

(Dis)ability in the Elementary School Classroom: Embracing an Inclusive Mindset

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Abstract

Children can learn about diversity and disability by harnessing their natural curiosity. They can become agents of change for the adults who surround them. We must go beyond accessibility and move into an inclusive mentality. Teachers need an inclusive mindset that shapes how they approach *all* students in the classroom. Thinking about learners rather than impairments is where Universal Design for Learning (UDL) plays a pivotal role in making classrooms more accessible to all. We can teach our students about ableism and ways of viewing the world through the lens of another. Teachers must ensure that the classroom library is representative of all students in the classroom and beyond. Literature has the unique ability to build empathy and nurture social acceptance by allowing students to imagine themselves in the shoes of the character in the story. A teacher can transform her classroom by shifting to an inclusive mindset, helping students develop deep and meaningful relationships with diverse students, implementing UDL effectively, and creating a classroom community where curiosity is encouraged. All students will develop deeper relationships with one another, become empathetic and appreciative of diversity, and will become agents of social change in their communities.

Key Words: ableism, disability, education, elementary exceptional, inclusion, social justice, special education

Too Polite To Look: Embracing Differences By Embracing Natural Curiosity

Kids are naturally curious about what they don't know, or don't understand, or is foreign to them. They only learn to be frightened of those differences when an adult influences

them to behave that way, and maybe censors that natural curiosity, or you know, reins in the question-asking in the hopes of them being polite little kids. (Mullins, 2009, 00:27)



Figure 1. Still Image from Aimee Mullins' TED talk shows her gesturing next to three pairs of prosthetic legs on stands while using a fourth pair as she walks across the stage. The first set on the stand are flesh-colored resembling traditional prosthetics, but the second two are unique, one made of wood and intricately carved and the third a combination of metal and polyurethane which Mullins calls "jellyfish legs" (Mullins/TED, 2009, 6:46)

If you walk into any elementary classroom and ask any student who in the room has food allergies, any student can usually quickly and accurately rattle off who in the room cannot have peanuts, dairy, or red food dye. Students easily learn that their peers are unique and that some students in the room have unique dietary needs. The students easily accommodate and even advocate for their classmates, reminding parents when sending in Valentines that they need a different option for the student who cannot have red dye. Students easily learn about different

needs in the classroom with regard to diet, yet education professionals continue to underestimate students' ability to learn the same with students who have different needs in other domains, like communication, behavior, and academics. Differences in the classroom bring value. Learning and embracing difference is what social justice education is all about. Dr. Karen Sealander embodies this mindset, noting that as teachers, we embrace everybody who walks through the door and see their value (2015, March, Personal Communication).

Alana Patzwald, third grade teacher, discusses how her class' curiosity about a classmate's disability was encouraged by the child's mother:

I had a student with brittle bone disease last year. Her mom encouraged us to show how her bones are different with raw spaghetti (her daughter's easily breakable bones) and how ours are more like Twizzlers (flexible and able to take some bending/force). After explaining how her bones were different we then passed out M&Ms. Like the M&Ms we all may look a bit different but are the same on the inside. I feel this was one of the best lessons for little kids to get how some things about us may be different but inside we are all the same and want the same treatment of respect. (Patzwald, A., 2015, April 22, Personal Communication)

While it is not always appropriate to discuss a student's label or diagnosis, it is okay for students to know that fair does not have to mean equal in the classroom. When a student gets glasses for the first time, other children are curious and want to know more, but the teacher and parent are not usually going to share the child's vision prescription. Many parents of the children whose classmate recently started wearing glasses may find requests for glasses coming from children that do not have the need for them as a natural result of curious classmates. Curiosity of difference is not bad. We want curious children; we want citizens who care enough to learn

about those around them and to be able to see things from another person's perspective. If we stifle curiosity in the name of politeness, there may be unintended consequences as a result. This author would argue that we could learn a great deal from the unadulterated curiosity of children. If world leaders who struggled to understand the history and religion of a region felt comfortable enough to ask questions to learn more, the world would likely be a more peaceful place. This curiosity to learn more and become better for it is one of the major premises of social justice education. Children can learn about diversity, including disability, by harnessing their natural curiosity. They can become agents of change for the adults who surround them, explaining to the adult who does not know any better that the folks at the table next to them are deaf and just talk with their hands instead of with their voice.

