the researcher was not sure what to expect when observing a student with autism in an inclusive kindergarten classroom. The practicum experiences the researcher encountered greatly influenced her viewpoint on special education.

In addition to the graduate program's school psychology focus and the practicum experiences, the researcher also was influenced by the lack of teacher education courses in the program. The researcher was not trained in teaching or literacy, so she entered the classroom with a school psychologist's training and not with a teacher's training. While the researcher did have one literacy class, it was an online course with limited interaction. This affected the way she viewed the teaching strategies used, and specifically what she considered to be literacy in the classroom. The definition the researcher had in mind for literacy began with plain and simply reading and writing, but as she read more articles for the literature review this definition broadened. Before the data was collected, the researcher came to the definition of literacy as similar to Kluth and Darmody-Latham (2003); that literacy is a wide variety of things including picture books, conversation, listening to stories, sign language, and role playing. These viewpoints had a definite impact on the way the researcher viewed the classroom and student in this study and the conclusions that were drawn from the data. Qualitative research carries with it the benefit of its researchers coming with their own set of beliefs and viewpoints. By laying these viewpoints out along with the data, the researcher is able to identify how bias affects her interpretation of the data and allows the reader to determine if they think the researcher's conclusions are biased.

# CHAPTER 4

# DATA ANALYSIS

Fifteen hours was spent observing Bryan, a student with autism who is 5 years old and is included in a general education kindergarten class. The researcher set out to see what literacy looked like for a student with autism in the general education classroom. Throughout the following text the findings will be described, drawing from recorded observations of Bryan at school at various times and settings, the reflection journal, and interviews with teachers. The observations were divided into three themes, as follows: (a) whole class literacy activities, (b) strategies used to help Bryan access literacy, and (c) obstacles to Bryan's literacy development. First the classroom will be described, then Bryan and his typical day, and then each theme will be discussed.

## The Classroom

To begin, the classroom where most of the observations took place will be described. As stated in teacher interview the general education teacher described herself as a constructivist and stated that she gives her students a lot of choices and ownership over their learning. She also stated that literacy is important to her and a big part of each day of class. Additionally, the teacher shared that there are many practicum students and student teachers in and out of the classroom on a daily basis. The classroom was very colorful, decorated with students' work, with letters and words on the walls, and divided into centers. There was a mail center where the students' mailboxes were kept and where students sign in every morning. There were also tables and chairs where students were seated in groups of 4 with nametags on their chairs and their supplies set out on the table.

In the back of the room there was a multicolored carpet with a rocking chair where large group instruction typically took place and shelving which housed tons of books and students' book boxes. The classroom also had a playhouse and various other options for play. The room had a lot going on: art work hanging from the ceilings, educational posters everywhere, many activities students could choose from, and a great deal of technology throughout the room that students could access. For example there were three desktop computers at the front right corner of the room, a station with one laptop for every student in the middle of the room, an overhead projector, and a CD player. Literacy was very much a visual part of the room, as observed by the shelves of books, letters and student work on the wall, and various opportunities for literacy related play. The observation notes describe the room as, "a buzz of activity with a lot going on." With fifteen kindergarten students in the classroom, one general education teacher, one special education teacher, speech teachers, and various student teachers and practicum students coming and going it is no wonder that the room was described as such. By describing the classroom, the stage has been set for what literacy looked like for a student with autism included in general education.

## Bryan and His Typical Day

In order to examine literacy for a student with autism, it is important to consider the student and his typical day. In many ways, Bryan looked like a typical kindergarten student. He had short, well-kept blonde hair and was of average height and weight. Bryan dressed well, typically in polo shirts and cargo pants or cargo sweatpants. Bryan had little habits that stood out at times, such as opening his mouth really wide and smiling, or

throwing his head back. According to teacher interview and file review, Bryan had significant developmental delays that his parents and teachers noticed very early on. Bryan did not talk until much later than expected and therefore had difficulty communicating his needs. In preschool at the age of 3, Bryan would throw temper tantrums and had behavior difficulties in the classroom. By the time Bryan started kindergarten he had made a lot of progress and his teachers and parents were very proud of him. His teacher reported that he rarely had any behavior problems in her classroom. Although he still had some difficulty with language, he was able to talk and communicate his needs. Some of the difficulties Bryan experienced that the teachers shared included talking in complete sentences, understanding feelings, asking and answering questions, and reading comprehension. Bryan's teachers shared that he excelled at math and loved anything to do with time and numbers. His teachers also shared that Bryan had friends and played with other students, but often he played parallel to them instead of interacting with them. Overall, Bryan's teachers stressed that he had many strengths and was a great little boy.

Now that an overview of Bryan has been given, his typical school day will be described. Bryan, as well as one other student in the class, received special education services; however, the observations indicated that those students were very much a part of the class. As stated in teacher interview and observations, every morning Bryan was dropped off by his parents twenty to thirty minutes before school started. He had jobs he was responsible for such as changing the date on the board and adjusting the number of days and weeks left of school. Other students had jobs as well, such as being line leader

or making sure there were enough sharpened pencils, and other students arrived early too. On 2-3 days out of the week, Bryan had speech instruction first thing in the morning before the day officially began. Speech teachers came in and worked with Bryan in the teacher's office that was within the classroom. After speech, Bryan joined the class in getting ready to start the day. Most days the rest of the students were doing various literacy activities on their own such as reading, working on a craft at their seat, or working on writing assignments. On several occasions the teacher was observed giving a five minute warning as they approached carpet time and it was a game to see if all of the students could be seated on the carpet and ready before the timer went off. Bryan participated in carpet time with the rest of the kids, which typically involved them going through their morning routine of weather, date, and days of the week, the teacher reading a story and talking about it, and discussing their schedule for the day.

The field notes stated that on most days after carpet time the class had literacy centers, which Bryan typically participated in. The centers included various literacy activities depending on the day such as writing, reading independently, playing a literacy game, and small group instruction with the teacher. However, one of the centers Bryan participated in was in the back of the room with the special education teacher. There were times when Bryan missed out on other literacy centers because he was working with the special education teacher. On some days, the special education teacher worked with one of the classroom centers instead of pulling her students to the back of the room.

The rest of Bryan's day was no different than the rest of the kindergarten class. On certain days they went to gym class after literacy centers, while on other days they

went to music class. After lunch and recess the class had various other activities including math and independent work time, free time on Fridays, and art projects. The bulk of the classroom observations occurred during the morning, as that was when the class had literacy instruction. In summary, most of Bryan's day was no different than the other kindergarten students in his class. The differences occurred first thing in the morning on two or three days a week when he had speech instruction and during literacy centers when he received specially designed instruction in a small group from the special education teacher.

Continuing with the description of Bryan's day, on most days "push-in" special education services were observed. The special education teacher came each morning for 20-30 minutes and worked either one-on-one with Bryan in the back of the classroom, or worked with Bryan and the other special education student in the back of the classroom. On some days she also added another student to their group, who she referred to as being at risk. Often times the special education teacher joined the class during literacy centers, so her station would be another center for the students in special education. As stated in teacher interview, the special and general education teachers would sometimes co-teach together; however, this was not observed. Overall the classroom felt truly inclusive and Bryan appeared to be a part of the class just like any other student. Special education was just another center in which some kids participated.

## Whole Class Literacy Activities

A great deal of the observation notes, reflections, and teacher interviews fall into the category of whole class literacy activities. It is important to consider whole group

literacy activities in order to get a clear picture of what literacy looked like for Bryan, a student with autism included in the general education classroom. The field notes contained whole class literacy activities, which fell into two main categories: literacy centers and integrating literacy into the rest of the day.

