Inclusive Classrooms: From Access to Engagement

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Introduction

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In the late 1990s I taught at one of the first full-inclusion public high schools in New York City. It was a small innovative school trying to hold its own against the increasingly entrenched grip of high-stakes testing. We were fully inclusive in the sense that we avoided tracking, and students with and without disabilities participated in all of their content-area classes together. Two of us made up the special education "team," and while the school was far from perfect and struggled with the growing pains of a new institution, my partner and I were given wide space to experiment.

Through trial and error we patched together a system balanced between working with teachers and working with students. We consulted and planned with the general education teachers and, when we could convince them, occasionally cotaught. We "pushed in" to support students in their classes and "pulled out" to provide more targeted support individually or in small groups. Given the pervasive literacy struggles faced by the majority of the students in the school, our work often extended beyond students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs); need—not labels—drove our work. We even taught a few self-contained sections, one for students with the most intense literacy needs and another for students who needed support in developing study and organizational skills.

We could focus on the needs and capabilities of our students and make fluid decisions either to work with them individually, in small groups, or in their classes, or to work directly with their content-area teachers to best support the students' access to the general education curriculum. Inclusion in this context was a mind-set, not a structure. It was imperfect and messy, but creative and responsive.

Current Trends

My experience was part of a national trend toward inclusive schools and classrooms, which began to take off in the 1980s with the regular education initiative (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Over time the underlying structures of inclusion have continued to evolve. The focus of *Inclusive Classrooms: From Access to Engagement* is the history of that evolution as well as an examination of one of its current iterations, the cotaught classroom, in which a general and a special educator share teaching responsibilities for a group of children with and without disabilities.[1]

In many ways, the expansion of inclusion classrooms is a step toward fulfilling the promises of both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the disability rights movement to ensure access, equity, and full citizenship for children with disabilities. At the same time, the field of special education continues to wrestle with definitions of disability rooted in a medical framework as well as social constructivist definitions of disability informed by legacies of the disability rights movement; and the fields of disabilities studies and, more recently, disability studies in education (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008).

The paradox of special education is that it seeks services, supports, and equitable access through a system that labels children and by extension separates them, often in ways that perpetuate systemic biases based on race, culture, class, and ableist assumptions about normative abilities (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Hehir, 2002). The fields of disability studies and disability studies in education have had an increasingly significant impact on special education and on the evolution of inclusion.

One major shift has been rooting the "problem" in the environment rather than the individual. In the early days of inclusion, students had to be deemed "ready" to be placed in a general education setting. Today, the discourse is increasingly about the ways in which educational environments can be "disabling." Universal design for learning has been one important framework focused on accessible learning environments and experiences rather than on learner deficits (Rose, Meyer & Hitchcock, 2005).

The writers in this issue of Occasional Papers advocate for models of inclusion that support children's capabilities and challenge systemic inequities based on ableism and cultural biases. They examine the complex and changing nature of collaboration between general and special educators in inclusion settings. Underlying these essays, though not always explicitly stated, is recognition that the fields of special education and disability studies can deepen and inform each other.

Our writers both acknowledge the power of labels and disability-specific knowledge and also critically examine how social, historical, and environmental forces impact children's and families' experiences. Despite exemplary models in many states and districts, there are regions and schools across the nation where inclusion continues to be fraught with challenges; these essays point toward successes and suggest ways forward.

History

The evolution of cotaught inclusion classrooms is linked to the history of special education as well as to more recent legislation such as No Child Left Behind (Friend et al., 2010). It is estimated that prior to the mid-1970s, one million students with disabilities were excluded from publicly funded education, and perhaps four times as many were educated in public schools without access to services and supports needed to ensure their full participation (Katzman, Gandhi, Harbour, & LaRock, 2005).

