

Chapter 3

Ability Differences in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning in Inclusive Classrooms

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Although we may talk about classrooms as “the kindergarten” or “the 3rd grade,” and may *assume* similarities in the skills and interests of chronologically similar students, the reality is that all classrooms are heterogeneous. Typical classrooms have *always* served (or ill-served) students who varied along any number of continua, including performance or ability, either by ignoring those differences or through elaborate tracking and grouping strategies. Now, however, many schools are moving towards more *purposive* heterogeneity; teachers recognize the value of teaching children to interact comfortably with a wide range of people and so work to create classrooms and practices that acknowledge differences among students in the classroom and respond to them thoughtfully and creatively (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, 2001, 2003).

This philosophy, known as full inclusion (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003; Rainforth & Kugelmass, 2003; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 2000), represents a commitment to creating schools and classrooms in which all children, without regard to individual needs or disabilities, are educated together. Rather than trying to “fix” children so that they can be fit back into relatively untouched “regular classrooms” (a process often referred to as “mainstreaming”), inclusion aims to substantially alter general education classrooms to make them more responsive to heterogeneous groups of learners. Inclusive classrooms embody the belief that diversity is a positive force in children’s and teachers’ lives and should be embraced, rather than ignored or minimized.

Inclusive classrooms attempt to honor and respond to the many kinds of diversity that children bring to the classroom. Differences in race, ethnicity, gender, family background, language, sexual orientation, and religion—as well as differences in ability/performance—are not dismissed in the name of standardization, but rather are appreciated and become part of the curriculum itself. Inclusive classrooms also must address differences in what is typically called “ability.” Although one can never accurately predict any child’s full potential or ultimate performance, children do differ in their *current* skills, knowledge, and competence. In traditional classrooms, these differences may lead to children being assigned to different reading or math groups, or being identified as “learning disabled” or “gifted.” In reality, all children have abilities and strengths, as well as areas in which they require more intensive instruction. As educators, we must make decisions about how to respond to these differences in educationally and ethically appropriate ways.

The task of responding appropriately to students’ learning and performance differences

has been severely challenged by the recent focus on high-stakes testing and standardization. Many schools and legislatures are moving towards judging students (and teachers) according to predetermined standard benchmarks that cannot be modified or individualized, making responsive teaching difficult. Nonetheless, considerable progress has been made in attempts to teach inclusively while also meeting high standards (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003; Rainforth & Kugelmass, 2003). In the current standardization climate, teachers need support as they attempt to meet all children's individual needs while still maintaining high standards and a cohesive classroom community.

What are the challenges of teaching in classrooms that educate children who read well alongside those who do not read at all, or children who learn quickly and easily with traditional methods alongside those who need intensive instruction or alternative strategies? How do we discriminate appropriate differentiation, based on high expectations, from tracking and "dumbing down," based on stereotypes or prejudicial labeling? The following exploration of these topics first examines some of the myths about ability differences and ability grouping that often perpetuate rigid, dysfunctional ways of teaching and instructional organization. Next, the author contrasts such beliefs with the realities of heterogeneity and mixed-ability groups, and explores some more appropriate ways to organize classrooms and instruction. A list of resources for implementing inclusive teaching concludes the chapter.

MYTHS ABOUT ABILITY AND ABILITY GROUPING

Myth 1: There Is Such a Thing As Ability

Many educators believe that each child has some fixed ability level that defines the best he or she can possibly do. Thus, we talk about children "not working up to ability" and, conversely, "overachieving" (that is, doing better than we predicted they would). Using these putative differences as a basis, we label children as "smart," "average," or "slow." For children whose differences appear more salient, we use the terms "gifted" or "handicapped." We often adjust our curricula and expectations accordingly. In actuality, all people, including all children, vary along a number of dimensions, and it is generally not helpful to talk about ability as if it were a fixed, immutable potential for achievement. How well any child does is a function of many variables, including the nature of the curriculum, the child's self-concept, the flexibility and support of those who surround the child, and the child's interest in the task. Therefore, if conditions were right, *we could all do better!* As Hunt (1961) noted:

It is highly unlikely that any society has developed a system of child rearing and education that maximizes the potential of the individuals which compose it. Probably no individual has ever lived whose full potential for happy intellectual interest and growth has been achieved. (p. 346)

Therefore, in some ways, we are all *underachievers*, and it makes sense for teachers to find ways to help all children achieve more and to create classrooms that nurture and support diversity. The work by Armstrong (1993) and Gardner (1983) on multiple intelligences helps us recognize the many ways to "be smart," and understand that a single continuum of "ability" makes little pedagogical sense.