Literacy centers occurred for approximately 90 minutes every morning during time the teacher designated as, "literacy time." The centers included independent reading, independent writing, small group reading instruction with the teacher, and literacy games. During the interview with the general education teacher, she said that the class was divided into four groups differentiated by reading level and each center is approximately 20 minutes long. A visual schedule was posted on the board with each group and its members and the order of the centers they would work at that day. Two minutes before each center ended, the teacher would give a warning so students were ready for a smooth transition. The literacy centers, which will be described in more detail in the following paragraphs, were the main literacy instruction that occurred in this kindergarten classroom and were a key part of Bryan's day.

When considering what literacy looked like for Bryan, it is important to consider independent reading, which was one of the literacy centers that took place for the whole class. The teacher interview revealed that Bryan, along with every other student, had his own book box where he stored books of his choosing. Many of Bryan's books in his box related to time and numbers, two of his main interests. These books were not only ones that he was interested in but also were at his instructional level, called "right fit books." The teachers helped students pick appropriate books. The book boxes were about the size

of milk crates and were labeled with each student's name and decorated with stickers; the boxes were all lined up on shelves that were accessible to the students. According to teacher interview, the students were expected to practice reading their right fit books during independent reading times. They were allowed to read with each other, to themselves, or to an adult. Many occasions were observed when Bryan indicated his preference of having adults read to him. A retelling of one such occasion is below.

Independent reading was observed during the researcher's first day in the classroom. The group's first center that day was independent reading, and Bryan eagerly got his book box and brought it to the carpet. All of the students in Bryan's group got their book boxes as well, but they scattered in different directions. Two students went into the playhouse and read there, while another read alone on the beanbag chair. Once Bryan was kneeling on the carpet with his book box, he looked around for an adult to read to him. One of the practicum students walked over to Bryan and asked if he wanted to read with her. Bryan smiled, grabbed her hand, and pulled her over to a corner where she sat down on the carpet and he climbed onto her lap. The field notes describe a struggle between the practicum student and Bryan as she tried to get him to read to her. Finally he did agree to read one of his books, which was about telling time. Bryan struggled with some of the words as he read and his reading was choppy. The practicum student asked Bryan questions as they went through the book, such as "What do you think will happen next?" and "What time was it when they went to sleep?" but Bryan did not want to answer. He demonstrated this by saying, "Shh! Reading!"

Bryan was observed during independent reading on another occasion, when no adult was immediately available to read to him. Instead of reading, Bryan lined up his books on the carpet and counted them. Every couple of minutes he would stop and look around, but then go back to lining up his books. Eventually a student teacher was available and Bryan immediately ran to her and sat on her lap and asked her to read to him. She convinced Bryan to read by telling him she would read one page if he read the next. This strategy worked and Bryan read every other page. The student teacher was unable to get Bryan to answer any questions, however. When she asked him any questions about the book he would not answer. When he did answer, what he said would not make sense. For example, she asked him, "What will happen if the monkeys jump on the bed?" and he said, "5 monkeys!" Even after they saw what happened to the monkeys jumping on the bed and finished the book, Bryan still did not answer any of her questions but instead grabbed another book.

Independent reading was one of the literacy centers the whole class participated in, and was a key part of what literacy looked like for Bryan. Several observations were recorded of Bryan during independent reading; each time was similar to what has been described. Bryan got his box of books, looked for an adult to read to him, the adult tried to convince Bryan to read, the adult tried to convince Bryan to answer questions about the book. On each and every instance, Bryan struggled with the adult by trying to get her to read and Bryan seemed to avoid answering any questions about the book. When Bryan did answer the adult's questions his answers usually did not make sense. These observations line up with what the special education teacher described during the

interview, which was that Bryan struggles with reading but enjoys being read to by adults. Additionally, the special education teacher reported that Bryan had difficulty understanding what he read and answering questions about it. Independent reading, one of the literacy centers in Bryan's kindergarten class, is a key part of Bryan's experience with literacy.

Independent writing was another literacy center, where students wrote about books they read. On one occasion the students were observed completing a worksheet, which asked questions about a book they had read during whole group reading instruction. According to journal reflections, Bryan did not seem to like the writing center. The observations included a description of one time when Bryan's group was at the writing center. The other members of Bryan's group were working independently on a writing assignment, but Bryan was not. Bryan got up and went over to where the teacher was working with another group, and asked her a question, "Mrs. Zander, when are we going to have free play?" The teacher answered Bryan and then told him to go sit down and work on his writing. Bryan tried to ask more questions but the teacher would not answer, so he eventually went back to sit down. Once seated, Bryan began playing with his pencil. He then got up to sharpen his pencil. Shortly after, Bryan began raising his hand and said, "Mrs. Zander, Mrs. Zander, I need help." When he was told she was working with other kids and would be with him shortly, he sighed loudly and put his head down on the table. The teacher came over to help him with the writing but by then it was time to move on to the next center. Bryan successfully avoided doing his writing. This was a typical pattern observed during the writing literacy center. Again, this went along

with what was learned from the teacher interview, which is that Bryan struggled with writing and needed more individualized assistance in order to be successful. Because there were often many adults in the room, Bryan did receive help on other occasions. One particular time, Bryan's group was told to write about what they did over Spring break. Bryan had a practicum student working one-on-one with him prompting him to write. Over the course of the twenty-minute center, Bryan wrote, "Numbers boy, it's Spring break. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10. Oh no, where's 11? She's gone." He then had the practicum student read his story over and over. Later Bryan read his paragraph to his teacher and she applauded him for trying his best. These observations of the independent writing literacy center are important when looking at the whole group literacy activities in Bryan's class.

Another literacy center, one of Bryan's favorites, was the small group reading instruction with the teacher. According to teacher interview, this varied from week to week and included taking turns reading, phonics instruction, answering questions about their reading, and learning and practicing reading strategies. On one occasion the students were observed in this center taking turns reading through an *Arthur* book. The general education teacher was able to give a lot of individualized attention and reminded Bryan to sound out the words he did not know. She reminded students to use their strategies, and recalled one for them in particular: "If a word doesn't sound right, Flippy the Dolphin flips it and tries again." The post-observation reflection stated, "Bryan really seemed to thrive on adult attention and really seemed to enjoy this center." As the students were reading in the small group, the teacher also made the suggestion to "take a picture with

your brain" in order to remember a hard word that would come up again. The teacher interview indicated that sometimes this center was used to do assessments in order to see what area each student struggled with and what they needed extra work on. This center was not observed on many occasions because often Bryan missed this center due to his specially designed reading instruction with the special education teacher; however, it is important to consider this center when examining classroom wide literacy activities.

The other center, literacy games, varied from day to day and included word games on the carpet and a reading program on the computer, called "Lexia." According to the field notes, Bryan was observed at the computer center using Lexia to practice early literacy skills on a number of occasions. Bryan sat at one of the computers at the back of the room, along with two other students. Each student had his own pair of headphones on and was working under his own username in the program, so the reading tasks were personalized for each student's level. As stated in the teacher interview, the kids loved the reading program Lexia and were able to practice reading skills and were assessed by playing short games. According to the observations, Bryan did not enjoy working on his own at the computer. He was observed getting up frequently to ask the teacher questions and he seemed to get frustrated by sighing, clenching his fists, and clicking the same choice over and over. Although Bryan sometimes missed this center due to specially designed instruction with the special education teacher, it was still an important part of the whole group reading centers. Another day Bryan was observed at the game center and his group was playing Go Fish with letter cards on the carpet. Bryan had difficulty with the concept of the game and repeatedly allowed others to see his cards. His classmates

tried to explain the game to him and explain that he should not let anyone else see his cards. Despite the struggles he had with understanding the game, he was still smiling and laughing, and signs of frustration or embarrassment were not observed. The other students did not laugh at him or make fun of him, but instead helped him and looked out for him. One peer told the others to just not look at his cards. Before the game was over, Bryan set his cards down and wandered off to do another activity. According to notes in the reflection journal, the researcher questioned if Bryan's literacy development benefited from the game. Playing word games with peers and working independently on reading games on the computer are literacy centers Bryan's class participated in daily, and they are important to consider when examining what literacy looked like for Bryan.