Teachers must spend time examining their own biases and areas for growth to become more effective teachers for all their students in the classroom. As a teacher, what do you do when you see a child who appears to have autism having a meltdown in the hallway of the school? How about the grocery store when shopping with your own children? So much of our understanding of how to interact with students or adults that are different than ourselves is based on previous experience. This does not apply only to those in the education profession. Police officers also are more likely to have a positive attitude towards those with an intellectual disability if they have had the opportunity and experiences to work and interact with persons who have those disabilities in a social setting (Eadens, 2008). Teachers know all about teachable moments, those opportunities to have moral discussions in the classroom. Leicester (2011) notes that those discussions gain from insights we acquire in our personal lives. Environmental factors, one of which can be the teacher themselves, can be what "handicaps the 'disabled' individual" rather than the disability itself (Leicester, 2011, p. 325). Beckett (2015) argues that

we have a responsibility to teach disability-focused anti-oppressive pedagogy that goes beyond what he terms “education about the other,” but into a pedagogical approach that “seeks to unshackle the possibilities for what a life can be/do and where a life might go” with the end goal of creating enabling societies (p. 89, 76). The United Nations recommends educational approaches that engender “respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity” (UN Enable, n.d., Guiding Principle d).

Creating a Culture of Inclusion

I believe that when we examine our own mental models toward disability, we won’t default to pity and charity but will focus our efforts on making our society accessible to everyone, and everyone will benefit. (Dunlap, T., 2014, 16:46)

Far too often, teacher preparation and current teacher in-service training revolves around the medical model of disability where exceptionality is viewed as a deficit warranting identification and remediation and can even be considered a form of ableism (Ashby, 2012; Brazabon, 2015). Pre-service teachers learn the most common diagnoses in the classroom in a disability-of-the-week format and then teachers learn the concepts of Universal Design for Learning in a separate module or teacher training. The alternative disability studies or social model looks at disability as it interacts with the environment in which it resides whereby the environment and society are the limiting factors. Social and political contexts are the culprits in creating “hierarchies of ability and disability” (Ashby, 2012, p. 92). In recognizing disability as an environmental and societal construct, any disability present in the school is emerging via interaction between the student and classroom opportunities and the perspectives and practices of their teachers (Ashby, 2012). If approaching students from an alternative minority group model,

then teachers would see students with exceptionalities as part of a marginalized and stigmatized group (Ashby, 2012; Kayama, 2015). Far too often, students with disabilities are marginalized by being placed in inappropriate environments. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasizes society's obligations towards those with disabilities and their human right to full inclusion and participation in society (Griffo, 2014). The students themselves feel different when they experience “institutional discrimination” and such injustice can become “linked to a central aspect of one’s identity as a disabled person” (Leicester, 2011). Torrie Dunlap of Kids Included Together proposes a melded approach to the traditional approaches, the biopsychosocial model, “This model accepts that medical labels and diagnoses are part of the identity of the person and environmental barriers are also considered when looking at how disability influences a child’s ability to function in the world” (Dunlap, 2014).

Teachers need a mindset that shapes how they approach *all* students in the classroom. Brazabon (2015) offers a simple maxim, “We need to think about learners rather than impairments” (p. 78). This is where Universal Design for Learning (UDL) plays a pivotal role. According to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, UDL is defined as:

A scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that:

- (A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and
- (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient. (Public Law 110-315)

Simply put, UDL is an opportunity to plan a lesson for *all* learners in the room from the start, regardless of label.