Myth 2: Students Learn Better in Homogeneous Groups

Some teachers still believe that by narrowing the range of abilities in the classroom, children will learn better because tasks will be more appropriate. Actually, despite the fact that many teachers continue to group students by ability, research findings overwhelmingly suggest that homogeneous grouping does not consistently help anyone learn more or better (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1990; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). In fact, organizing children into high-, average-, and low-ability groups actually *creates* differences in what

children learn by exposing them to different kinds of material. Although some children in high-ability groups may benefit from such arrangements, those who lose the most are the children placed in average- and low-ability groups. Such grouping practices tend to compound racial, ethnic, and economic differences in schools, as poor children and children of color are least likely to be served in enriched, gifted, or high-ability tracks. These children are more likely to end up in vocational or low-ability groups (Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

Ability grouping also takes a serious toll on children's self concepts and on their opportunities to form meaningful relationships across groups. Children in the "slow group," the "low reading group," or what gets labeled as the "dumb class" are often painfully aware of the limited expectations adults have for them. Children so identified often face teasing and ridicule from their peers. Similarly, children who are put in top groups or removed to gifted classes are often labeled as "brains" or "nerds" and may find themselves socially isolated. Grouping children creates distance among them and tends to amplify and solidify whatever actual differences originally existed (Sapon-Shevin, 1994, 1999).

Myth 3: Teaching Is Easier in Homogeneous Groups

Teachers who have always organized instruction around three reading groups, or around a high-math group and a low-math group, find homogeneous grouping comfortable and familiar. However, teachers who group homogeneously also complain about a lack of time to meet individual needs and about the low motivation and involvement levels of some students. By grouping heterogeneously for instruction, especially using models like cooperative learning and peer tutoring (in which children learn to help one another), teachers often find that teaching becomes more enjoyable (Putnam, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 2002; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). When heterogeneous teaching models are working well, children receive the benefit of peer instruction and motivation; the teacher's role shifts from management to instruction. Many teachers report their students being livelier and more involved, and that they enjoyed more challenging and exciting teaching experiences.

Myth 4: Children Are Cruel and Cannot Accept Differences

All of us have seen children teased and tormented because of their differences. We have all heard children call one another "four-eyes," "metal mouth," "dummy," or "fatso." Children also have a tremendous capacity to become supportive and nurturing friends of classmates who are different from themselves. Yet children cannot develop such understanding, appreciation, and social skills if they are kept isolated from peers who are different. Mere contact is not enough to promote positive responses to differences; teachers must systematically address student differences and structure learning activities that encourage positive social interaction. The social climate of the classroom must be a *first* priority, not something to be "squeezed in" if time remains. Although children can be cruel, they can be systematically taught to be caring, empathic, and supportive of one another (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

Myth 5: Parents Support Homogeneous Grouping and Tracking

Because many cultural messages tell us that differences are bad and that people who are different must live and be educated separately, it is no wonder that many parents accept the practices of homogeneous grouping and the segregation of children who are different. Increasingly, however, parents of children labeled as "handicapped" are challenging the practice of placing their children in separate, isolated schools or classrooms. These parents want their children to grow up as part of the community in which they live, and this means going to school and playing with chronological peers. Many parents of "typical" children also have come to support integration or full inclusion within schools (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). This is particularly true as they see their children becoming comfortable with, and knowl-

edgeable about, disabilities and differences. Even parents who initially expressed concern that the presence of children with educational challenges would "dilute" the quality of their own child's education have noted that, when conscientiously implemented, inclusive, regular classrooms do not lose any of their "rigor"; rather, they become more flexible, accommodating learning environments for all children.

Parents whose children have been labeled "gifted" are often conflicted. Some parents feel (rightfully) that their child's unique needs cannot be met in the typical, workbook-oriented, lock-step classroom and that removal to a special class is the only solution. They are concerned that their "high-achieving" child will be bored or held back by less intelligent classmates. Other parents, however, worry about separating their child from his or her "regular" classmates; they do not want their child to feel stigmatized or overly different from other children (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). If not all of their own children are labeled "gifted," they also worry about creating schisms within their own family. Many of these concerns, however, are a function of the inadequacy of many regular classrooms, rather than inherent flaws in the principles of multi-level, multi-modality classrooms. If and when parents can be shown "regular" classrooms that meet the individual needs of each child within an inclusive, accepting classroom community, the potential for parental support of heterogeneous grouping will be enhanced (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003).

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

In order for teachers to teach and students to learn in heterogeneous classrooms, considerable attention must be given to classroom organization, curriculum design, and community building. What kinds of teaching strategies are most appropriate and successful in heterogeneous classrooms? How can students learn to accept and understand one another's differences?

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is one of the optimal ways to teach children with different abilities in the same classroom. Cooperative-learning instruction involves children working together, helping each other to learn. Much of the early work in cooperative learning referred to the importance of heterogeneous grouping as a principle. More recently, the concept of heterogeneity has been expanded to address specific strategies for incorporating *all* children within cooperative learning, including those previously segregated in special classes or separate programs (Putnam, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1990; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 2002; Thousand et al., 2002).

Of the many structured systems of cooperative learning, one method, called Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978), involves dividing the material to be learned into five or six parts and assigning students to heterogeneous five- or six-member teams. Each student is responsible for learning and then teaching his or her portion of the material to the whole team. Members of different groups who have been assigned the same portion of material meet in "expert groups" to study and discuss their section. Because each group member is responsible for all the material, all students must help each other learn; no one can sit back without participating.