In addition to literacy centers, Bryan's classroom teacher worked to integrate literacy throughout the day. As stated in teacher interview, this could be as basic as reading a book to the class during morning carpet time, or could be as complex as learning about spiders in Science class through a poem. In this section the following examples of literacy integration in Bryan's classroom will be discussed: morning carpet time, show and tell, free play, science, and unit themes. A real strength of this kindergarten classroom, which was noted in the reflection journal, was the teacher's focus on integrating literacy throughout the day and it is key to consider when examining what literacy looked like for one student with autism in the general education classroom.

One example of how literacy was integrated throughout the day for this kindergarten class occurred first thing in the morning at carpet time, which can be an important part of the day for kindergarteners because it sets the stage for the rest of the

day. This morning routine was observed on multiple occasions and according to observation notes it looked similar each time. After the teacher gave a 2-minute warning, all of the students, including Bryan began to put away what they were working on and head over to the carpet. There were a couple students wrapped up in working on an art project who took longer than the others, but the whole class was eventually seated at the carpet. Two students, who had the job that day of being the leaders, ran through the days of the week song and while one held a pointer and pointed to the days on the calendar. One day it was Bryan's turn to be one of the leaders and he got the pointer stick and pointed to the calendar, but seemed hesitant to say anything. His leader partner did most of the leading and Bryan followed along after her. Most of the students sang along to the song, "The days of the week (clap, clap) the days of the week (clap, clap). Sunday Monday, Tuesday Wednesday, Thursday Friday, and then there's Saturday. The days of the week (clap, clap), the days of the week (clap, clap)." Bryan seemed to know all the words to the song and sang along quietly with the other kids. After the song, the teacher led a discussion with the class about what day it was, what the weather was like, and how many days were left of school. All of the students, except the leaders, were sitting "crisscross, applesauce" on the carpet. According to the field notes, Bryan stared into space while the questions were asked and did not appear to be engaged in the discussion. According to the reflection journal, this kind of off-task behavior was observed from Bryan during several whole group sessions; he also would look out the window, bounce around, and scoot further away from the group at times. The next part of the morning carpet time involved story time. The teacher read to the students and they answered

questions as they went. Bryan typically listened intently during the story but did not participate in the questions. The questions the teacher asked depended on the book and what they were doing in class at that time. For example, one day the class was focused on making predictions, so the questions centered around determining what the students guessed the book would be about and what would happen next. While all of these activities may not be directly related to reading, they all relate to literacy in some way. Learning the days of a week, to read a calendar, and to discuss the weather all added to the literacy learning in Bryan's classroom. Although Bryan was not always an active participant in whole group activities, they were still a key part of what literacy looked like for him.

One day during carpet time the class had a student teacher led group instead of story time. After the student teacher led a brief group discussion about conflict among friends, she asked the class to divide into small groups. Bryan was in a small group given the task of creating and acting out a skit that demonstrated conflict resolution. From the observation notes, it was not evident if Bryan understood the multi-step directions, though he did follow along with his peers. When it came time to do the skit in front of the class, Bryan used his peers as models for what to do. Research by Kliewer et al. (2004) focuses on the idea that literacy includes many different modes that children use to express and understand stories that come from their own experiences. The type of skit Bryan participated in could be considered one type of literacy and is an example of how him and his classmates experienced literacy integrated throughout their day.

Literacy was also integrated throughout the day through the fun activities of show and tell and free play. Many kindergarten classes have show and tell, but the difference in this class was that the students had to hide the item behind their back and gave clues to their classmates until they guessed what the item was. Although this activity was not observed, the teacher described it during an interview and stated that it was especially good for Bryan because it gave him practice coming up with details about an object and speaking in front of his classmates. It also gave him practice guessing other students' items based on the clues they gave. In addition to literacy through show and tell, the class also occasionally had free play as a reward for good behavior. During one Friday observation, Bryan was so excited for free play at the end of the day. As soon as it was time, Bryan and a few girls got out a puppet stand and began setting up shop. They made a sign, created their own money, and set up a display of marbles, which they were selling in their store. They took turns of who would sell the marbles and who would buy the marbles, and the other students argued over who would get to play with them. Bryan was the expert on counting money and was definitely a leader in that group. When a student came up to the stand to buy marbles, Bryan got practice asking what they wanted and telling them how much money to pay. Free play did not always involve literacy but in this example Bryan experienced literacy through role playing, formulating questions, and using his imagination. Show and tell and free play were two of the many activities used to integrate literacy throughout the day.

Another way literacy was integrated throughout the day was through themed units, which fell into the category of whole group literacy activities in Bryan's classroom.

As stated in teacher interview, the units carried over throughout the students' whole day from reading and writing to math and science. The unit observed was the Arctic. Several whole group literacy activities were observed throughout this unit that engaged the students, which will be described in the upcoming paragraphs.

On the first day of the unit the teacher read the students a book about Eskimos. The students all sat on the carpet as the teacher sat in the rocking chair and read them the book. Every couple of pages she asked them questions to keep them engaged. The field notes described Bryan as "staring off into space" during a lot of the story time, so it was hard to determine whether he was paying attention or not. When the teacher asked questions Bryan did not volunteer to answer, which was a pattern seen in the field notes. After reading the book the teacher set out several items from the Arctic including snowshoes, fossils, and photographs from her brother's trip to Alaska. The students walked through the exhibit and were encouraged to touch the items and look at the pictures. Bryan seemed engaged in this activity, as evident by him examining several of the items and exclaiming to his friends about them. He seemed especially interested in an animal skull, which he picked up, turned around in his hands, and examined for several seconds. The observation notes stated that the students were then asked to work in small groups in order to come up with questions to ask about the various Arctic items, which they would later share out in large group. Although Bryan participated in this whole group literacy activity, his small group looked slightly different than the other small groups. His group had a special education teacher leading the group, whereas the other students were able to work more independently to come up with questions about the

items. After working in their small groups, the students came together on the carpet and were asked to share a question that they came up with about the Arctic artifacts. The students had written their questions down on post-its, and the teacher asked for volunteers to share. Bryan did not raise his hand to volunteer this time, or any of the other times he was observed during whole group. The teacher called on Bryan to answer and he had difficulty responding. The question he had written, with the help of the special education teacher was, "Where do bears live?" When called on, Bryan replied, "Bears' caves." The teacher probed in order to get a question out of Bryan by asking if he meant do bears live in caves? Bryan nodded and the teacher addressed the whole class with the question and told Bryan, "Great question!" Listening to a story about Eskimos, examining artifacts from the Arctic, working in small groups to come up with questions about the artifacts, and having a class discussion to share their questions were some whole group literacy activities Bryan and his classmates participated in as a part of a themed unit which integrated literacy throughout their day.

