

Freedom to *Imagine* and the Right to *Read*

By Otto Lana



For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who find themselves in segregated settings, the denial of a literacy-based, age-appropriate education is not a neutral pedagogical choice — it is an act of systemic exclusion. From kindergarten through twelfth grade and into transition programs governed by IDEA, the promise of a Free Appropriate Public Education is routinely diminished by the word *appropriate*, a term left to the discretion of individual school sites and well-meaning IEP teams, resulting in the clank of a prison door of the perpetual preschool prison instead of the knock of opportunity on a door that opens to a limitless future.

When schools view students through the lens of low capacity, the consequences are predictable and devastating. Without the presumption of competence, students with disabilities are removed from diploma-bound tracks and handed functional life skills goals in place of academics. They are taught to sort laundry instead of to read literature. They are taught to count coins instead of to understand history. This is not education — it is a self-fulfilling prophecy dressed in the language of support.

Literacy is not a luxury for students who can “handle” it. It is the architecture of agency. Without reading and writing, a student cannot control their own narrative. They cannot imagine themselves in a story, because every story they are given was written for a three-year-old. Stuck in a permanent world of *Dr. Seuss* and *Eric Carle* while their peers move on, these students never encounter authentic representations of people like themselves — no role models, no mirrors, no maps toward a bigger life, no launchpads for a moonshot.

Without literacy, communication collapses. Critical thinking has no scaffold. Dreams have no language. The barriers built by low expectations do not stay at school — they follow students into adulthood, into isolation, into dependence.

Every student, regardless of disability, deserves an education that presumes their potential. Literacy is not the reward for being easy to teach. It is the right of every child to be taught. Every child deserves the freedom to imagine, and imagination begins with the right to read. ■



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