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## ABSTRACT

Part of a series on critical issues in urban education, this booklet discusses the need to incorporate discussions of the meaning and experience of disabilities into the course of study for all children. Eight reasons why educators should teach about disabilities are presented and 17 ways to infuse disabilities into curriculum across age levels are provided, including: (1) have adults with disabilities come to class to talk about their lives; (2) have students do accessibility surveys; (3) have students write stories about people with disabilities; (4) incorporate and discuss stories that have disability themes; (5) have children do interviews with individuals with disabilities; (6) have students write an essay on stereotypes; (7) show students informational videos about eugenics; (8) have students write biographies of individuals with disabilities; (9) have students learn American Sign Language signs; (10) have students learn the alphabet in Braille; (11) take students to a museum and look for things about disability; (12) have students prepare photo essays; (13) teach students about different brain functions; (14) have students design assistive devices; (15) have students surf the Web for disability resources; and (16) have students design a new graphic symbol to signify disability. Additional resources are listed. (CR)

**On Infusing Disability Studies into the General Curriculum.  
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Phil Ferguson

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Brief discussions  
of critical issues in  
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**On Infusing Disability  
Studies into the  
General Curriculum**



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August 2001

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# On Point...

## **On Infusing Disability Studies into the General Curriculum**

**Phil Ferguson**



## Infusing Disability Studies into the General Curriculum

Teachers and administrators are all familiar with the growing movement toward the inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms. Discussions about how to do this, with which children, at what ages, and with what supports and structural reforms are happening in urban school districts across the country. As a result, there is an increasing amount of information and research about the “how and why” of inclusion. Indeed, some of that information is available from the National Institute for Urban School Improvement or is referenced on our Web-based library of resources.

Just as there is a recognized need to include more children with disabilities into the general education classroom, with access to the general curriculum, there is also a need to infuse that same curriculum with more discussion of disabilities themselves. Not only should we include children with disabilities in our classrooms, we need to incorporate discussions of the meaning and experience of disabilities into the course of study for all children. Whether it is the workplace, the movie theater, the golf course, the restaurant, or the school, we are being asked to learn more about what it means to be disabled. At least for schools, however, there is much less information

and research on how to teach *about* the presence and participation of people with disabilities in our society than there is on how to teach *with* the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom.

What follows is intended simply to provide some hints and resources about how to start thinking, talking, and teaching about the meaning and experience of children with disabilities in our schools.

## Eight Reasons Why We Should Teach about Disabilities in the General Curriculum

### **1. *People with disabilities are one of the largest and least understood minority groups in America.***

Along with race and gender, disability is one of the main categories of difference used by Americans. It is estimated that over 50 million Americans have some type of disability. Although rates vary greatly from country to country, roughly one sixth of the world's population has some type of significant disability or chronic health impairment.

### **2. *Ignorance feeds discrimination and stereotypes.***

Despite the fact that virtually everyone in our country either has a disability or knows someone who does, there is little discussion in our schools about the meaning of this experience. Despite improvements in social policy and civil rights laws over the last few decades, as a group, people with disabilities continue to lag behind the general population in numerous indicators of well being (e.g., unemployment rates, graduation rates, income, participation in social life). People generally, but especially our children and youth, have little familiarity with the history of discrimination and exclusion that has led to this status.

### **3. *To eliminate stereotypes, we first have to see them and then challenge the assumptions behind them.***

We have to see stereotypes for what they are before we can work to eliminate them. Discrimination and stereotypes about people with disabilities continue to dominate our language and discussion. It is no longer publicly acceptable to use overtly racist or sexist terminology in our conversation. Certainly, such language continues to be used, but the most offensive terms are widely condemned. Yet, the same cannot be said for terms of derision and stereotype related to categories of disability. People who would never use the 'N' word to refer to an African American think nothing of calling someone a 'retard' or

'cripple.' If one student trips, another is quick to laugh about the person being "a spaz," perhaps not even aware of the derivation of the insult from "spastic" (a type of hypertonicity associated most often with cerebral palsy). Someone who is not doing anything productive is said to be "vegging out" extending the association of "vegetable" and mental retardation. Even our everyday expressions and phrases are full of unexamined stereotypes about the capacities of people with various categories of disabilities: "blind leading the blind," "falling on deaf ears," "crippled by defeat," "making a lame excuse." How can we expect the full acceptance of children with disabilities into our classrooms if we allow such stereotypes in our thoughts and language to go unexamined?