Another whole group literacy activity that was observed was the students writing reports on Arctic animals. Consistent with teacher interview, the students participated in writing activities like this throughout each themed unit. Bryan chose polar bears and worked with the teachers and his classmates to research polar bears. For example, he was able to find some books on polar bears, which he put in his book box and read during the independent reading literacy center; he was also able to use the internet to find information about polar bears. The students, including Bryan, were observed working on a worksheet "rough draft" to come up with ideas for their reports. The worksheet

contained guiding questions to help students come up with descriptions of the animals. Eventually the students ended up writing a final draft report about their animals. The next step was that each student created a diorama using various supplies such as a shoebox, cotton balls, construction paper, and yarn. The students worked on the boxes during centers and received assistance from the teachers and student teachers. The observation notes describe Bryan working on his diorama with the help of a practicum student. The reflection journal stated that he seemed to need a lot of direction on what to do with the shoebox and the student helped him come up with ideas of what to add. He did not independently get up and get his supplies but waited for the student to direct him what to get. He asked her, "What next?" several times. Writing a report and doing a related art project is an example of a whole group literacy activity that Bryan and his classmates participated in as a part of a themed unit. This example integrated reading, writing, social studies, science, and art, and is an important aspect of what literacy looked like for Bryan.

Many whole group literacy activities occurred across various subjects throughout the day and three examples observed include an activity about the food chain, a poem and craft about spiders, and an ongoing classroom activity with eagles. The observation notes include a description of one day when the teacher read the class a book about animals and the food chain. After the story she had the students stand in a circle on the carpet. She passed out a card to each student; some cards were different animals, a sun, grass, bugs, water, etc. She passed around a ball of yarn to students, demonstrating the food chain, until a web was created in the middle of the group of students. She then read through a

series of events such as pollution and an animal being killed and cut the yarn in various places until the web was completely broken. This activity integrated a lot of different areas the students were learning about and really seemed to engage them. The field notes mention that the students were excited, yelling out what piece of the chain they were and raising and lowering their strings. Bryan was very interested in this activity; he was observed making eye contact with the teacher, holding the string, and answering the questions asked by the teacher. Bryan made groaning noises, stomped his feet, and appeared to be sad that the web was breaking. After that, the teacher asked students for ways to help save the earth and the class had a discussion about what each student could do differently. Bryan did not answer any of the questions but made eye contact with the teacher and appeared to be paying attention. This food chain activity is an example of a whole group literacy activity that the students participated in during science class.

Another science activity, which is an example of whole group literacy, involved learning about spiders. The field notes, which describe the activity, state that a guest teacher and practicum student came in to teach the class about spiders. The activity began with the teacher reading a short poem about spiders to the students while they were seated at their tables. After she read the poem, she passed out a worksheet with the poem and a space to create a spider out of pipe cleaners and other art supplies. While many of the students worked to create spiders on their copies of the poems, Bryan needed assistance from the practicum student. The student helped him assemble a spider and glue it together. Since some students finished earlier than others, they were asked to color a picture of a spider as well. After all of the students finished their spiders, the teacher led a

discussion about spiders. Although Bryan was present he did not participate in the discussion. He fidgeted with the art supplies and stared into space, so it was not evident if he was paying attention. This whole group literacy activity was integrated into science and also involved art.

The final literacy activity described in the field notes involved eagles and was ongoing throughout the time spent in Bryan's classroom. As stated in teacher interview, the kindergarten class was told about a live web camera that could be accessed through the Internet that recorded baby eagles in a nest in Decorah, Iowa. Although whole class literacy activities involving the eagle eggs or babies were not observed, the interviews with the teachers revealed that the students were all very interested in the eagles and had discussions on them on multiple occasions. The students also had the opportunity to check in on the eagles at any time, as the web camera was open on one of the computers at all times. Additionally, the teacher stated that the class did writing activities about the baby eagles. Participating in a class discussion and writing about the live eagle web camera are examples of how whole group literacy activities were integrated across other subjects. These are important examples to consider when examining the literacy experience of Bryan, a student with autism.

After analyzing classroom observations, reflections, and teacher interviews, one of themes that emerged was whole class literacy activities. Literacy centers are a big part of that, as well as the integration of literacy across the rest of the day. Whole group literacy activities are important to consider in order to gain a clear picture of what literacy looked like for Bryan in the general education classroom.

## Strategies to Help Bryan Access Literacy

In addition to whole class literacy activities, several strategies were observed to be used by the classroom teacher, speech teacher, and special education teacher in order to help Bryan access literacy. While many of these strategies took place during the specially designed instruction Bryan received from the special education teacher and speech teachers, his classroom teacher used some of the strategies as well. The strategies used to help Bryan access literacy are critical to consider when looking at his literacy experience and can be divided into the following categories: using topics of interest, giving multiple opportunities to think about difficult topics, positive reinforcement, and providing choices.

Bryan's teachers stated that in order to hold his attention and encourage him to be excited about literacy, they often incorporated his topics of interest into their lessons. Observation and interview notes will be used in order to describe examples of this strategy used with Bryan's interest in his family life, animals, and math across various literacy activities. During an interview, the special education teacher stated that because Bryan loved to talk about his parents and little sister, she tried to incorporate events from his family life into his daily specially designed literacy instruction. Every Monday morning the special education teacher corresponded with Bryan's mom in order to find out what they did over the weekend. Bryan's mom described what they did and often sent a picture. Since one of Bryan's goal areas was asking and answering questions, the special education teacher would then work with Bryan on asking and answering questions about his weekend. This was observed one day, when Bryan's little sister had had a

birthday party over the weekend. The special education teacher asked Bryan what he did over the weekend and he stared at her, shrugged his shoulders, and changed the subject saying "It 9:00." When she asked Bryan if he had a good weekend he gave the same confusing response; this was typical in the observations of Bryan answering questions. Since the teacher already knew about Bryan's weekend from communicating with his mom, she was able to give him hints and prompts in order to help him be more successful in answering. As per field notes, the teacher asked Bryan if anyone he knew had a birthday that weekend. That clue prompted Bryan to respond that yes, his little sister had a birthday. The two worked together to get Bryan to write down 3 things about his weekend. After Bryan wrote about his weekend, they read a book together about birthdays. It helped to keep Bryan engaged by relating the book to what he had done over the weekend and to his family, so every couple of pages the teacher would ask a question such as, "Did your sister have balloons at her birthday, too?" The observation notes state that the next day they went over Bryan's weekend again and this time the special education teacher had brought balloons that Bryan was able to blow up and then pop. They also talked about the book they had read, relating literacy to his family and to the activity at hand. The reflection journal for that day indicates that the collaboration between Bryan's parents and his teacher seemed to really help keep his attention on the literacy activity they were doing. The strategy of incorporating Bryan's interests into the literacy activities helped Bryan access literacy.

Teacher interview and classroom observations revealed that Bryan was very interested in animals. The following paragraph will describe literacy activities that were

geared towards Bryan's interest of animals in order to help him access literacy. The eagle web camera that was described in whole group literacy activities was used in Bryan's specially designed instruction as well, since Bryan showed such interest in the baby eagles. As stated in the observation notes, the special education teacher and Bryan worked for a whole week on watching the eagles, asking and answering questions about them, and reading books about them. One of the activities they did was naming the baby eagles once they had hatched. They worked together to come up with names for the baby eagles based on their appearances. The special education teacher ended up coming up with the names with the help of Bryan - one name from the field notes was "Fluffy," for example. She picked up on Bryan's interest in the eagle Web camera from whole group instruction and used it to help motivate him to read books about eagles and tackle difficult concepts such as assigning names to creatures. This was just one way that Bryan's teachers used topics he was interested in to help him access literacy.

