

## **Democratic Classrooms and Accessible Instruction**

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A current slogan circulating in school rhetoric across North America is that we must maintain "high standards for all students." However, the practice of high-stakes testing and heavily scripted curriculum often mitigate against the types of instructional events that actually support dynamic learning opportunities for all students. In my 15 years of special education teaching I moved from teaching in self-contained settings to teaching in fully inclusive general education classrooms. I spent many years working with general education teachers to develop curriculum and instruction that challenged and supported all learners. After moving on to university teaching I had the opportunity to read much of what has been published on making curriculum modifications and designing what I am terming, "accessible instruction."

There is a large body of literature that offers much advice regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. However, there is very little link made between this literature and the work on democratic schooling practices. Yet such practices often overlap and certainly can be thought of as mutually supportive. In this essay, I outline essential tenets of accessible instruction, give real classroom examples of some practices, and make the link to educating for democracy. I begin with the example of a sixth grader I will call Marie (a pseudonym).

During one year of university teaching, I co-taught a social studies class at a local middle school. Marie was being included in general education, along with four other students with special education labels, for the first time since kindergarten. The teacher explained to me that Marie tested as moderately cognitively impaired and also exhibited a host of atypical classroom behaviors, such as thumb sucking and making loud and unusual noises. Yet from almost the very beginning of the year, Marie made it clear that she had ideas to contribute to the class.

The teacher and I had designed a year-long unit we called, "Walls." It began with a focus on how hunter-gatherer humans used walls (for art and shelter) and how life changed as people first developed agricultural practices. As the class offered ideas for a concept map on nomads, I circulated around the room and happened to be near Marie as she whispered (seemingly to herself), "Are homeless people nomads?"

I was immediately struck by the significance of Marie's question. Here a student could be seen making an important intellectual connection between what we were presenting as ancient history and what we all recognize as a profound current social problem. The teacher and I quickly decided to begin the next class period with a chance for Marie to re-state her question for the whole class to hear and ponder. We then asked the class to create a venn diagram illustrating the characteristics that homeless people do and do not share with nomadic people. The students expressed obvious interest and immediate concern about homelessness which led us to deviate for an entire week from our planned sequence on early farmers and focus instead on learning about problems and services for people without permanent shelter in the United States. We watched a documentary based on interviews with homeless people, brought in material on local support services for community members currently homeless, and

read news articles and stories written about and by homeless adults and children. We concluded the week with a whole class discussion speculating about the different feelings about themselves that nomads might have had versus those of homeless people.

## **TENETS OF ACCESSIBLE INSTRUCTION**

In June we concluded our "Walls" unit by publishing a book with chapters written by the whole class, chapters written by small groups, and chapters written by each student. Marie wrote her chapter about Helen Keller—a woman who lived with invisible walls around her—and presented it as a cartoon biography, illustrated by a classmate who excelled at cartooning.

At the end of the year I had the opportunity to interview most of the sixth graders and asked about what they thought about working with students whose skill levels were different than their own. The students with the highest skill levels in literacy all expressed their enthusiasm for the social studies course, noting that this was a class where students could really get to know each other's opinions. One student, Rachel, explained that she had initially been skeptical when she realized students from the special education program were in her class. "I found out, though," she explained, "that I have something to learn from everyone." In this way, the instructional practices that support the inclusion of students formerly segregated in special education classes serve simultaneously to promote the type of dialogue so essential for democratic schooling. The very mechanisms that open up the floor to students with differing skill levels, also open up the floor to a serious exchange of ideas.

There are four basic tenets of teaching and learning that form a foundation upon which to build curriculum for restructured inclusive classrooms that also promote democratic classroom practices. These are: searching for strengths in all learners; expanding beyond the whole-class, uniform-lesson format; utilizing flexible grouping strategies; and fostering collaborative problem solving. These tenets are more fundamental than just curricular adaptations. But, any specific accommodations will be much easier to accomplish within the context that these tenets provide.

## **SEARCHING FOR STRENGTHS IN ALL LEARNERS**

Rather than analyzing all the things a student cannot do, this tenet holds that we should find all of the capacities that our students already have. This is particularly important when teaching students who are already marginalized by labels—for example children from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, children with lower socioeconomic status, or children with disabilities. Using this tenet, we view all learners as active constructors of knowledge, and seek to uncover their capacities, rather than their deficiencies. Since all new learning exists in connection with prior learning, it is crucial that we begin with the learners' prior experiences. It is then our job as teachers to discover what it is that our students do know, value, and believe. Parents and other community members are often an invaluable resource at helping to reveal the strengths and knowledge of the learner. This idea of building on strengths and prior knowledge is central to the special education notion of diagnostic teaching—that is, searching for

what learners are currently capable of doing alone, and designing instruction that will help them reach the next step. This orientation is also common to an integrated language perspective, wherein teachers are encouraged to be good "kid-watchers" (Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1995), paying careful attention to the steps each individual student takes in literacy learning. In all of these approaches, teachers are encouraged to ask, "Who is this student? And what does this student bring to the learning situation?" Answers to these questions become the starting point for instructional strategies.