**4. *Familiarity breeds comfort, not contempt.***

The more our children and youth know about people with disabilities – the discrimination they have faced in history, the barriers they confront in daily life, the stereotypes we apply to them about what they can and cannot do – the more comfortable they will become with their classmates with disabilities. This is the knowledge that creates empathy and understanding, not the more traditional recitation of technical definitions and statistics about disabilities that



emphasizes deficits and limitations in a pseudo-medical context. The point is not to move students from feelings of fear to feelings of pity, but to encourage students to approach disability as one more source of the diversity that makes our lives richer.

**5. *We should recognize the important contributions that people with disabilities have made throughout history.***

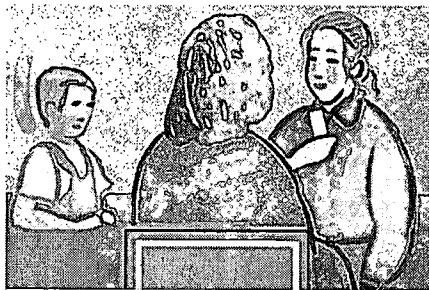
There are over 80,000 photographs of Franklin D. Roosevelt collected in the presidential library at Hyde Park, New York. Yet, only two of those show him sitting in a wheelchair, even though that was how he got around the entire time he was president. Einstein had a learning disability. Homer was blind. Alexander the Great had epilepsy. Beethoven wrote some of his finest music after becoming deaf. People with disabilities have always been an important part of our culture, yet their histories are largely unnoticed and unacknowledged. Only after protests by disability activists was the new FDR memorial in Washington, D.C. altered to include a sculptural representation of him in the wheelchair he used every day that he was in the White House.



**6. Disability is part of the diversity that we should celebrate in society.**

As with every other group of Americans, most people with disabilities do not become famous, make brilliant scientific discoveries, or produce immortal works of art.

The stories of the everyday experiences of ordinary people with disabilities need to be part of our social history as well. History should not be only about the “headlines and heroes” of past generations, but should include the equally heroic accounts of what the daily lives of people with disabilities were like as they battled the barriers of exclusion and discrimination.



**7. Our literature, art, and popular entertainment are full of imagery and portrayals of disabilities.**

From the troll hiding under the bridge in children’s fairy tales to the “homicidal maniac” in the latest horror movie, disability and physical difference are associated with evil or pity in much of the art and literature with which children grow up. The stereotypes that we see in our language are even more deeply embedded in our art and entertainment. The blind detective can solve mysteries because of heightened awareness of his other senses. The mad scientist in the wheelchair is driven to evil out of anger at the world because of his disability (e.g., *Dr. Strangelove*). The lovable “man-child” who is too innocent to survive in the real world and so must return to the protective environment of the institution (e.g., Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*). The “deformed” character who must love from afar and is left in social isolation (e.g., *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*). Recently, we have begun to see more complex and fully developed disabled characters and imagery: Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*, Corky in the TV show *Life Goes On*, and Marlee Matlin’s roles in movies and TV that show deafness as simply a part of life.

**8. Race, gender, and disability are related throughout history.**

Understanding the history of racism in our society inevitably involves an understanding of how the dominant culture portrays people as inferior. For centuries, one of the ways to justify discrimination against people of color has been to portray them as less able than the white race. Women were said to “belong in the home” since their brains and muscles were smaller than men’s, and therefore they

were less able to compete in the marketplace. Since being judged to be mentally retarded has always been viewed as one of the most undesirable outcomes, it has naturally been one of the preferred labels applied to minority groups to explain inequalities in educational outcomes. Understanding the nature and variety of diversity helps defuse the power of stigmatizing labels and eventually renders them ineffective. If we want students to understand racism and sexism, then they have to also understand “ableism” in society.