The Jigsaw method can be used to teach many things: one 2nd-grade teacher divides the class into groups of five and gives each group member two of the week's 10 spelling words to teach to the rest of the group. A 5th-grade teacher required group members to learn and then teach different parts of a unit on South Africa. Group members specialized in the music, art, food, geography, or history of the region. Paula Boilard, a band teacher, divided her jazz band into groups who became "experts" in the rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and melody of a new piece. By learning the rhythm for all the instruments, each member gained a much better sense of how the whole piece fit together. The band's harmony was increased in many ways!

In another method for organizing the classroom for cooperative learning, sometimes called

"Learning Together" (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), the teacher assigns heterogeneous groups of students to produce a single product as a group. The teacher arranges the classroom to facilitate peer interaction, provides appropriate materials, constructs and explains the task so that it requires group cooperation, observes the students' interactions, and intervenes as necessary. Students might be placed with a partner, for example, and asked to do a complex math problem. Each member must be able to explain the answer; they cannot just say, "Because Mike said the answer is 34." Therefore, higher level students must work with and teach lower level students. Larger groups, consisting of four or five students, might be asked to produce a skit, with different group members assigned to the writing, directing, and acting; or the students write a cooperative report.

This method places considerable emphasis on teaching group members appropriate social skills to facilitate smooth interaction and cooperation. This can be done in various ways. Sometimes, one student in the group functions as the observer, recording the various facilitative behaviors of the group members. He or she might note, for example, how often each member talks, encourages others, asks questions, or clarifies. At the end of the session, the observer shares this information with the group, so that all students can begin to understand which behaviors help a group succeed and how these behaviors can be developed.

An alternative way to build appropriate group social skills is to assign special tasks to each group member. If the group's task, for example, is to generate a list of ways the school could recycle waste products, one group member might be assigned the role of recorder (writing down what people say), one the role of encourager (making sure that everyone contributes), one the role of clarifier (making sure that everyone agrees with and understands what has been written), and one the role of reporter (sharing with the large group what has been recorded). These roles might be clearly described for the students on different cards, and the teacher could engage students in lessons on how to do each task: "What are some ways you could encourage other people in your group?" or "What are some clarifying questions you could ask your group members?"

Teachers can encourage class-wide cooperation in less formal ways as well. One 4th-grade teacher implemented what she called the "family rule." Students were seated in clusters of four desks; the rule was that no one in the group could ask the teacher a question unless he or she had first checked with everyone else in the group. Consequently, the teacher received relief from answering an endless stream of questions. The students not only took active responsibility for helping their classmates find the right page, figure out the worksheet instructions, and spell difficult words, but also began to see each other as resources in many other ways. The teacher reported that children who were worried or upset about other issues (e.g., lost lunch money, a bully on the playground, a sick puppy at home) began to turn to one another for comfort and support.

Teachers also encourage support and cooperation by putting children in charge of more aspects of the classroom. In some classrooms, students take roll, do the lunch count, decorate bulletin boards, make decisions about scheduling concerns, and orient classroom visitors. By providing ample opportunities for children to exercise leadership and make choices, a teacher can help children to see one another as more than "the worst reader" or "the best math student."

Unfortunately, for many teachers, cooperative learning has been reduced to something they "do with" (sometimes "to") students for a brief period of the day or week. Formulaic, regimented systems of cooperative learning often predominate, taking away the impetus for a fully cooperative classroom experience. We need to examine every aspect of the classroom—what we teach, how we teach it, how we organize and manage students, how we respond to questions, how we solve problems, and how we talk about concerns. Within this framework of Socially Conscious Cooperative Learning (Schniedewind & Sapon-Shevin, 1998), children learn and live a philosophy of mutual care and interpersonal responsibility.

Peer Tutoring

Another way to address different skill levels within a class is to arrange for children to be resources for one another, through peer tutoring or peer teaching (Thousand et al., 2002; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). Such programs can be arranged at many different levels, both within classrooms and across grade levels. In one school, every 6th-grader has a 1st-grade math "buddy" with whom he or she works, three times a week. This system provides extensive one-on-one instruction for the 1st-graders, and the 6th-grade teacher has reported that even the "weakest" math students in her class are showing a renewed interest in and enthusiasm for mathematics. She has seen some of the 6th-graders doing extra work to prepare for their teaching, so they would "be sure to get it right." In other schools, 1st-graders read regularly to appreciative 2nd-graders, and 6th-graders help integrate children with special needs. Teachers report that when students are involved in the process of integration, incidents of teasing virtually disappear and any infractions are dealt with by the other students. "Don't make fun of Jim, he has cerebral palsy; he talks fine and we understand him," is a representative remark made by the students to correct their peers.

Patty Feld, a teacher in a small rural school, organizes her students to help one another. Several times a week, the children participate in what she calls SHOA (Students Helping One Another). For a designated time period, children work together in pairs, with one child being responsible for helping the other. Half the time, Patty decides what the pair will work on; at other times, the student being helped is allowed to decide what kind of help he or she wants. All students read books at their own level. In weekly book-sharing time, students tell each other about what they are reading and learning. All the students benefit from one another's learning because they get to hear about books they might not be able to read, and reading-level differences are minimized by the cooperative sharing.

