Shannon Simonelli:

I'd like to welcome our listeners back to part 2 of our discussion with Dr. Susan Bray-Stainback, and I will turn it over to Julie so she can ask her next questions. Go ahead, Julie.

Julie: [00:22]

Okay. Thank you, Shannon.

Susan, you were just talking to us about the idea of reciprocal support and how everyone in a school community, if we have that sense of community in there, has a notion that they can be both givers and receivers of support, that everybody has something they can offer others. That creates a very collaborative type of atmosphere which does seem to support inclusive practices within schools.

Something that I'm thinking about now has to do with the way that students are grouped in schools, and something I'm seeing a little bit more of as time goes by, and that is how children are grouped within their classroom, and sometimes within the school. I'm seeing a trend toward more homogeneous grouping rather than heterogeneous grouping. In a story that you told earlier, about when all the kids were functioning at the same level, that there was less growth in that. I know we have a lot of research that supports heterogeneous over homogeneous groups. I'm wondering if you can address the issue of grouping, something that teachers can think about and do in their own classrooms--they can run with this tomorrow if they want,--but looking at the issue of grouping and how that can either facilitate inclusive practices or can undermine those [practices].

Susan: [1:45]

First, the issue of grouping and often why. Again, we're coming back to the "them" and "us" kind of thing. Let me say one thing, though. I think something that has really facilitated a more homogeneous grouping is the standardization of curriculum and evaluation. While we know in our hearts in education that all children are different, we still tend to have a relatively standardized set of things that we teach Even more so now, as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation and the Bush administration, we have standardized evaluation and curriculum requirements. So, what happens, and with this legislation, it's set up so that if certain schools don't do well, then there's even a threat of withdrawal of funds, and they're the schools that most desperately need the help. As a result, if they use homogeneous grouping, they can capitalize on the classes that the children do well on the test. So that's one aspect.

Another aspect is that parents are often afraid that their children aren't going to achieve as well, because these children that may have greater learning needs (as they perceive it), they'll take away from their children. In regard to that, for decades, just decades, there's been research findings to refute that. Back in the eighties, early eighties, Disability Rights in Education and The Children's Defense Fund found out that it's advantageous. Students in heterogeneous classrooms perform much better

than those in homogeneous classrooms. And the National Education Association in the late nineties did a report that confirmed that. Those studies showed that they didn't only benefit academically; their opportunity for learning and their success in educational settings were enhanced with inclusionary practices, more heterogeneous practices.

But despite this, they still … People haven't been exposed to that and understand it. They still have this "them" and "us," As a result of this, we really need to focus on some things that bring the parents and community members, and even other school members, into understanding what inclusive grouping can do, or heterogeneous grouping can do.

Having people come in, people that are very influential in a group, even like PTA or among some administrators, having people come in and actually spend some time seeing how it operates, finding a place that operates very well, and the children are very comfortable and well into it, you know, have them come in and actually see the difference.

There was a situation back in Hansen Elementary School back in Iowa where we had this person writing the superintendent; and meeting before the PTA and other community groups saying that they were destroying the education of the children because they were putting in children who couldn't read or write or talk very well. So we encouraged this person, if they were going to be that critical, to come see what was going on. Well, after the person came for about a week, and after they got done seeing the children were helping one another, learning from one another, actively involved in all the things, and having a child that was different, a considerable difference, facilitates that because you have to allow children to do that. They became, that person became our strongest advocate. By just letting them come in to the classroom and see that.

That might be an extreme, because she was an extreme. She was a good person, and she was really concerned for the children, and then she recognized the good in it. And that's what we need to do. We really have to get into public relations, both formally and informally. And we've got to get the children brainstorming.

Julie: [7:16]

Right. And I think that's a wonderful way to kind of expand the concept of school is more than just that campus and that building, that education is much broader than that and involving the community in that. I would absolutely support that.

I'm going to turn this kind of back down into the classroom and what goes on there. I think another misconception, and again, part of that comes out of the stress and anxieties that some of the standards movement has happened with the teachers, and that is the concept that if I group children in these certain ways, you know, whether it's heterogeneous or homogeneous, that they all need to do the same thing in the same way. I think we know from differentiated instruction that children can all meet the same standard, but they can do it in their own way. They can process it in multiple and flexible ways. They can show us what they know in multiple and flexible

ways. And that is one way to really kind of support the more heterogeneous grouping concept. Does that make sense to you?

Susan: [8:24]

Yes, it does. I think in that idea is that as teachers, we need to think of ourselves as facilitators of instruction, not dispensers of information and knowledge. We are the arrangers of the environment so these children can have the opportunities to do this, interact and to learn.

I think another aspect of that is we need to see skills like reading, communication, math and that kind of thing as not an end in themselves, but a way for children to learn to learn. I think that's what we need to support. Our society is changing so quickly. We can't just give them a bunch of facts because down the road ten years, they're going to need different things. So I think the main thing children need to learn is how to learn, and to figure out what they need to learn.

So we become the facilitators. I think having kids with differences in the classroom, that all the different kids are different, not only can they broaden learning opportunities, but it also makes us as teachers more aware of the fact that we don't, everybody doesn't need, or should have, the same thing. Does that make sense?

Julie: [9:58]

Yes. It does, and it kind of leads me to the next topic that I wanted to address.