Disability is often viewed through a lens other than that of difference or diversity. Ashby (2012) notes that “considering disability as a social construct does not signify a denial of difference.” (p. 92). Dr. Lisa Dieker notes, “Inclusion isn’t something you do, it’s something you believe... It’s fascinating that people want data to show [inclusion] works. Did we do research studies to prove Brown vs. Board of Education?” (Dieker, as quoted in Wallace, 2015). Advocate Maureen Wallace (2015) summarizes best, “To [Dieker], and many other inclusion advocates, it is a basic civil right” (Paragraph 12). We can teach our students about ableism and other ways of viewing the world through the lens of another. Leicester (2011) argues that disability awareness is an essential part of moral education. She asks, “How in mainstream society can we most effectively develop our students’ understanding of, and commitment to, greater justice for disabled citizens and their non-patronising empathy for those coping with impairment in a disablist world?” (p. 326). The answer to this question is through inclusive practices and social justice education.

Blum, Gutierrez, and Peck (2015) illustrate inclusive practice with a great anecdote of two children, Ahmed and Chinar, one of which has severe developmental delays, cleaning a chalkboard together,

In the process, they both get some chalk and water on their [clothes]. Realizing how silly they both look, they begin to laugh hysterically... Ms. Ali approaches the students.

Admiring their work, she says, “Why, this is the cleanest the board has been all year!

Thank you my dear students!” When Ahmed’s mother picks him up at the end of the day

she asks, “Ahmed, how was your day?” Ahmed enthusiastically replies, “It was wonderful! Can we invite Chinar’s family to our home for tea?” (p. 14).

Ms. Ali recognizes that every student in her class needs group membership in not only the classroom community, but the community at large. Within an inclusive setting, Ahmed and Chinar have the opportunity to become friends, to learn empathy for one another, and to interact with those different than themselves in a safe and encouraged environment. The authors note that the children’s development is actually intertwined together. Blum and her colleagues (2015) argue that increasing students’ access and participation in socially valued roles, activities, and settings are not only goals of inclusion but also the means by which these goals can be achieved.

For far too long, whether a student is included in the general education classroom has been determined solely by the child’s ability to master the curricular content of the classroom. Blum et. al. (2015) argue that “skill acquisition by itself does not exclusively determine the extent to which a student can participate with his peers” (p. 21). Just as a student would struggle to learn a math concept in isolation from its real-life application, students with all abilities need skill acquisition to be meaningfully included in the context of social activities and settings. Group membership is a key component in inclusive practice. Peers expect students of all ability levels to participate in activities as they do, which reinforces the belief of all students that the student with a disability is “one of us” (Blum et. al., 2015, p. 21).

Teachers can encourage group membership by having students work in small groups with assigned roles so that each student’s contribution is outlined and valued in the final product. When a student with a disability is first placed in an inclusive setting, peer supports will have to be initiated and often modeled by the classroom teacher. Eventually, peers will follow the teacher’s lead and initiate social interactions and group supports. Samantha Borgman, a first

grade teacher, discusses how the impact of her direction to her students has increased the positive interactions in the classroom with a student who shows signs of being on the autism spectrum. One of her guiding teaching principles is “how we are all different and special in our own way and that we hold an important role in the class.” Borgman has trained all her students to use the designated calm down spot in the classroom when they are upset or angry. She notes that other students encourage the student on the spectrum to use the calm down spot when he is having an outburst due to frustration. As the year progressed, she notes that she now sees “them wanting to help him understand by reading with him or practicing math with him” (Borgman, 2015, May 3, Personal Communication).

Blum and her colleagues “propose an intentional move from the traditional curriculum focus of specific skill acquisition toward a more holistic view of student learning and development in which valued outcomes are defined by increased student participation in roles, activities and settings” (p. 25). All students in a classroom where students with disabilities are included will increase empathy, acceptance of differences, sense of self-worth, and commitment to personal principles of social justice (Blum et. al., 2015)

An example of a social justice lesson related to the concept of ableism is related to the updated accessibility icon. During the past few years, there has been a push to update the International Symbol of Access icon to an updated one created by Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney. Some large cities like New York City have made important decisions to adopt the newer, more engaged, active, depiction of a person in a wheelchair where the person’s head is forward, arm is pointing backward and the overall icon depicts motion and indicates that the person in the wheelchair is in control of his/her own mobility (Accessible Icon Project, n.d.). As we teach about policies in class and introduce the concept of ableism to our students, a lesson

whereby children are comparing depictions of the accessibility symbol through the lens of ableism yields critical discussion on the topic. Students in elementary school can easily see the differences between the images, and it is a great way to start the conversation and help students build a different lens around the concept of disability for students that may not have had prior experiences with anyone in a wheelchair.