Through interview, Bryan's teachers shared that they used the topic of math to help Bryan access literacy because he was very interested in numbers and telling time and excelled in math class. In the reflection journal the researcher wrote that she was initially perplexed by how one could use math to provide access to literacy, however, it was very evident in the observation notes that Bryan's teachers used math in many ways in order to support his literacy learning. These ways included providing him access to books about numbers and time, using a point system for reinforcement, and giving him the responsibility of changing the daily calendar. According to the notes, Bryan's book box, which was discussed earlier, was full of books about telling time and numbers. It was

shared during from teacher interview that Bryan's teachers regularly helped him pick out these books specific to his interests and at his instructional level. Bryan was able to read these books during independent reading center, which was discussed in the section of this paper on whole group literacy activities. Bryan enjoyed the books about numbers and time because he always chose those over others from his book box and smiled and laughed while he was reading them.

Bryan was observed reading a book about time and answering questions when he worked with the speech teachers one day. The teachers had a little white board and markers and Bryan was allowed to draw a clock in order to help with asking "when" questions. They read a book together about a mouse's day and different events occurring at different times of the day. For example, one of the questions was, "What time does the mouse go to bed?" The teachers told Bryan to draw the time on the white board and then wanted him to say, "The mouse goes to bed at 9:00." Bryan was able to draw the time but not able to form a complete sentence. They also worked on telling him to draw a certain time, and then asked him to ask a question based on the clock. For example, he drew 8:00 and they wanted him to say, "What did the mouse do at 8:00?" Helping Bryan find right fit books about numbers and telling time, and working with the speech teachers using a book about time are examples from the observation notes of how Bryan's teachers used his topics of interest to help him access literacy.

During teacher interview, Bryan's special education teacher explained the point system she used with Bryan. In order to motivate Bryan to keep working during their literacy time, she used a daily point system. She gave Bryan points every time

cooperated. Instead of giving one point at a time, she operated using large numbers since that got Bryan more excited. An example of them using the point system occurred during one of the observations and was described previously. The special education teacher asked Bryan about his weekend and wanted him to write 3 things him and his family did. He kept getting distracted and would change the subject, fidget, or stare into space. The teacher started by telling Bryan he would get 100 points for each answer he gave. So when he repeated that his sister had a birthday party that weekend, she wrote down 100 points. When he said they had cake, she wrote down 200 points. For every question he asked or answered, he would get more points. He continuously asked about the points and made sure Mrs. J did not forget about them too. The reflection journal stated that while the point system seemed effective at times, it also distracted Bryan because he obsessed over the points. During teacher interview, the special education teacher shared her concerns about the point system and explained that she planned to slowly use the point system less and less so that Bryan would work without getting points. She also stated that in order to find out what works best for Bryan it was necessary to try a lot of different strategies. Using a point system to reward Bryan was one strategy his special education teacher used to help him access literacy.

Bryan's teachers gave him multiple opportunities to work on difficult concepts in order to help his literacy development. As stated in teacher interview, two concepts that were difficult for Bryan to grasp were creativity and emotion. For example when Bryan read a book with the special education teacher, she would ask him if he liked the book or not. Bryan shrugged his shoulders and he seemed unsure of how to answer the question.

One activity the special education teacher did with Bryan in order to work on this concept was having him rate on a visual scale whether he liked the book they just read. She printed out smiley faces to use for different emotions: didn't like it, it was okay, and loved it. They worked on this every time they read a book together. Additionally, the teacher worked on creativity with Bryan in multiple ways. Because being creative and naming the baby eagles was difficult for Bryan, she incorporated it into other areas as well. They read a book about naming baby seals and brainstormed how the kids thought of names for the seals. They also watched a video on puppies and together thought of and listed out names for the puppies. The field notes stated that they decided one of the puppies should be named "Fatty" because he was heavier than the others. The special education teacher shared during a teacher interview that she learned from his mom that Bryan had a stuffed iguana at home that he had named, so she incorporated that into her lessons as well. They talked about what he named the iguana, how he came up with it, and what he might name other stuffed animals. Naming animals involves a degree of creativity, an abstract concept that proved to be difficult for Bryan. By using repetition and drawing from various sources, the teacher was able to help Bryan get a better grasp on the concept of creativity while also supporting his literacy development.

Another instance was observed where the special education teacher used multiple sources to help Bryan understand complex ideas. She told Bryan about her weekend in California. The main point of the activity was to get Bryan to ask her questions about her trip. She showed him pictures from the trip, they did a puzzle of the states, and they watched a YouTube video of seals because she saw them on her trip. With assistance

Bryan was able to formulate some questions about the teacher's trip and write them in his journal. They worked together on answering and asking questions on other occasions as well. One example is listed above when they discussed Bryan's weekend and his sister's birthday party. They also worked on the difficult concept of questions during one of the arctic unit activities. While the whole group literacy activity was to break into small groups and come up with questions about the artifacts, Bryan worked in a small group with the special education teacher to come up with questions. Not only were they working on one of Bryan's literacy goals in these instances, they were also working on giving Bryan various ways to access literacy - the internet, puzzles, photographs, and writing.

There were many strategies Bryan's teachers used to help him access literacy, including positive reinforcement through verbal praise and tangible reward. As stated in teacher interviews, both teachers tried to use constant positive reinforcement with Bryan. During whole group literacy instruction, The teacher often prompted Bryan to pay attention and when he followed her direction she would encourage him by sitting by him, including him in the lesson, or simply thanking him for paying attention. One example of this was when Bryan was working with The teacher during whole group literacy centers. His group was taking turns reading a book and he came upon a word that was difficult for him. Instead of acting frustrated and giving up, Bryan sounded out the word and was able to get it. The teacher became very excited and said, "Great job Bryan! I love how you used your strategies to sound that word out!" Bryan beamed in response to this praise and continued to read. The observation notes include multiple similar notations when the

special education teacher used verbal praise, as well. The pattern was that Bryan would do what was asked of him and the special education teacher would say, "Great job Bryan! I like how you followed my direction." Using verbal praise to encourage Bryan was one strategy his teachers used to help him access literacy.

In addition to using verbal praise, Bryan's teachers also used rewards as a form of positive reinforcement in order to keep him engaged and help him access literacy. The reflection journal stated that this strategy seemed to be used when the teachers were trying to get Bryan to complete a non-preferred activity. The field notes described one occasion where Bryan read a book about time to the special education teacher during his specially designed literacy instruction. Before they started reading, she asked him what he thought the book was going to be about. Bryan said, "No, read!" and tried to open the book. She then explained to Bryan that once they got through reading the book and answering questions about it as they went, her and Bryan could play a card game she had brought with. Bryan's eyes lit up and he appeared to be more willing to try to answer the questions. He needed reminders of the end reward as they read through the book, as he would begin to change the subject, fidget, or stare into space. According to teacher interview, the special education teacher used this strategy of offering reinforcement when Bryan cooperated on a number of occasions. Another example of positive reinforcement involves a watch that Bryan brought from home. Bryan was a thin little boy and this was a giant adult's watch, so he had to wear it around his bicep over the top of his shirts. He loved the watch and was constantly looking at it and talking about it. One day the teacher was observed using it as a reward; Bryan could only have the watch when he had

completed the writing activities he needed to get done. The observation notes revealed that this was one of the only times Bryan seemed eager to finish his writing assignment. Upon completion he excitedly bounced up to his teacher and said, "I done! I done Mrs. Zander!" After she checked the assignment and helped him make a few changes, she praised him for finishing his writing assignment and rewarded him with his watch. In order to consider what literacy looked like for Bryan, a student with autism who was included in a general education classroom, it is important to examine the strategies his teachers used, such as positive reinforcement, to help him access and be engaged in literacy.