Until the late 1950s state courts upheld legislation that allowed school officials to exclude students who were deemed "uneducable" or disruptive to the learning of others (Yell, Rodgers, & Lodge Rodgers, 1998). In many states parents were denied the right to due process and the ability to challenge decisions made by local school officials. In response to these conditions, in the 1930s and 1940s parents began to form groups to advocate for the rights of their children. By the 1950s organizations such as the National Association for Retarded Citizens began to appear and became powerful lobbying and advocacy voices. Fueled by the legislative successes of the civil rights movement, parents of children with disabilities brought the first lawsuits against states and boards of education.

The plaintiffs in Brown v. Board of Education argued for and won equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. The courts found that when a state provides public education to any of its citizenry, it must provide that service equally to all of its citizenry. Notably, protections against segregation were extended to a "class"— in the case of Brown v. Board of Education, the class of African American children. Citing Brown, parents began to file lawsuits, arguing that children with disabilities were a class that had been systemically denied equal access to the public education system (Yell et al., 1998).

Two early and pivotal cases, both from 1972, were the Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania (PARC) and Mills v. the Board of Education of the District of Columbia (Mills). PARC found that students with intellectual disabilities (then called mental retardation) were capable of receiving benefit from schooling and could not be denied access to a publicly funded education. This set the precedent for a "free and appropriate education" that is a central tenet of current federal law. Mills likewise found both that children with disabilities could not be excluded from public schooling and that parents had the right to due process regarding assessment and placement decisions (Zettel & Ballard, 1982, as cited in Yell et al., 1998).

While these cases focused on access and placement, other cases—notably Diana v. The State Board of Education (1970) and Larry P. v. Riles (1972)—challenged biased assessment procedures and established children's right to linguistically and culturally appropriate evaluations; like PARC and Mills, these decisions subsequently informed federal legislation. The continuing overrepresentation of children of color in special education suggests, however, that these issues are far from resolved.

As parents were fighting for access and rights in schools, the disability rights movement, forged by people with disabilities, was fighting for equity in the public and private spheres. The movement worked to raise public consciousness at the state and national levels about these issues. By 1974 most states had passed some form of legislation guaranteeing children with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate education. It was becoming increasingly clear, however, that federal legislation was needed to safeguard all children. In 1975 Congress passed the [Education for All Handicapped Children Act](#) (EAHCA, or (PL) 94–142), renamed the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) in 1990.

Central to IDEA is the right to a [free and appropriate education](#) (FAPE). FAPE is based on the principle of "zero-reject," according to which no child can be excluded from public school. In addition, IDEA states that children have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. This is, essentially a mandate for inclusion: the first setting to be considered for a child with a disability should be the general education classroom of their local public school, with added supports and services as needed. If this setting cannot appropriately meet the needs of a child, then more restrictive settings can be considered. However, while inclusion is mandated, the definition of "appropriate" remains undefined and continues to be the source of significant litigation as well as one of the reasons that such a wide range of models for inclusion have existed over the years.

Inclusion: What Came Before

In the opening essay of this volume, *Inclusion: What Came Before*, Judith Lesch's firsthand account of her teaching experiences from the late 1970s through the mid-1990s takes us on a journey through the evolving approaches to inclusion. Hers is a nuanced look at the "promises, contradictions, and complexities of educating children with disabilities in…the 'least restrictive environment.'" She points out that while labeling is the first step toward accessing hard-fought-for services, particularly for children with high-incidence disabilities (such as learning and emotional disabilities), it can also be of "questionable validity" and lead to stigma.

Lesch advocates for models of inclusion based on need rather than labels, yet recognizes that labels have helped to drive much-needed research, such as the studies leading to the vast strides that have been made during the past decade in understanding children with autism spectrum disorders. She reflects on the power of inclusion to realize "ideals of social justice and equality for all children," to create a more inclusive society, and to extend teaching methods. Yet she brings a critical eye to inclusive practices, recognizing the need children with disabilities may have for a peer group and the uniqueness of children's and families' changing needs over time.