This orientation is also compatible with theories of multiple intelligence (Armstrong, 1994; Gardner, 1991) that encourage us to design instruction rich in opportunities to explore visual and performing arts, music, human interactions, and even introspective studies. During the creation of the Walls book, for instance, students had opportunities to integrate the arts and social issues into their individually written chapters. We also devoted much class time to work that developed "interpersonal intelligence" as students formed committees such as "editors", "illustrators," "indexers," "glossary," and "maps."

## **EXPANDING BEYOND THE WHOLE-CLASS, UNIFORM LESSON FORMAT**

The second basic tenet in designing accessible instruction requires that teachers expand beyond the whole-class, uniform lesson format to also include other forms of instruction. There is a strong tradition in classrooms throughout the world to organize instruction in a single lesson format (Goodlad, 1983). This is the format that most of us know quite well from our own school experiences and features teacher-directed, whole class activities with little instructional variation across groups of children. This form of instruction is commonly delivered as "chalk and talk," referring to lecture format, or "drill and skill," usually involving worksheets and individual seatwork.

In contrast, when teachers plan for differences among students (whether they have labeled disabilities or not), other formats are commonly used. In classrooms that are accessible to a wider range of learners, there are usually multiple things happening at once in the same room. This flexibility opens the door to the inclusion of students with a variety of skill levels. Teachers who embrace such activity-based instruction use formats that have the power to be challenging for all students. Such formats include: simulations, applied learning stations, role-plays, demonstrations, experiments, and projects. But such teachers do not stop there; they also use the school community and even the wider community as well.

Within this type of restructured classroom, teachers do not abandon direct instruction. Instead, teachers frequently use explanations and demonstrations with either small groups or the whole class. These teacher-directed activities—called "mini-lessons" (Calkins, 1986)—are planned by teachers as opportunities to teach students specific skills and concepts as needed. In this way, instruction is contingently responsive (Wells & ChangWells, 1992) to students' current needs, not arising because it is suggested by a teacher's manual, but instead growing out of the teacher's own diagnosis of student learning.

Progressive pedagogies built around rich learning experiences are all compatible with democratic inclusive classroom practices and stretch instruction beyond the single-lesson format. Such pedagogies can be found in all content areas and include: a

process approach to writing; literature-based reading; problem-posing social studies; inquiry-based science; and constructivist mathematics. These are all approaches that resist single answers and rote instruction. Instead, learners interact with materials, peers, and teachers, in dynamic and flexible ways. Such learning offers the chance to work at many different skill levels simultaneously as well as fostering a critical approach to knowledge that is so essential for a democracy to thrive.

## **UTILIZING FLEXIBLE GROUPING STRATEGIES**

A common educational practice that does not fit within inclusive classrooms where diverse learners are fully accommodated is what is commonly known as "ability grouping." Such groups, typically arranged by current skill level (usually in the area of reading), are fixed throughout much of the school year. In contrast, teachers who actively challenge and support all learners embrace a wide variety of grouping strategies based on dimensions other than ability or perceived ability (Neary, Halvorsen, Kronberg, & Kelly, 1992). That is, flexible groups are formed and re-formed as the teacher and students establish new goals (Harp, 1989; Unsworth, 1984). These working groups often vary in size—some tasks might involve pair work, whereas other tasks use groups as large as six members. These are sometimes heterogeneous groups formed to accomplish specific tasks (Wisniewski & Alper, 1994) and can be organized around students' interests. Consequently, they allow for a great deal of student choice.

Teachers who are committed to support all learners work diligently to form and re-form heterogeneous groups that are balanced with a wide range of skill levels and interests. In large part this helps to foster opportunities for spontaneous and planned peer interaction (Thousand & Villa, 1988). To support these heterogeneous groups, teachers often use various structures of cooperative learning that include attention to factors such as positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986). It is important to note that simply putting students into cooperative groups and having them evaluate participation and cooperative behaviors may not ensure equal participation among group members. Rather, teachers need to find and plan ways to improve peers' perceptions of students with lower status in heterogeneous groups (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1995). Researchers studying participation of students with disabilities in cooperative learning groups found that the teachers of the most successful groups "made public statements validating the contributions of children with disabilities" and thus served to raise their status among their peers (O'Connor & Jenkins, 1995, p. 13). These same authors also observed the teachers of the most successful groups focusing their comments towards group behaviors, rather than targeting individual low-status students.

In order to teach a particular skill or fill some other instructional need, some teachers in inclusive classrooms also use homogeneous groups. As an alternative to fixed, so-called "ability grouping," the teacher in the scenario below is working with students on the same skill. As you will see, groups have been assigned different tasks on the basis of skill level.