Figure 2. Image depicts the timeline of the evolution of the symbol for International Accessibility from 1968 through the accessible icon project icon described in the text. The 2011 depictions note the Street Art Campaign where activists put a more active looking sticker person seated on top of the 1969 ADA & ISO approved symbol (Accessible Icon Project, n.d.)

As we look at all types of social justice education, we must ensure that we are preparing our future generations to not only be aware of racism, genderism, and the like, but also ableism. One elementary unit offered on the social justice website Teaching Tolerance is entitled Picturing Accessibility: Art, Activism and Physical Disabilities and it expands the concept and looks at ableism in a four lesson unit: <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/picturing-accessibility-art-activism-and-physical-disabiliti>

Mentality Not Just Accessibility

Inclusion teaches everyone in the classroom to accept students with disabilities and value their contributions, to adapt to challenges and celebrate strengths (Wallace, 2015, Paragraph 18).

As teachers and members of society, we must go beyond accessibility and move into an inclusive mentality. Teachers need an inclusive mindset that shapes how they approach *all* students in the classroom. Thinking about learners rather than impairments is easily accomplished through the premises of UDL. We must also go beyond people-first language in our classrooms where we are substituting terminology like ‘autistic child’ with ‘child with autism’. Let’s change from people-first language to community-focused language and behaviors. To reference the earlier allergy example, students can understand at a very early age that one student being allowed to eat a peanut butter sandwich while another must eat a ham sandwich is not inequitable, it is simply ensuring each student’s dietary needs are met in the lunchroom. Erica Levey, a first grade teacher, discusses a quote from a former professor with her students: "Fair isn't everyone getting the same thing. Fair is everyone getting what they need to succeed." Levey notes, “I have discussed this with my students and it has contributed to a sense of community that has benefited all students!” (Levey, 2015, April 27, Personal Communication). Teachers must challenge any terminology or systems that make us sort, classify, and rank-order our students (Ashby, 2012). Levey shares one way she meets the academic needs of the students in her room without allowing students in her classroom to rank-order themselves:

I used to use pre-determined, differentiated spelling lists for my approaching, on-level, and advanced students. However, in spite of my attempts to conceal this with "cute" list names and varied colors, students quickly realized what list they had received. It became

a source of bragging and ridicule, so, I implemented a weekly spelling pre-test. Every student receives a list based on their pre-test. I found that this has greatly curbed the "bragging rights," while also giving a clearer picture of my student needs. (Levey, 2015, April 27, Personal Communication)

Far too often students with disabilities are excluded by peers and the teachers find themselves without the appropriate tools to intervene and to assist their students in developing empathy for all. Leicester (2011) points out how in principle, most parents of children with exceptionalities feel their child should not be bussed to a school other than their neighborhood school, but how some felt they had to make that choice due to issues with bullying in an inclusive setting. They made the choice for a more restrictive environment “for the sake of their child’s happiness and well-being while at school” (p. 324). Teachers must create a warm and caring community in the classroom where all students feel they are a member of the classroom community. When teaching a classroom of students with mixed abilities or backgrounds, one lesson that can be easily implemented is to pair students off into groups of two or three and have them create a Venn diagram together whereby they can see what they have in common with one another. It gets students talking about what they have in common and serves as a foundation for friendships and mutual interests for the remainder of the term or school year.

Teachers must ensure that the literature in the classroom is representative of all the students in the classroom and beyond. Literature has the unique ability to build empathy and nurture social acceptance by allowing students to imagine themselves in the shoes of the character in the story (Riger & McGrail, 2015). One role teachers play in social justice education as it relates to disability is to “reframe students’ understandings of disability, identity, and equality” (Curwood, 2012, p. 16). As teachers choose high-quality literature and media

selections for their classroom, Curwood encourages teachers to look for characters that have a disability who are positively portrayed, to stay away from plotlines with binary oppositions like normal/abnormal and ability/disability. Teachers should seek stories where the character(s) with disabilities should be afforded the same citizenship rights as the other characters in the story. Literature and other media tools can be a tool to expand attitudes and perceptions of one's self and others.