At the end of Lesch's career as a special education teacher, a new model for inclusion—the cotaught classroom—was just becoming popular. In the 1980s and 1990s it had become increasingly clear that models of special education were producing dismal results for too many children. Graduation rates of children with special needs—and by extension, rates of entry into higher education and employment—remained low, despite the newly gained access to public schooling and the developing field of special education that was intended to meet children's specific learning needs (Friend et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010).

Educators increasingly turned their attention to ensuring access to the general education curriculum and to outcomes for children with disabilities. This focus on outcomes fit in with the increasingly hegemonic standards-based education movement and high-stakes testing agenda of the 1990s. These shifting priorities led to legislative changes. In 1997 IDEA was reauthorized to ensure that the majority of students with disabilities would participate in all district and statewide assessments (prior to this, many students with disabilities had been exempt from those assessments); in 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) similarly ensured that most students with disabilities would participate in such assessments, tying test scores to school funding and requiring states to disaggregate data for children with disabilities.

These changes in the legislation have played a major role in increasing the numbers of children with disabilities who have been given access to the general education curriculum, increasingly in cotaught classrooms (Friend et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007). Herein lies another paradox: while the push for participation in assessments may be part of what is driving important changes in inclusive practice,

there is concern that the push toward standardization is incompatible with the principle of individualization at the core of IDEA (McLaughlin, 2010). Teachers in inclusion classrooms feel this struggle daily as they work to serve the increasingly diverse and complex needs of their students in the context of tighter controls over content, methods, and outcomes.

While teacher evaluation and compensation is increasingly tied to student test scores, little research has been done on the implications of using current value-added models to measure coteaching performance in inclusion classrooms, or even on the full implications of including more children with disabilities in standardized testing (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007). Finally, although the number of cotaught classrooms has increased, little empirical data has been collected on their "success." Many of the existing studies examine perceptions of coteaching rather than specific outcomes for students with and without disabilities (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Friend et al., 2010). While these perceptions are for the most part favorable, more research is certainly needed.

Given the sustained growth of inclusion classrooms, educators must continue to examine and when appropriate challenge current practices and policies through research and advocacy. If driven by the needs, abilities, and rights of children rather than by the needs of a system focused on test scores, inclusion has the potential to realize one of the central goals of special education and the disability rights movement—that of social justice (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Doing the Civil Right Thing

In *Doing the Civil Right Thing: Supporting Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms*, David J. Connor and Kristen Goldmansour explore cotaught inclusion classrooms through the lens of the social justice narrative. They write about the parents who asserted "that it was their children's civil right to be educated within a diverse classroom, one that truly mirrored the nation's population." They critique the alternative to inclusion as "segregation," which results in "devaluation, a loss in cultural capital for individuals" and argue that cotaught classrooms can upend "artificial notions of 'normalcy' that have served to diminish and devalue 'disabled' children."

In their examination of one exemplary cotaught classroom, they look at what works. Too often the discourse on inclusion is one of critique and problem identification. While the field needs to continually turn a self-critical eye on its work, an examination of successful practice opens possibilities rather than focusing on hurdles. Connor and Goldmansour look at the elements of successful collaboration and examine concrete practices that teachers employ to make curriculum accessible while meeting each child's specific needs.

To realize this vision requires challenging traditional understandings of the relationship between general and special education. In the most intimate way, a cotaught classroom forces two often-separated worlds to come together. Just as this joining can impact the practice of partner teachers, it

has the potential to change practices in the larger field. Schools of education are just beginning to include support and training for coteaching across disciplines in their programs (Friend et al., 2010).

At Bank Street College there is a growing recognition of the ways in which our organizational structures as well as the historical tensions inherent to progressive and special education have impeded the sharing of expertise across the special and general education divide. To better mirror the realities of the field today, a small group of general and special education faculty piloted a new collaborative advisement model with graduate students in their fieldwork year. In another pilot program, general and special education faculty members partnered with Bank Street School for Children teachers to observe individual children and develop strategies to better support their progress in a general education setting. These are small steps, but ones that begin to suggest innovative ways to create dialogue and share expertise.