In addition to topics of interest, multiple opportunities to learn difficult concepts, and positive reinforcement, Bryan's teachers also provided him with choices in order to help him access literacy. Choice primarily came into play when Bryan was working with the special education teacher during specially designed literacy instruction. Many times when Bryan and Mrs. J were reading a book, he did not want to answer any questions about the book so she had to coax him into participating. One way she did this was by giving him plenty of choices. One day, for example, Mrs. J told Bryan 3 activities they would be doing today. The activities included a say, draw, and write activity where Bryan was asked what he had done at recess. With the help of the teacher he would describe it, draw a picture of it, then write a sentence about it. Another choice that day was to read one of the books the special education teacher had brought along, which were all involving numbers. Bryan chose to read the book first, but wanted the teacher to read to him and showed resistance to answering any questions about the book. So the teacher let

Bryan be the teacher and guide her through the book. During teacher interview, the special education teacher stated that she felt giving him choices made him feel like he was in control and helped him stay engaged. The observation notes revealed a pattern of other times when Bryan was given choices during his specially designed instruction. They all looked very similar: she told Bryan they would do 3 activities throughout their time together; she explained the activities which were almost always reading a book, writing about the book, and formulating questions or answers about another event such as Bryan's weekend; she then gave Bryan the opportunity to choose the order he wanted to do the activities. By giving Bryan a choice in which activities he participates in, his teachers helped give him access to literacy. It is important to consider the strategies used to give Bryan access to literacy when looking at an overall picture of what literacy looks like for him through inclusion in general education.

## Obstacles to Bryan's Literacy Development

Despite the strategies Bryan's teachers used to help him access literacy, he still struggled at times and in order to get an overall picture of what literacy looked like for Bryan, it is important to consider the barriers to literacy that he faced. Based on notes from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and a reflection journal, the barriers to literacy Bryan faced include staying focused, needing adult assistance, and communication.

As stated in observations and teacher interviews, Bryan often struggled to stay focused throughout the day. While Bryan was staring into space, fidgeting, or perseverating on something, he missed valuable instruction and practice that could have

helped his literacy development. The main areas where Bryan's inattention presented a problem were during large group instruction and specially designed literacy instruction with the special education teacher.

Bryan's teachers reported one of their biggest concerns as Bryan's inattention during large group activities and instruction. Many days during morning carpet time he gazed into space, played with his hands, and did not appear to be paying attention to what was going on. Other instances of large group instruction were similar. Bryan would sit quietly just like the other kids, but often did not seem engaged in the instruction because of staring, slapping his face over and over, fidgeting, or flipping through a book or notebook he might have. Another example of Bryan's inattention during large group instruction occurred during an observation of a 25-minute period of reading instruction. Bryan was on task for approximately 48% of the time, compared to an average peer who was on task for 83% of the time. While most of his peers sat relatively still and looked at the teacher with minimum distractions, Bryan wiggled, looked around, and clapped his hands on his legs. Bryan's inattention also effected whether or not he knew what to do when directions were given to the whole group. The teacher often gave directions for their next activity after whole group instruction, and often Bryan would have no idea what to do. The observation notes stated that one day The teacher reminded Bryan to pay attention to her instructions, which were to get out their books and open them to a certain page. She noticed that he was off task fidgeting shortly after her prompt, so she asked Bryan what he was supposed to do. He had no idea, so she came over to his seat and

walked through it again with him one-on-one and he was able to follow. Inattention during large group instruction is one of the barriers to literacy that Bryan faces.

In addition to struggling with attention during large group instruction, Bryan was observed having difficulty staying focused during his specially designed instruction with the special education teacher. The following example was observed, which was also supported by teacher interview: the special education teacher asked Bryan to pick a book to read from a stack of four. Bryan picked the book, "Is It Time?" He began whining that he was thirsty and the teacher could not get him to begin reading, so she agreed to let him go get a drink. When they returned she asked him to start reading the book, and he did. However shortly thereafter he began whining that his pants were wet. The teacher asked him why his pants were wet and he just groaned, wiggled around in his seat and said, "I'm wet. I'm wet." The teacher then must have remembered that the students swam in gym earlier that day so that was why his pants were wet. As stated in the field notes, she continued to try to engage him and get him to stop perseverating on his wet pants, but had a hard time getting him to focus that day. Another example of his difficulty to focus when working with the special education teacher was when they were working on formulating questions about her trip to California, as mentioned earlier in the paper. Bryan was concerned about his literacy group and kept saying that he needed to get back to the group, which was at the game center. The teacher used various strategies to try to engage Bryan and while some were successful, overall it took a lot of time out of the instruction. She ended up ending instruction early since she could not get him to focus. Inattention

and distractibility was a big obstacle to Bryan accessing literacy during his specially designed instruction.

According to observations and teacher interviews, another barrier to literacy Bryan faced was that he often needed adult assistance. Working independently and during large group activities were two main areas observed that he needed adult assistance. During a group activity it became a problem when his teacher was busy with other students and he was unable to complete a task on his own. He would often whine, saying, "Mrs. Zander, Mrs. Zander, I don't know what to do." Or "Mrs. Zander, Mrs. Zander, I'm stuck." Bryan also struggled to work independently, including reading on his own during independent reading. One example of this was mentioned earlier, when Bryan was at the silent reading literacy center. Since there were no adults available to read with him, he lined his books up and counted them instead of reading. Here is another example from the field notes, also during silent reading, "He is upset- whining, frowning- because he is all by himself. He asks one student teacher to read to him but she says no because she is doing something else. He keeps saying, 'Will someone read to me?' His voice is getting louder and louder. Everyone ignored him so he began throwing a temper tantrum- pounding his fists on the floor and stomping his feet." Because Bryan was unable to get adult assistance when he needed it, he began acting out and he got frustrated. When frustrated, Bryan was unable to focus on learning. As demonstrated from these examples, Bryan struggled working and reading independently, and this was a barrier to his literacy because an adult was not available to help him at all times.

Although Bryan loved working with adults, he also became frustrated with the demands put on him at times. Bryan's teachers hypothesized that the reason for some of Bryan's frustration was his difficulty with communication. The difficulties, which were apparent from the field notes, included answering and asking questions. Without being able to answer questions about a book, how would Bryan demonstrate if he understood the book? Additionally, it could be a barrier to his learning if Bryan was unable to communicate his needs or ask for clarification when he did not understand. Over and over Bryan was observed reading with an adult and her asking him questions about the book they were reading. On one occasion Bryan said, "No questions! Just read!" Bryan became very demanding at times and insisted the adult continue to read instead of asking him questions. Bryan seemed to really have difficulty with answering and asking questions, so this was an area observed that he tried to avoid a lot. One day the teacher was allowing Bryan to be the teacher in order to get through their activity. The teacher made a prediction and asked Bryan to tell her if she was right or not, after they read through the book. He wouldn't answer her question and instead told her to turn around and close her eyes, and he wrote down different times, unrelated to what they were reading. Another day, Bryan was reading with the special education teacher and she asked him who the main character's sister was in the book. He responded, "Baby Arthur." This answer did not make sense, as Arthur was the main character of the book. One final example from the observation notes is from when Bryan was working with the speech teachers on asking questions. The teacher asked Alex when his birthday was and he answered. She then told him to ask her about her birthday. He repeated her question,

"When is my birthday?" He was not able to formulate his own question but only able to mimic what the teacher said. These examples highlight the difficulty Bryan had with asking and answering questions, which was a barrier to him accessing literacy.

## Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question, "How does a child with autism experience literacy in an inclusive classroom?" By analyzing notes from 15 hours of observation in an inclusive kindergarten classroom, notes from a reflection journal that was written in after each observation, and notes from interviewing the teachers, the pieces of the puzzle started to fit together. While inclusion is not necessarily always the least restrictive environment, a lot was learned about what can be done to teach literacy to a student with autism in the general education classroom. Analyzing the field notes revealed the following themes: whole group literacy activities including literacy centers and the integration of literacy throughout the day, strategies used to help the student access literacy, and obstacles to the student's literacy development experienced in an inclusive environment. These themes were discussed and described in detail in order to give the reader a clear picture of what literacy looked like for one student with autism in the general education classroom. While all students are different, some of the themes may be able to be generalized to other classrooms, schools, and students. Finally, while some activities and strategies worked for Bryan and others did not, all of them need to be considered when looking at his literacy experience.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

In the previous chapters a case study was presented about Bryan, a student with autism, who was included in a general education kindergarten classroom. The paper began with a review of the current literature on social construction, the construction of literacy and disability, how the constructs intersect with each other, the importance of literacy for children with autism, barriers to literacy, current research interventions, and benefits to inclusion in regards to literacy. The researcher spent 15 hours observing Bryan in his classroom and interviewed his general education and special education teachers. Chapter 4 included an in-depth analysis of field notes from the observations, teacher interviews, and a reflection journal. The themes that emerged from the data analysis were whole group literacy, strategies to help Bryan access literacy, and obstacles to literacy. In this chapter, the research question will be answered, "How does a child with autism experience literacy in an inclusive classroom?" The findings and how they fit with the literature will be discussed; limitations of the study will be considered; and implications for future research will be examined.

## Local Understanding and Presuming Competence

One of the major findings is that Bryan's teachers had a local understanding and presumed his competence. Kliewer (2008) said, "Local understanding is the capacity to recognize the intelligence, imagination, and drive to make sense of the surrounding world within all children..." (p. 4). Similarly, presuming competence suggests that educators believe students can and will be able to learn (Biklen & Burke, 2006). Even though the

observations of Bryan were limited in time, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that his potential as a competent learner was assumed. The findings that follow include examples that were only able to occur because Bryan's teachers presumed he was competent and had a local understanding.

## Literate Citizenship

Another finding that will be addressed is Bryan's literate citizenship. Kliewer (2008) explains this citizenship as being involved and supported in the school's reading and writing curriculum. Because of the construction of disability, often students with disabilities are seen as unable to be a part of a literate environment. Although Bryan was labeled with a disability, there is evidence that his literacy experience was not that different from the rest of the students in his kindergarten classroom and he was a part of the literate community. For example, Bryan took part in whole group literacy activities with the rest of his class and often used his classmates as models for his own behavior. When Bryan took part in a word game with his peers, he was given the opportunity to learn literacy in a different way, alongside his classmates. Bryan also was accepted into the literate community when he and his classmates set up a store for selling marbles. The children's interactions with him and their acceptance of his playing the role of leader in this project demonstrate that they saw him as a literate member of the community. Additionally, when Bryan did show and tell, his teachers supported the growth of his descriptive and public speaking skills. Another example of Bryan's citizenship is when Bryan was given the assignment to think of questions about the arctic artifacts and share with the rest of the class. While most of the other students worked in small groups with

minimal teacher support, Bryan worked in a group with the special education teacher. She helped him come up with ideas and write them down on post-it notes to share with the class. Kliewer (2008) stated, "Teachers who developed ways of supporting the participation of children with disabilities in the written language agenda of school seemed to succeed in fostering what I described as a child's citizenship" (p. 20). Additionally, although Bryan's teachers knew he struggled with writing, he still received the same writing assignments as the rest of his class. On one occasion, Bryan was asked to write a story. While his story did not follow the exact guidelines of the assignment - to write about spring break - his teachers focused on celebrating the positives. If Bryan's teachers did not presume he was competent, they would have given him an alternate task to complete. According to observations and teacher interviews, Bryan took part in the literate community of his classroom on a daily basis and had citizenship in an inclusive literate community.

## Inclusion Promotes Literacy

The next finding is that inclusion promoted Bryan's literacy. Evidence shows that because Bryan was seen as competent by his teachers and was given literate citizenship, he was challenged in ways he would not have been if he were placed in a self-contained classroom. For example, leading the class in morning carpet routine challenged Bryan and he was able to use his peers as models to improve his participation. Another way inclusion helped Bryan's literacy was by promoting learning through collaboration (Kliewer & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2007), as evidenced by his inclusion in a literacy group during centers. When Bryan played a word game with his friends, they were able to assist

him and act as models, which lead to increased literacy. The literature also indicates that inclusion helps promote literacy for students with significant disabilities (Kliewer, 2008) and this case study is an example of inclusion helping a student with autism access literacy. Zascavage and Keefe (2004) stated that when students are placed in a special school or a special classroom, the attitude is often much different than if the students are included in a general education classroom. In a segregated, self-contained classroom teachers may not have a local understanding and curriculum may focus on functional skills, whereas Bryan was included in a general education classroom, presumed competent, and his curriculum focused on literacy.

## Effective Teaching Strategies

In addition to presuming competence and local understanding, literate citizenship, and inclusion, another finding was the effective literacy strategies Bryan's teachers used. Research indicates that better equipping teachers to teach literacy to all students helps students with disabilities access literacy (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer & Landis, 1999; Zascavage & Keefe 2004). Evidence shows that Bryan's teachers were well equipped because of the variety of strategies they pulled from their teaching. These strategies, which are also discussed in the literature, include providing a literacy rich environment, using topics of interest, and providing multiple opportunities to learn difficult topics. It is only because Bryan's teachers presumed that he was competent that they chose to learn and use a variety of strategies to engage him in the literate community of the classroom.

The research states that it is important to have a literacy rich environment for students with significant developmental disabilities (Katims, 1996) and this is a strategy Bryan's teachers used for all of their students. First of all, Bryan's teachers filled their classroom with literacy rich items such as bookshelves full of books, students' names written above their mailboxes, the alphabet and educational posters on the wall, students' writing posted on bulletin boards, and various opportunities for pretend play. Bryan's teachers also stressed literacy by not only doing literacy centers daily, but also integrating literacy into their students' days in morning routine, science, social studies, and other activities. One example of when the literacy rich environment benefitted Bryan was when he entered the classroom each day and checked his mailbox. Through this routine he learned to find and recognize his name in print. Because Bryan's teachers had a presumed competence, they believed Bryan would be able to learn to identify his name in print in order to check his mailbox each day. Additionally, Bryan utilized the wealth of books available in the classroom; his teachers were able to draw from the variety of books in order to find ones that suited Bryan's interests and this promoted Bryan's literacy as well. Spending each school day in a literacy rich environment, which was only allowed because of Bryan's teachers' local understanding and presumed competence, helped Bryan access literacy.

Also part of the effective strategies finding is that Bryan's teachers used topics he was interested in, such as numbers, animals, and his family. The strategies they used were predicated on the belief that Bryan could become literate. For example, when the special education teacher made sure that she knew about Bryan's weekend before questioning

him about it she presumed that with that knowledge she could support him in creating written communication about the weekend. Had she not believed this, she would not have made the effort to know about his weekend nor would she have expected him to produce any writing about his weekend. This method helped to engage Bryan in the literacy instruction, which helped improve his learning and is also in the literature as another way a teacher can presume a child is competent (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003). By working together to implement these strategies to help Bryan access literacy, his teachers had a local understanding and presumed he was a competent learner.