Teachers can arrange for students to help one another and become educational resources and sources of support in other ways. One teacher, who had a CD player and was anxious to ensure that all students learned to operate it properly, taught one little boy all about the machine. He learned what all the buttons did, how to adjust the volume, and how to operate the machine gently. He taught two other children during the day and checked them out on the process. Each of these children then taught two more, until the whole class knew the correct procedures. The new equipment was carefully attended at all times, and some of the classroom dynamics shifted by structuring situations where "high achievers" learned from nonreaders.

Another 5th-grade teacher kept four students in at recess to learn a difficult craft project. The teacher then asked each of these students to work with his or her table mates to complete the project. Students began to see one another in a new light, regarding children who were not typically considered "stars" with newfound respect. This teacher wondered why she hadn't always taught the activity this way, instead of trying to supervise 25 children, who were struggling with gluing and assembling, at the same time.

In order for peer teaching or peer tutoring to positively affect some of the typical status hierarchies within classrooms, teachers must be careful that all children get a chance to be the teacher or the leader, and that no one is stuck permanently in the role of receiving help. In inclusive classrooms where the range of skills and interests is wider than usual, it is especially important that relationships be reciprocal (Van Der Klift & Kunc, 2002).

One way to ensure this reciprocity is to broaden the kinds of activities and projects that children do throughout the school year. One teacher created a Classroom Yellow Pages that listed children's names, their areas of "expertise," and the ways in which they were willing to provide assistance to classmates. The guide included such entries as:

LaDonna Smith: jump-rope songs and jingles; willing to teach double-dutch jumping and crossing over to anyone interested.

Miguel Hernandez: baseball card collector; can show interested people how to start a collection, special cards to look for, and how to figure batting averages and other statistics.

By encouraging students to look beyond some of the typical school subjects by which to evaluate themselves and each other, the teacher created new areas of interest, promoted peer interaction, and broke existing stereotypes about "who was smart and who wasn't." Study of the multiple intelligences theory (Armstrong, 1993; Gardner, 1983) can help us to think more broadly about abilities and differences so that all students are valued for their strengths and supported in their areas of challenge.

Multi-level Teaching

In order to teach a wide range of students within one classroom, teachers need to rethink not only how they teach, but also what they teach. Instead of assuming that all students will be engaged in identical learning experiences for the same unit and evaluated according to the same criteria, the curriculum can be conceptualized as broad and inclusive. If the class is doing a unit on space, for example, the teacher can organize space activities and projects on many different levels. Children who have exceptional reading and research skills might be asked to write a report on the origins of the galaxy. Other children might be asked to draw and label the major planets in the solar system. A child with limited language skills might be required to be able to point to pictures of the sun, the moon, and the earth in different arrangements. Every student would share their completed projects with the whole group, so that everyone benefits from the diversity of activities.

In one classroom that contained both students identified as "gifted" and students labeled as "mentally retarded," the teacher set up a school sandwich store. The students took teachers' orders for Friday's lunch and delivered their sandwiches on that day. All of the class members were involved in the project, but at different levels. Depending on their math skills, some children calculated prices according to ingredient costs, some figured out state and "classroom tax," and others did the actual shopping. Students whose educational objectives included functional skills, such as meal preparation, worked to make the sandwiches. Other students generated publicity and issued a monthly business report. By constructing a project like this, the teacher was able to engage all students in a collaborative project and still meet each individual's educational needs (Rainforth & Kugelmass, 2003).

Teachers need to continually challenge the traditional curriculum and ask themselves: What does each child need to know? What aspects of this unit can be modified or adapted? Can students participate in the same activity with different levels of evaluation and involvement, or does an alternate, related activity need to be provided (Thousand et al., 2002)?

By asking these questions, teachers may find that they can achieve more flexibility for the whole class, and that modifications made with a particular student in mind can benefit many students. Patty Feld implements multilevel instruction by teaching across modalities. By including reading, writing, drawing and movement in her lessons, she is able to address the age and skill differences present in a particular group of students. In a unit on dinosaurs, for example, students wrote a play based on research, built three-dimensional dioramas, created an animal pantomime activity, and crafted a dinosaur fact rap. Classroom posters read, "We encourage our friends"; Patty tells students that questions are always okay. She not only encourages question asking, but also turns those questions back to the group. She says she has learned to ask open-ended questions that do not have right or wrong answers, and to wait for multiple replies. Often, a child who has not immediately jumped into the discussion makes a contribution at a later time that enriches the conversation. Students who witness such exchanges realize that there are many ways to be smart.