Overcoming Barriers to Coteaching

In *Overcoming Barriers to Coteaching*, Seamus O'Connor, a high school special education teacher, shares a story of bridging a divide. He takes a clear and honest look at the evolution of his relationship with his coteaching partner, Carol. In doing so, he explores themes of equity, trust, and negotiated differences in building a collaborative classroom. The process he describes is not easy. He writes:

In addition to entailing the risk of relinquishing authority, good-faith coteaching involves opening up your every act in a classroom to observation and commentary by another professional, questioning your fundamental beliefs about teaching and schools, confronting sharp personality differences, and changing or scrapping potentially all of your usual classroom procedures.

But despite all the challenges, the work is transformative, deepening and extending both his and Carol's skills and—perhaps more importantly—their capacity to engage in reflective practice.

From Access to Interaction

Finally, in *From Access to Interaction: Prioritizing Opportunities for Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Development for Children with Physical Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms*, Daniel Atkins calls us to reflective practice. His seven-year-old son, Owen, is in a cotaught inclusive classroom in New York City. Atkins writes that access is merely an entry point, and that by viewing the adaptations educators make to allow Owen's physical participation in academic and social activities as the end point of successful inclusion, we accept ableist assumptions about the educational needs of children with disabilities.

Atkins's stories illustrate the way that such assumptions "become dysfunctional when the educational and developmental services provided to disabled children focus inordinately on the characteristics of their disability" (Hehir, 2002, p. 4). Atkins calls on educators to see beyond access to identify "core moments" for child-centered experiential learning in inclusion classrooms. He warns that "[t]he process of scaffolding the child's inclusion in the activities or interactions of the day can too often become

conflated or confused with the process of scaffolding the child's physical ability to gain access to those activities or interactions."

While Atkins writes specifically about physical access, this perspective holds for any kind of access we try to create in inclusion classrooms. Atkins acknowledges that to create opportunities that turn access into interaction, teachers must be deeply reflective about the social, emotional, and educational goals of their curriculum. Assuming competence on the part of every child, teachers must carefully and collaboratively "create rich opportunities" for all their students.

Persistent Problems and a Way Forward

We have not yet achieved the goals of IDEA and the disability rights movement, nor have we fully realized a vision of the role and structure of inclusive education. While there has been progress, students with disabilities' graduation and achievement rates continue to lag behind those of their typically developing peers (Blackorby et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007).

While families have fought vigorously for their children's right to be in inclusion classrooms, some families, if given the choice, continue to opt for self-contained settings. In some cases, this may be due to the lack of enough consistently high-quality public school inclusion classrooms[2] and in others to parents' desires for small, specialized settings for their children. Parents with resources and knowledge are more likely to be able to get placements for their children in funded independent special education schools, which creates a two-tier system. Inequity also plays out in the continued overrepresentation of children of color in special education. Inclusion will never fulfill its promise of social justice without an ongoing critical examination of the broader social and political issues that lead to these inequities (Artiles et al., 2006). Finally, the standards movement, high-stakes testing, and value-added teacher accountability methods make children with disabilities as well as the general and special educators who teach them increasingly vulnerable.

The essays in this issue highlight examples of successful practice and point to directions for the future. While creating strong inclusion models that assume full participation for children with disabilities, we must understand the history of inclusive education and the ways in which the past impacts the present for ill and for good. Models of inclusion should be flexible and diverse enough to preserve a continuum of supports and also challenge the assumption that all children and families will benefit from the same approach. Central to strengthening inclusive practice is our continued need to transform the relationship between general and special education. Most important, we must see children as capable agents of their own growth and development and create opportunities not simply for their access to general education but for their rich engagement in learning.

[1] In New York City, for example, this process is referred to as both collaborative team teaching (CTT) and integrated coteaching (ICT).

[2] While this issue of *Occasional Papers* focuses on traditional public schools, charter schools have become an increasingly important factor in discussions of inclusion. Statistically, charters tend to vastly underserve children with disabilities; at the same time, some have been established with the mission to be fully inclusive schools. A fuller exploration is beyond the scope of this issue but essential to the larger public discourse.