## 17 Ways to Infuse Disabilities into Curriculum Across Age Levels

*(16 good ones and one to avoid)*

1. Have adults come to class to talk about their lives and history in the local community. Include adults with disabilities.
2. Have students do “accessibility surveys” and maps of neighborhoods, schools, and communities that identify various barriers and accommodations. Not just ramps and curb cuts, but Braille, graphics, visual cues, and so on.
3. Have students write children’s stories with portrayals of people with disabilities that challenge common stereotypes or misconceptions.
4. Incorporate and discuss stories that have disability themes and characters.
5. Have children do an oral history interview with 1) a family member or friend who has a disability or 2) a family member or friend who has a relative with a disability.
6. Have students write an essay on some common expression or term and explain the stereotypes about disability that it shows.
7. Show students videos about the history of eugenics (a movement in the first part of the 20th century to involuntarily sterilize and segregate people with disabilities deemed “socially undesirable”) and its association with racism.
8. Have students write a biography of historical figures with a disabilities.
9. Have students learn 20 words of American Sign Language or how to fingerspell the manual alphabet.
10. Have students learn the alphabet in Braille.

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11. Take students to a *museum* and look for things about disability.
12. Have students prepare photo essays about the barriers disabled people face in the community.
13. Teach students about the parts of the brain that control different motor functions and have them color these in.
14. Have student groups design a new piece of equipment or adaptation (they don't have to build it) for people with different types of disabilities (e.g., moving sidewalks on city blocks).
15. Have small groups of students surf the Web for resources about different types of disabilities.
16. Have students design a new graphic symbol (to replace the stick figure in the wheelchair) to signify disability access and rights.
17. Many disability advocates have criticized programs that try to "simulate" what it is like to have different disabilities. Their concern is that such exercises often reinforce stereotypes and emphasize a "deficit" model of disability. Putting socks on our hands to simulate fine motor problems or sitting in a wheelchair for a few hours is seldom a realistic way to understand the experience of disability. Think how we might react if a teacher asked white children to darken their faces so that they could experience what it was like to be black. Talk to disability rights activists in your area to see what they think about such "disability awareness" activities.

# 1001 Resources for More Ideas and Material: Surfing the Web for Disability Information

## Sites that Help with Curriculum Information

1. <http://www.disabilityhistory.org/dshp.html>  
A wonderful place to start for information about disability history.
2. [http://codi.buffalo.edu/graph\\_based/bibliography/woodhill/woodhill.html](http://codi.buffalo.edu/graph_based/bibliography/woodhill/woodhill.html)  
Another source for history of disability material that is broken into different types and categories of disability.
3. [http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/as\\_syllabi.html](http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/as_syllabi.html)  
A great – and growing – collection of course syllabi from college courses in the humanities about disability studies. It is good as a resource for novels, short stories, movies, etc. that contain disability imagery or themes.
4. <http://www.disabilityfilms.co.uk>  
Another source for movies that involve disability issues.
5. <http://hometown.aol.com/MRandDD/movies.htm>  
One more source for movies that involve disability issues.

## Current Events and Periodicals Devoted to Disability News

These are some of the many Web sites that include disability-related news and articles about disability rights activities or developments.

6. <http://www.disabilityworld.org>
7. <http://www.disabilitynews.com>
8. <http://www.halftheplanet.com>
9. <http://www.tell-us-your-story.com/index.html#stories>

## General, All Purpose Web Sites with Good Links

10. <http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.html>  
Family Village is a wonderful smorgasbord of resources especially for families.

## **Organizations for Specific Disabilities**

11. <http://www.thearc.org>  
The Arc is a leading advocacy organization for individuals with intellectual disabilities – a.k.a mental retardation – and their families. It contains lots of information and links to other sites.
12. <http://www.people1.org/websites.htm>  
People First is another leading advocacy organization for individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. It contains lots of information and links to other sites.
13. <http://www.ldanatl.org>  
A source for learning disabilities.
14. <http://www.nfb.org>  
The official site of the National Federation of the Blind.
15. <http://www.nami.org/index.html>  
The official site of the National Association for the Mentally Ill.
16. <http://www.autism-society.org>  
The official site of the Autism Society of America.
17. [http://www.members.carol.net/~ndsc/index\\_fr.html](http://www.members.carol.net/~ndsc/index_fr.html)  
The official site of the National Down Syndrome Congress.
18. Through 1001. All the links you get when you search for “disability” on Yahoo or any other search engine for the Web.



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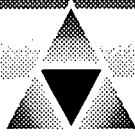
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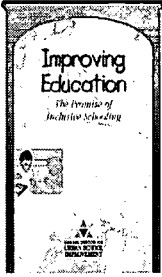
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