Another teacher assigned one student each day to take a set of notes for the class (a carbon copy of personal notes), in order to meet the needs of a deaf student who could not take

notes. The teacher later found that these notes were also helpful to students with learning problems who could not both listen and take notes, students whose handwriting left them with very inadequate notes, and students who were absent and needed to catch up. Another teacher, on the advice of the learning-disabilities teacher, began writing key words on the board and teaching them before beginning a new lesson. She found that all students benefited from this pre-teaching motivation and organization. Another teacher, in helping one student get himself organized by teaching him to use an assignment notebook and to check with peers for assignments, found that many students in her class could benefit from a similar system to keep themselves on task and on track. Such classroom modifications and adaptations benefit children's learning and also demonstrate that all students are valued. The message is clear: We do not abandon people who are having difficulties.

Teaching Social Skills

In order for cooperative learning and peer tutoring to be effective, teachers may need to address social skills. Teachers may want to provide direct instruction in ways to praise, offer encouragement, and resolve conflicts.

One way of teaching such skills is by engaging students in a unit on giving and receiving help. Students can explore and practice ways of offering help (saying "Can I help you?" rather than "Let me do that; you're too short-dumb-slow"); as well as ways of accepting and declining help gracefully (saying "No thanks, I'm doing fine," rather than "What do you think I am, dumb or something?"). All people need practice in these nuances.

Teachers can help students reflect on questions such as the following:

- What are three things I do really well?
- What are three things I have trouble doing?
- What are some ways I can provide help to people?
- What are some things I need help with, and what kind of help would I like?

The answers to these questions will show students, and the teacher, that everyone has skills and abilities, and everyone needs help in certain areas. Karen may be a whiz as a reader, but she may need help fitting into playground games. Carmen may struggle with her math, but she is great at remembering things and getting people and activities organized. Classrooms can become communities of mutual support if teachers promote respect for differences and provide multiple opportunities for students to see each other in many ways.

Patty Feld finds heterogeneous groups to be "a lot more like life," and she enjoys the interplay among different children. Patty addresses differences with her students directly. When some of the children wanted to play basketball, she engaged the students in a discussion of how they might pick the teams so that it would be more fair and more fun for all. They also discussed ways of encouraging each other to play better. Students who were more skilled in the sport spent part of each gym period working with students whose skills were more limited.

Issues of friendship and exclusion also can be addressed directly. I worked with four teachers in using Vivian Paley's book *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (1992). The book details how Paley, a kindergarten teacher, proposed a rule that children could not exclude one another, and documents the subsequent discussions and implementation. These four teachers—a kindergarten, a 1st-grade, a 2nd-grade, and a 4th-grade teacher—implemented Paley's rule in their own classrooms and watched carefully as children wrestled with issues of how to include a diverse group of peers in play and work activities. By making issues of inclusion a topic for discussion and observation, and a focus of classroom concern, the teachers substantially altered their classroom climates and taught children new ways to think about reaching out and embracing others (Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998).

When children are working closely together, conflicts inevitably will arise that they must

learn to resolve. One teacher set aside a walk-in closet where children in conflict can take themselves—not be sent to—when they are having a conflict and need some time and space to work it out. Another teacher initiated what she calls the Problem Pail. Any students having a conflict can write what happened on a slip of paper and put it in the pail. Twice a week, the teacher gathers the class together and fishes “problems” out of the pail. Each person involved in the conflict gets a chance, without interruption, to tell what happened. Then, the whole class generates possible solutions or strategies for resolving the problem. The teacher often finds that the problems have already been worked out. The students sometimes come to the pail and remove a slip of paper because it no longer applies. With tattling removed as an option, some problems simply dissipate because it is too much trouble to write them down. Her class also keeps charts of problem solutions—a classroom compendium of solutions to conflict. When similar issues arise, the teacher is able to ask, “What did we do the last time something like this came up?” Students often refer to these charts on their own.

Teaching About Differences

Some teachers mistakenly assume that if they do not talk about the ways in which children in their classes differ—do not comment on the fact that one child reads more slowly, that another talks with difficulty, or that still another finishes math problems before anyone else—they will somehow avoid the comparisons and competitive evaluations in which children often engage. In truth, the opposite is more likely. When teachers do not directly address differences in skills and abilities, students receive the message that certain things simply cannot be talked about and their discomfort is likely to increase. How, then, should teachers handle the differences in their classrooms?

First, teachers need to be careful not to send negative messages about differences. Star charts on the wall that indicate who is doing well and who is doing poorly are not conducive to creating a classroom community that respects diversity. Most forms of competition in the classroom—spelling bees, awards for the “best team,” and voting on the best essay—should be eliminated. Such competition is damaging not only to the student who does poorly (“We don’t want Michael on our math team; we had him last week”), but also to students who consistently do well (“She thinks she’s so smart just ’cause she got done faster than everyone else”). A good rule of thumb is this: If a visitor to the classroom can tell from the bulletin boards, the seating arrangement, or wall charts who is doing “better” and who is “in trouble,” then it is certain that the children themselves are also painfully aware of those differences and comparisons. Respect for differences is more likely to develop if all children contribute something to bulletin boards, students choose which of their completed assignments they would like to display, and room arrangements are flexible and inclusive. Avoiding negative comparisons, however, is only the first step, and it is far from enough. Teachers must find multiple opportunities to talk about and honor children’s differences. When one kindergarten class integrated a student with seizures and severe speech and motor difficulties, the teacher engaged the children in an active discussion of the girl’s limitations and how they could include her. The children themselves figured out ways that their classmate could participate in games, which aspects of the reading lesson she might be able to do, and how they could include her in social activities throughout the day and on the weekend.