Another strategy in this finding that helped Bryan access literacy was using a variety of methods to teach difficult topics. Kluth and Darmody-Latham (2003) also discussed this topic as a way to teach students with significant disabilities and their recommendations include using visual supports, singing, using art, and reading aloud. One example used in this case study was teaching Bryan about naming animals through a variety of activities, which included reading a book, looking at pictures, and watching video. This strategy gave Bryan multiple opportunities to grasp what the special education teacher referred to as a very difficult topic for Bryan. More evidence of this finding is when Bryan's teacher worked with him on writing using the topic of birthdays. The teacher used the tangible item of balloons, read books with Bryan about birthdays, and looked at photographs of Bryan's sister's birthday party. Not only was the special education teacher using topics that interested Bryan, she also used a variety of methods to help keep Bryan engaged. He was able to work on his writing skills since writing followed each activity. Because Bryan's teacher presumed he was competent, she

planned lessons around the expectation that he would write about his sister's birthday party. Additionally, she believed Bryan would be able to participate in the activities she planned, so she provided him with those opportunities.

Barriers Not Present

Another important finding is that while the literature described barriers to literacy that students with disabilities often face, the field notes did not reflect those same barriers in Bryan's classroom. These barriers include exclusion from group activities, teacher attitude, teaching practices, and time for instruction. Kluth and Darmody-Latham (2003) stated that one of the barriers to literacy for students with disabilities can be that they are often excluded from certain activities such as pretend play, story telling, and acting, yet these were areas Bryan was observed being a part of. Two examples of this were Bryan leading his classmates in pretend play selling marbles and Bryan participating in the skit about conflict with a group of his classmates. Bryan was very much a part of each of these scenarios and was even the leader in the example of pretend play. A third example of Bryan being accepted in the classroom was when the class role-played as different parts of a food web being destroyed from pollution. Bryan modeled his peers' behavior and participated in the roleplaying. Undoubtedly one of the reasons Bryan's teachers encouraged his participation in activities such as pretend play and acting is because they had a local understanding and presumed his competence, which in turn helped Bryan access literacy.

Bryan's teachers' attitudes, practices, and time for instruction were other barriers found in the literature that were instead observed as strengths in Bryan's classroom.

Zascavage and Keefe (2004) explained that some teachers have the attitude that students with significant developmental disabilities do not have the capacity to become literate. This was not the case for Bryan's teachers. On multiple occasions their positive attitudes toward Bryan and their assumption that Bryan could learn were observed. One example is the time when Bryan's general education teacher encouraged Bryan to continue working on his writing assignment because she "knew" he could do it. An additional part of the positive attitudes Bryan's teachers had was described in the literature as being prepared to expect a struggle (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). This means that the teachers were aware that Bryan might have difficulties but they still believed that he was competent and gave him adequate chances to learn. Bryan's special education teacher did this when she provided a variety of choices for activities for Bryan, knowing that he may be distracted and would need topics of his interest in order to stay engaged. Bryan's teachers also demonstrated this strategy during large group instruction, which was a challenge for Bryan. His teachers still encouraged him to participate and provided support as needed because their attitudes were positive and they presumed Bryan was competent.

In addition to his teacher's attitudes, the fact that Bryan took part in the whole class literacy activities such as centers, morning carpet time, and show and tell are reflective of his teachers' practices and that they believed in his ability to be literate. If the teachers thought Bryan could not participate and learn with the other students, they would not have included him. His teachers' practices were also reflected in their literacy rich classroom, openness to include Bryan, and their willingness to offer positive reinforcement frequently. When teachers assume that students with significant disabilities

cannot be literate, the class's curriculum often reflects that belief and focuses more on functional skills than academics (Kliewer et al., 2004). This was not the case in Bryan's classroom, as evidenced by the description of literacy activities he participated in throughout his day such as literacy centers and specially designed instruction. His specially designed literacy instruction included naming baby animals through a variety of activities, discussing Bryan's weekend and incorporating it into instruction and writing, and finding books that suited Bryan's interests and ability level.

A final barrier, which Zascavage and Keefe (2004) mention but was not observed in Bryan's classroom, is that the majority of the school day of a student with a disability may be spent transitioning from one activity to the next and working on medical needs and therapy and little time is left to devote to teaching literacy. In Bryan's case, his speech therapists came to him and worked with him right in his classroom before class. His special education teacher also came to him and worked with him within his classroom; both of these factors freed up time for instruction that may have been spent during transition. Although Bryan did face challenges such as staying focused, needing a high amount of adult assistance, and struggling with communication, the barriers mentioned in the literature were not observed in Bryan's case.

## Construction of Literacy and Disability

The barriers mentioned in the literature, which were not observed in Bryan's classroom, were created by the intersection of the constructions of literacy and disability and may keep some students from learning literacy. Since Bryan's teachers presumed he was competent by providing him with literate citizenship, promoting literacy through

inclusion, using a variety of strategies to engage him, and avoiding barriers that are often present for students with disabilities, they did not abide by society's constructions of disability and literacy. To summarize what was discussed earlier in the paper, society has created the construction of a person with a disability as someone who is inferior to others (Adkins, 2003). A student with autism may be seen as unable to learn to read and unable to participate in literacy; however, this was not the case for Bryan, as his teachers promoted his literacy learning by including him in whole group literacy activities and presuming he was competent. Additionally, society also has a construction of what it means to be literate and that does not typically include individuals with significant disabilities. Research by Kliewer and Landis' (1999) indicated that many individualized education plans (IEPs) of students with significant disabilities did not have goals addressing the use of written language. Bryan's special education teacher worked with him daily on writing and reading and teacher interview revealed Bryan's goals as including a math applications goal, a writing sentences goal, a reading comprehension goal, and a speech/language goal. In Bryan's case, his teachers set aside the constructions of disability and literacy and the evidence shows that this benefitted Bryan's literacy learning immensely. Kasa-Hendrickson (2005) stated that by presuming the competence of their students, widening the construction of what it means to have a disability, and understanding their students as literate citizens with their own ideas and stories, teachers are able to rethink how they look at performance and participation; Bryan's teachers did just that.

## Limitations

This case study was an investigation into how a child with autism experienced literacy in an inclusive classroom. Despite planning and research, the study had its limitations. The biggest limitation of this case study is the size, which is often a difficulty with case studies. Because only one student was observed, there are questions about generalizing the conclusions to other students and other schools. Additionally, 15 hours of observation may not have been enough to get a true picture of what Bryan's literacy learning looked like. Finally, in qualitative research there is a chance of researcher bias. According to Lichtman (2010) total objectivity is not possible in qualitative research. Although steps were taken to address these limitations, they were limitations nonetheless. In an ideal world, several more case studies similar to this one would also be conducted in order to come up with a clearer picture of what literacy looks like for students with autism in inclusive classrooms.

## Future Research

The current study set out to examine how a child with autism experiences literacy in an inclusive classroom. This question was addressed by a case study that included classroom observations, teacher interviews, and reflections. Future research might include:

(1) Further investigate strategies teachers use to help students with autism access literacy.

(2) Collect quantitative data such as IEP goals, standardized testing, and classroom data in order to examine included students' literacy learning over time, in conjunction with qualitative data as presented in this paper.

(3) Complete further case studies in order to have a synthesis of studies that look at the literacy learning of students with autism included in general education classrooms.

(4) Investigate similarities and differences between strategies used with students with autism who are included in the general education classroom and those who are not.

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