A second grade teacher in an inclusive classroom receives "push-in" services almost every day from the reading specialist. During this time, they have developed

what they call "customized skill groups," where children are working on tasks all related to one large skill. For instance, when the skill being developed was alphabetizing, one group worked on making a dictionary of all their new science words and putting them in order, while another group used an alphabet line to place these same science words written on index cards in order.

Below is another example of a grouping decision based on an instructional need as well as interests and tasks from the sixth grade "Walls" unit. In this case, both groups were assigned the same basic task and one group has been given an extended task. Additionally, the teacher provided direct instruction for one group.

While studying first cities, we wrote a chapter for our Walls book on Mesopotamia. Wanting to make the link to current geography, we asked the students to find out what modern countries made up ancient Mesopotamia. The teacher offered half the class step-by-step instruction on how to do this with maps on an overhead projector. She demonstrated overlaying the modern and the ancient maps. Meanwhile, the other group—whom the teacher judged to have much more proficiency with maps—was working without her assistance. They had a large table-sized map to work with, and were also asked to label modern cities found in recent current event clippings. In this way, students were able to get different levels of support as they all worked on the concept of land boundaries changing as societies changed. Although she assigned students to the initial groups, she told them what both groups were doing and encouraged them to switch groups if they thought they should.

When students see that groupings are flexible, we greatly reduce the stigma that adheres to being in "the low group." Particularly when students are actively involved in the process of creating groups, it becomes much easier for individual students to admit that, "Yes, I need a little bit of help with working with maps. I think I'll move to the other group."

## **FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING**

When designed well, the sorts of flexible small groups just described can help set up an atmosphere in classrooms of collaborative problem solving (Rainforth, 1992), which is the fourth tenet of instruction that supports accessible instruction. In inclusive classrooms, learning is less about getting a single right answer to a factual question (which would leave out some students who might never have the recall or verbal skills to succeed with these sorts of tasks), and more about working together to answer larger, more conceptual questions.

Some teachers, influenced by the Essential Schools Movement (originally from Brown University) organize curriculum and instruction around "essential questions." According to Cheryl Jorgensen, who has done much work with curriculum in inclusive classrooms, essential questions have the following characteristics: (a) there is no one right answer; (b) they help students become investigators; (c) they involve thinking, not just answering; (d) they offer a sense of adventure, are fun to explore and try to answer; (e) all students can answer them; and (f) they require students to connect different disciplines and areas of knowledge (Jorgensen, 1994, p. 22). As with Marie's question, "Are homeless people nomads?" these questions can come from students, as well as from the teacher.

Some teachers take the next step and link essential questions to issues of democracy, human rights and social justice (Allen, 1999). These teachers work with their students to organize projects that take them outside the four walls of school and into the local or global community. Such instruction involves direct teaching of many of the skills needed for participatory democracy. Not surprisingly, these large projects also offer opportunities for students with a wide range of skill levels. The case of a high school in Miami, Oklahoma illustrates the link between democracy and inclusive involvement. Their town of approximately 3,000 people is the site of numerous lead mines that were improperly shut down over 25 years ago. Due to ground water contamination and large piles of lead tailings, a huge number of children suffer from extensive lead poisoning. Due to the efforts of Rebecca Jim, a guidance counselor at the high school, the science and English teachers work with their students to design inquiry projects about the environmental and health issues related to lead pollution and then plan public education programs. Although some of the students experience cognitive and behavioral effects from lead poisoning, when interviewed (Kesson & Oyler, 1999) the students were adamant that there was important work done by all members of their classroom community. One student explained, "Some people are good at talking to the media, some people are good at planning dances for fund-raising, and some people are good at doing research. It takes all of us working together on an issue this big and this important. We need everyone."

## **SCHOOLING FOR DEMOCRACY**

For schools to actively educate for democratic citizenship, we must create instructional methods that are inherently democratic. Learning situations that allow each student to be supported and challenged do not require that everyone be engaged in the same activity. For, as the wonderful children's book *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962), teaches us: treating everyone the same is not synonymous with treating everyone equally. In fact, to treat people equally requires that we think carefully about the supports and strategies that need to be in place so that everyone can contribute to the work and conversation. It is within what John Dewey termed "conjoint communication" (1916) that active democracy can occur. For democracy is not merely a form of government. It is, more importantly, a way of living and learning. For classrooms to be active sites of democracy, they must be places where everyone can and does learn, and where everyone can and does teach. Yet this utopian vision requires particular strategies and careful planning. Designing accessible instruction is assuredly more work for all teachers who attempt it. Yet when students such as Marie can be seen as significant intellectual contributors to creating classroom knowledge, we have taken an important step toward building a more participatory democracy. Questions such as Marie's challenge us to uncover the capacities all students bring with them to school. Making room for all students in instructional events contributes directly toward building a stronger, more just society for us all.

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