When children see that individual differences are supported in a noncompetitive classroom environment, they are free to celebrate the successes of their classmates without comparison (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). In one classroom I entered, a student rushed up to me and said, “Craig just got a new reading book and he can read real stories now!” Although the child who shared Craig’s accomplishment with me had been reading for many years, he was able to recognize and appreciate Craig’s important milestone. Confident in his own success and supported for his own accomplishments, he understood that every child in the room was working on their individual goals in order to learn.

Teachers with heterogeneous classrooms who attempt to individualize instruction to meet children's needs at first will be asked, "How come Noah doesn't do the same math we do?" or "When will I get to work on the computer like Nicole does?" How a teacher responds to such questions will do much to set the tone of the classroom. Generally speaking, honest, forthright answers seem best: "Noah works in a different book because he's working on addition, and he's not ready for multiplication yet" or "Let's find a time when you can work with Nicole on the computer." Most who teach in inclusive classrooms report that, after a short period of time, children accept the fact that other children may be working on different levels or materials, and they often assist other students when they can. When both needing and giving help are treated as common, natural occurrences, children will more likely be accommodating of one another's challenges and appreciative of their accomplishments.

Promoting positive responses to diversity also means interrupting inappropriate responses swiftly and directly: "It's not right to call other people 'stupid'—what else could you say to Karen?" Teachers who tolerate name-calling and put-downs give children the clear message that such behavior is acceptable, or even inevitable. At a recent conference of GLSEN (The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network), I learned and adopted the phrase "zero indifference," a commitment to noticing and challenging inappropriate teasing, bullying, and harassment in the classroom. A teacher who says, "What can you do? Children are just like that" indicates that he/she does not feel able or inclined to address the social climate of his or her classroom. It is important that all educators carefully consider their own values regarding differences and what they want to convey to students (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

Many excellent curricula for teaching about differences exist, some of which are included in the resource list at the end of this chapter. Students certainly need to know about the ways in which they differ in terms of skills, abilities, and interests. It is equally important, however, for students to discover the ways in which they are alike. Stressing differences without talking about similarities can give students the idea that they have no common ground upon which to build relationships. When teachers are discussing student differences—who is good at what, who has trouble, and so forth—they also must talk about the fact that all students are in school to learn, all persons have things they do well and things they do less well, and everyone does better with encouragement and support (Hall, 1999; Levin, 1994). It is also important not to ground discussions of differences in the language of disability. Recently, a 3rd-grade teacher of a very inclusive classroom approached me for advice. She was complimenting one of her students who has Down syndrome about her excellent achievement on a recent test when a boy in the "gifted" program wandered by, heard the conversation with the other student, and said, "Big deal—I got a 100!" The teacher asked me what she should explain to the "gifted" boy about Down syndrome and developmental delays. "Nothing," I responded. "This is not about Down syndrome—this is about being a nice, caring human being. And caring humans don't say hurtful or diminishing things to other humans." It's important that we don't diminish or limit our lessons about right treatment of others to a set of rules about "How to treat the disabled." To do so limits our scope and effectiveness.

THINKING ABOUT INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

To create inclusive classrooms, teachers must think about what they teach, how they teach, and how they structure interactions among students. Transmitting consistent messages about the positive nature of diversity and the need for inclusiveness means that all aspects of classroom life must reflect that commitment.

The Curriculum

Think critically about the kinds of display materials in the room. Do these materials model the belief that we all belong and all can contribute? Just as teachers will want to include books, posters, and information about people of color and of various ethnic backgrounds in

their classrooms, materials about people with differences and disabilities also should be included and integrated into all aspects of the curriculum. A unit on the five senses, for example, can include information on vision and hearing impairments. A unit on fairy tales can include a discussion of characters who feel different, such as the Ugly Duckling or Rumpelstiltskin, and a discussion of labeling and stereotyping. A unit on architecture can include information about physical accessibility to buildings and barrier-free designs. All students' accomplishments should be included in classroom displays and all students' contributions should be valued.

Our Language

How do we talk about differences? Do we imply that it is better to be "all the same," or do we attach value to diversity? How do teachers refer to the resource room, how and how much do they explain why some children are chosen for the gifted program, and how do they respond to children who are struggling or failing? Teachers can ask students: "What should we do when someone in our class makes a mistake?" or "If you were struggling with something, what kind of support would you want?" Children can learn to be critical of stereotypes and misinformation about differences and disabilities. One teacher asked students to bring in cartoons containing words like "idiot" and "imbecile." The teacher used them to lead a discussion about "smartness" and "stupidity" and how we should respond to such derogatory words and concepts. Learning to monitor our own and others' language is an important step in creating inclusive classroom communities.