We were talking about if we group in homogeneous ways - and that kind of stratifies the gap. We know what each group is, whatever name we give them; if it's the blue birds and the red birds and the yellow birds and the buzzards, we know which ones are the top ones and which ones are the bottom ones. And that kind of perpetuates the same thing. That's just what you were saying.

I'd like you to address a little bit, another concept that you and I have talked about in the past. And that is the way we structure activities in classrooms. The grouping thing and heterogeneously, that's cool. But then also the element of competition. There seems to be so much encouragement of competition within schools,between schools. And again, standards hold some responsibility for exacerbating that.

But can we talk a little bit about what teachers might do, or the effects of having competitive types of activities within the classroom versus more collaborative and cooperative kinds of activities that they do with kids, and how that relates to really embracing and facilitating inclusive practice.

Susan: [11:19]

Okay. If we want every child to be self-confident, and supported, and support others, we have to set the environment so that they feel comfortable doing that. When you get into a situation where you're in a competitive activity, usually there's a winner. But then there's multiple losers. Actually there's one winner, okay? And that makes that kid feel real good right then, but then everybody else feels pretty crumby. That certainly does nothing to foster children's motivation to spend time in the classroom and being happy there and feeling worthwhile.

I think that there are ways. One thing, I think we kind of said it before, is we need to celebrate everybody's successes. Because we're going to help one another, we're part of their success. So everybody's a winner. In some way, everybody can be a winner. And they don't have to be better than their neighbor. They're just good at something.

Shannon: [12:45]

It's their own unique ability.

Susan: [12:50]

Yes. Yes. And that's what's capitalized on, and that's also what is brought to the attention of others. But not just the children who are the absolute best in math, or the absolute best at spelling. But every child.

It's like figuring out again what can everybody do or support? What can everybody do to get recognition? So rather than one, or one group, get recognition and everybody else fails. Failure causes a lot of anxiety, and even the threat of failure.

Another thing that competition does is that children quickly learn that in order to do, to be the winner, they have to do better than the other children. So they don't want to help the other children because that reduces their chances of being the winner. It automatically negates motivation for cooperation.

They're just a few ideas. Is there something else? I'm just kind of blowing off the top of my head here, but …

Julie: [14:14]

I think it might be helpful for teachers to take some things that they do in the classroom that tend to currently run under a more competitive structure, or the activities are organized in that way,--like the first to do this, or whoever gets the most of that, and there's some kind of reward system for all that stuff, or recognition or something,--how they might be able to take some of those activities and turn them so that the content is essentially the same, but they do it in a more collaborative and cooperative and mutually supportive kind of way.

An example that I use when I do workshops and so on is the notion of musical chairs, like in early childhood. Everybody knows about the musical chairs and what you just said, about in the end there's one winner and the rest are losers, right? But we can also take that same activity and make it cooperative so that there's never a child that leaves that circle. But every time the music stops, rather than there's somebody being out, they have to figure out how they're all going to sit on the chairs that are there, which really facilitates problem-solving. You don't even have to tell them they're going to have to think it or figure it out. They do that really automatically.

So I guess I'm asking if you can think of other activity kinds of things that teachers can take where it's traditionally been pretty competitive and be able to tweak that into something that's more cooperative.

Susan: [15:46]

Okay. I need a minute to think.

Julie: [15:51]

And while you are thinking, I'll expand upon my chair, or the cooperative musical chairs thing.

Susan:

Because I was listening to you, and I wasn't …

Julie:

Okay. I'm sorry.

Shannon:

Why don't we have one more example, and then we can just transition in to a break. So if you have one more example, Julie, why don't you go ahead and expand on that.

Julie: [16:11]

I just wanted to talk a little bit more about the musical chair example. Actually it's an idea that isn't mine. I forget where it originated to tell you the truth. But it's in Mara Sapon-Shevin's "Because We Can Change the World" book as well.

What children learn from doing it cooperatively really kind of embraces that inclusive aspect, in that we don't beat down kids that are slower than us or weaker than us where the competitive version encourages that. Instead we find ways to make sure that everybody is part of it, because the only way that the group reaches the goal at the end, where everybody's sitting on that one single chair is by problem-solving and helping one another out and finding ways to, not just in problem-solving, but finding ways to really embrace everybody's contribution and achievement of that end goal.

I guess that's the kind of stuff that I would like to see teachers take a look at, how their activities are structured. If it's competitive, as Susan was pointing out, that's only good for the winner for that day. Then everybody else walks away feeling like, you know, oh, I didn't do so well with that. We can be really thinking about how we can take some of the activities that we have and make them more cooperative and incorporating those elements of reciprocal support.

Susan: [17:39]

I just wanted to add just a little bit on that, and that is in addition to doing problem-solving and brainstorming, by default the children are becoming more empowered. They're more actively involved in their own learning. Then the teacher is just the facilitator, and the kids have to figure it out.

Julie: [18:00]

Exactly. And that’s a really excellent point.

Susan: [18:04]

And they’re the ones making the decisions.

Julie: [18:08]

Perfect.

Shannon: [18:11]

Yeah. Wonderful. Okay, I feel the stillness in the air. We’ve really said something, here. I’m going to let that be our last word for this second section. We’ll take a little break, and we’ll come back with our final part three of our talk together.