This concept of creating community and helping students see their strengths and similarities applies far beyond students with exceptionalities. Teacher Alysia Dillon tells a story of how she worked with a second-language learner in her kindergarten class who had moved from Egypt whereby his primary language was Arabic. He was trying to learn English, Spanish and had a diagnosed learning disability and speech impairment. After his behavior escalated in the classroom, Dillon chose to celebrate his uniqueness publicly to her class, noting how hard he was working towards becoming trilingual. The class rallied around him trying to learn Arabic in addition to the mandated Spanish as a foreign language in their curriculum. The student's behavior and language proficiency improved as a direct result of his classroom community celebrating his uniqueness (Dillon, 2015, April 24, Personal Communication).

Key Instructional Practices and Strategies

1. Advocate for the value of difference and diversity in society and your classroom community.
2. Design each lesson so that it meets the needs of all students using Universal Design for Learning.

3. Go beyond people-first language to changing the language used to refer to students with disabilities. Be wary of how the language you select in your classroom positions students in the classroom. (Ashby, 2012)
4. Include high quality children's literature that includes positive portrayals of students who represent a diversity of students, including those with disabilities.
5. Be a critical user of media in the classroom.

Examine all stories for stereotypical representations of those in any group, including those with disabilities. Be certain that you are selecting options that include children or adults with disabilities in the story "rather than constructing disability as outside" (Ashby, 2012, p. 93).

6. Examine your own biases and lack of experience with persons of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Fill in those gaps by making new friends, volunteering your time to work with an organization, etc.
7. Build deep and meaningful relationships between your students. Encourage students to build relationships by learning about each other and find what they have in common. When working in small groups, have assigned roles, so that each student's contribution is critical to the group product. If students are excluding students with disabilities during unstructured time (like recess), plan ways to include all students, and facilitate discussions about how to include all classmates. Teach all students conflict resolution skills and mediate where needed so students can learn from conflicts with their peers.

Conclusion

Changing the classroom environment so that *all* students feel that they are part of the community will not happen overnight. If a teacher shifts to an inclusive mindset, helps students

develop deep and meaningful relationships with students different from themselves, implements UDL effectively, and creates a classroom community where curiosity is encouraged, the classroom can experience transformation. All students will develop deeper relationships with one another, become empathetic and appreciative of diversity, and will go on to become agents of social change in their communities. We want a future where everyone has the opportunity to have a limitless life and to do that we must start with the breeding ground for society, our elementary school classrooms.

Multi-Media References To Learn More

1. **Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)** <http://www.cast.org/udl/>
 “Universal design for learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn.” CAST is the premier resource on UDL and offers multiple resources for understanding the concept.
2. **Council for Exceptional Children** <https://www.cec.sped.org/>
 “The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of individuals with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. CEC advocates for appropriate governmental policies, sets professional standards, provides professional development, advocates for individuals with exceptionalities, and helps professionals obtain conditions and resources necessary for effective professional practice.”
3. **TASH** <https://tash.org/>
 “Tash is an international leader in disability advocacy. Founded in 1975, TASH advocates for human rights and inclusion for people with significant disabilities and support needs - those most vulnerable to segregation, abuse, neglect and institutionalization.”
4. **Teaching Tolerance** <http://www.tolerance.org/>
 “A place for educators to find thought-provoking news, conversation and support for those who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools”. The Teaching Tolerance organization has a wonderful database of searchable lessons for the classroom and free resources for teachers. If looking for social justice lessons related to the field of disability, simply search under the string “Ability”.
5. **Think Inclusive** <http://www.thinkinclusive.us/>
 “Think Inclusive is an online resource that promotes the full and authentic inclusion of people with disabilities in their school and communities through education and advocacy.”

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