Our Own Relationships With People Who Are Different

Does the teacher model respect for, and inclusion of, people who are different within his or her own life? It is hard for a teacher to convey the importance of including people who think or learn differently if this commitment is not represented in his or her own life. Some teachers who tolerate teasing and the exclusion of children who are different are still working through their own past experiences with inclusion and exclusion. Gaining some clarity about the damaging ways in which we all were excluded periodically (or consistently) can be an important first step in increasing students' sensitivity. As we work to get ourselves, as teachers, surrounded by the networks of support we need, we can be more effective in helping our students do the same.

CONCLUSION

For classrooms to be inclusive, modeling respect and appreciation for all children, the areas identified in this chapter must inform all aspects of classroom life. Children learn what they live. If they are segregated by ability and skill for most of the day, an hour's lesson on respecting diversity is not likely to have a major impact. The typical school day or year provides multiple opportunities to problem-solve issues of inclusiveness. When one 5th-grade class wanted to plan refreshments for a party and accommodate the needs of a vegetarian child, a child who kept kosher, and a child who was Muslim, the children brainstormed food choices that would allow everyone to eat comfortably. When a child using a wheelchair was not strong enough to lift himself out of his chair, the whole class became involved in a fitness and muscle-building unit that revolved around improving upper-body strength. Classrooms such as these send a consistent message: We are a community; we are all in this together; we will take responsibility for one another; we won't abandon people because of their difference or difficulties.

RESOURCES

Many excellent resources are available for both teaching children about differences, and structuring cooperative, inclusive classroom teaching.

Resource Guides for Cooperative Learning and Inclusive Teaching

These books may help teachers organize instruction and curriculum to promote positive peer interactions and the inclusion of children of various ability levels.

- Aronson, E. (1978). *The jigsaw classroom*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Cohen, E. G. (1994). *Designing groupwork: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gibbs, J. (2001). *Tribes: A new way of learning and being together*. Windsor, CA: Center Source Publications.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. (1999). *Learning together and alone*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kagan, S. (1985). *Cooperative learning: Resources for teachers*. Riverside, CA: University of California, School of Education.
- Schniedewind, N., & Davidson, E. (1987). *Cooperative learning, cooperative lives: A sourcebook of learning activities for building a peaceful world*. Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Sharan, Y., & Sharan, S. (1992). *Expanding cooperative learning through group investigation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Thousand, J. S., Villa, R. A., & Nevin, A. I. (Eds.). (2002). *Creativity and collaborative learning: The practical guide to empowering students, teachers and families*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Tovey, R. (1995). Awareness programs help change students' attitudes towards their disabled peers. *Harvard Educational Newsletter*, 11(6), 7-8.

Resources for Creative Conflict Resolution and Class Climate

These books bring up issues of management, discipline, and conflict resolution, all of which may require a different, more thoughtful approach in classrooms that are purposefully heterogeneous.

- Drew, N. (1987). *Learning the skills of peacemaking: An activity guide for elementary-age children on communicating, cooperating, resolving conflict*. Rolling Hills Estates, CA: Jalmar Press.
- Fletcher, R. (1986). *Teaching peace: Skills for living in a global society*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Kreidler, W. J. (1984). *Creative conflict resolution*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Levin, D. E. (1994). *Teaching young children in violent times: Building a peaceable classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.
- Prutzman, P., Burger, M. L., Bodenhamer, G., & Stern, L. (1978). *The friendly classroom for a small planet: A handbook on creative approaches to living and problem solving for children*. Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing.
- Ramsey, P. G. (1991). *Making friends in school: Promoting peer relationships in early childhood*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Resources on Cooperative Play and Games

These books can help teachers find ways to organize recreation and play so that children who are at different levels of skill all can have fun. These books contain suggestions for games and play that are inclusive and promote positive social interaction.

- Fluegelman, A. (1976). *The new games book*. Garden City, NY: Dolphin.
- Orlick, T. (1978). *The cooperative sports and games book: Challenge without competition*. New York: Pantheon.
- Sobel, J. (1983). *Everybody wins: Non-competitive games for young children*. New York: Walker and Company.
- Weinstein, M., & Goodman, J. (1980). *Playfair: Everybody's guide to noncompetitive play*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.

Strategies for Promoting Full Inclusion Within Schools

These books describe the movement known as "full inclusion," which advocates reorganizing and restructuring schools so that all children, including those with disabilities, are included. They include many strategies for thinking about school reform and classroom organization.

- Perske, R. (1988). *Circle of friends: People with disabilities and their friends enrich the lives of one another*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Putnam, J. W. (1994). *Cooperative learning activities and strategies for inclusion: Celebrating diversity in the classroom*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (Eds.). (1996). *Inclusion: A guide for educators*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Stainback, W., & Stainback, S. (Eds.). (1990). *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Thousand, J. S., Villa, R. A., & Nevin, A. I. (Eds.). (2002). *Creativity and collaborative learning: The practical guide to empowering students, teachers and families*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., Stainback, W., & Stainback, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Teaching About Differences: Curriculum Guides

These resources offer strategies for talking and teaching about individual differences, including, but not limited to, disabilities.

- Derman-Sparks, L., & the A.B.C. Task Force. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Neugebauer, B. (Ed.). (1992). *Alike and different: Exploring our humanity with young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Schniedewind, N., & Davidson, E. (1998). *Open minds to equality: A sourcebook of learning activities to affirm diversity and promote equity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Children's Books About Differences

Many excellent children's books model diversity and inclusiveness. In addition to books that directly address disability/difference issues, more general books that address the multiple differences that exist in classrooms and society can be helpful in beginning a discussion with children.

- Andreae, G. (2000). *Giraffes can't dance*. London: Orchard Books.
- Ashley, B. (1991). *Cleversticks*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Carroll, J., & Smith, C. (2001). *Billy the punk*. New York: Random House.
- Combs, B. (2000). *ABC: A family alphabet book*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing.

- Combs, B. (2000). *123: A family counting book*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing.
- dePaola, T. (1983). *Now one foot, now the other*. New York: Putnam.
- Fierstein, H. (2002). *The sissy duckling*. New York: Simon and Schuster Books
- Hazen, B. S. (1985). *Why are people different? A book about prejudice*. New York: Golden Books.
- Heine, H. (1986). *Friends*. New York: Aladdin Books.
- Henkes, K. (1991). *Chrysanthemum*. New York: Trumpet Book Club.
- Hoose, P., & Hoose, H. (1998). *Hey, little ant*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Jimenez, K. P. (2000). *Are you a boy or a girl?* Toronto, Canada: Green Dragon Press.
- Kasza, K. (1987). *The wolf's chicken stew*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Knight, M. B. (1993). *Who belongs here? An American story*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers.
- Laguna, S. (2002). *Too loud Lilly*. New York: Scholastic Group.
- Munson, D. (2000). *Enemy pie*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Pinkwater, D. (1977). *The big orange splot*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Seskin, S., & Shamblin, A. (2002). *Don't laugh at me*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Wild, M., & Argent, K. (1998). *Miss Lily's fabulous pink feather boa*. Toronto: Penguin Books.

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- Aronson, E. (1978). *The jigsaw classroom*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hall, N. S. (1999). *Creative resources for the anti-bias classroom*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.
- Hunt, J. M. (1961). *Intelligence and experience*. New York: Ronald Press.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kluth, P., Straut, D. M., & Biklen, D. P. (2003). *Access to academics for all students: Critical approaches to inclusive curriculum, instruction, and policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Levin, D. (1994). *Teaching young children in violent times: Building a peaceable classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.
- Massachusetts Advocacy Center. (1990). *Locked in/locked out: Tracking and placement practices in Boston public schools*. Boston: Author.
- Oakes, J., & Lipton, M. (1999). *Teaching to change the world*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Paley, V. G. (1992). *You can't say you can't play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, J. W. (1994). *Cooperative learning activities and strategies for inclusion: Celebrating diversity in the classroom*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Putnam, J. (1997). *Cooperative learning in diverse classrooms*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Rainforth, B., & Kugelmass, J. W. (2003). *Curriculum and instruction for all learners: Blending systematic and constructivist approaches in inclusive elementary schools*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1990). Student support through cooperative learning. In W. Stainback & S. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education* (pp. 65-79). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1994). *Playing favorites: Gifted education and the disruption of community*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive school communities*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2001). Making inclusion visible: Honoring the process and the struggle. *Democracy and Education*, 14(1), 24-27.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2003). Inclusion: A matter of social justice. *Educational Leadership*, 61(2), 25-29.

- Sapon-Shevin, M., Ayres, B., & Duncan, J. (2002). Cooperative learning and inclusion. In J. S. Thousand, R. A. Villa, & A. I. Nevin (Eds.), *Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students, teachers and families* (2nd ed., pp. 209-222). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Sapon-Shevin, M., Dobbelaere, A., Corrigan, C. R., Goodman, K., & Mastin, M. C. (1998). Promoting inclusive behavior in inclusive classrooms: "You can't say you can't play." In L. H. Meyer, H. S. Park, M. Grenot-Scheyer, I. S. Schwartz, & B. Harry (Eds.), *Making friends: The influences of culture and development* (pp. 105-132). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Schniedewind, N., & Sapon-Shevin, M. (1998). Professional development for socially conscious cooperative learning. In C. M. Brody & N. Davidson (Eds.), *Professional development and cooperative learning: Issues and approaches* (pp. 203-219). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Thousand, J. S., Villa, R. A., & Nevin, A. I. (Eds.). (2002). *Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students, teachers and families* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Van der Klift, E., & Kunc, N. (2002). Beyond benevolence: Supporting genuine friendships in inclusive schools. In J. S. Thousand, R. A. Villa, & A. I. Nevin (Eds.), *Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students, teachers and families* (2nd ed., pp. 21-28). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., Stainback, W., & Stainback, S. (Eds.). (2000). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.