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Inclusion: What Came Before

Judith Lesch

When I grew up in the 1940s and '50s in southern Indiana, I never saw a child with a disability in my school or in my community. As far as I knew, there were no adults with disabilities anywhere either. The same was true for my husband, growing up in Queens in New York.

Where were all those children, all those people, who must have existed somewhere? In the early part of the 20th century, sadly, it was routine practice to send children with physical or intellectual disabilities away to institutions. Although there were notable exceptions to this pattern, many people in this era saw disability as a source of shame, and individuals with disabilities were often warehoused in institutions for their entire lives (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000).

Fast-forward to an unseasonably warm day in February, 1993, in the playground of a New York suburban elementary school where first and second graders enjoy the freedom of running without coats and hats. I watch Rudy, an engaging eight-year-old with Down syndrome, join a group of boys who are playing with a football. I hear one of the boys say, "Let's see how you run, Rudy." And Rudy runs off with amazing speed for his solid frame.

Perhaps because I used to be Rudy's teacher in a self-contained special education classroom, I wonder, protectively, are they trying to get rid of him? But no, they all run to join Rudy at the other end of the field, saying, "Yeah, he can run." When I look again he has the ball in hand, ready to make a pass, motioning for the receivers to get in their places on the field. The enthusiasm and glee of active, intense physical play is present on each child's face.

To an outside observer, this playground scene might seem unremarkable, but it was the result of a long process that had led to Rudy's full inclusion in a general education first-grade classroom and in the life of his elementary school. It was also an example of the changing historical and cultural beliefs about disability, as we have moved away from the invisibility and stigmatization of disability toward a more humane and inclusive society.

The story of this progression can be told from different points of view: of the parents who labored for laws to protect and educate their children with disabilities; of the disability communities themselves, who advocated for their own self-determination; and of the policy makers and educators who worked to implement these ideals of social justice and equality for all children.

When I began work as a special education teacher in 1978, shortly after the enactment of PL 94–142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), it was the beginning of a new educational era, one described in legislation but not yet established in practice. By writing about my experiences in the classroom during these early days, I hope to highlight some of the challenges and changing perspectives

of a previous era, and to consider the continuing promises, contradictions, and complexities of educating children with disabilities in what has come to be known as the "least restrictive environment."

PL 94-142 and Its Consequences

PL 94–142 established the right of all children, including those with disabilities, to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Children with severe disabilities who had been excluded from public schools— sometimes educated in church basements and other separate locations through private organizations—now had the right to be educated by their home school districts without cost to parents. Children (such as the newly identified population of children with learning disabilities) attending local schools but needing different kinds of instructional services to learn, would now receive those services in their local school settings.

A separate "special" educational system began to emerge to provide these services, with different teacher certifications, separate administrators, and a whole range of legally binding requirements, paperwork, and expectations. To meet the increasing demand for educational services, school districts all over the country established new self-contained special education classes to serve the children with disabilities within their jurisdiction. For the first time, under the law parents were given the right to appeal educational decisions regarding their children, and as a result, the intervening years have seen a huge expansion of due process litigation over the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders.

While children with disabilities were for the first time guaranteed appropriate schooling and services, the need for these services had to be verified through formal testing and labeling of the child with a disability. The form of this eligibility requirement was distasteful and troubling for many parents and teachers.

The practice of separating out those who were different from the "norm" was for many an issue of social justice, an educational practice that reinforced the view that some children were seen as "better" and others as "deficient." From the beginning, this practice set up an ongoing tension between what it meant to provide an appropriate education and the unintended consequences of labeling a child as having a disability.

For many children and families, labeling led to entrapment in a special education system that they could never leave, a system that could undermine self-esteem and lead to self-fulfilling negative prophecies. Many assessments and the labels themselves were later seen to be of questionable validity, yet they were often used to remove children who were "hard to teach" from general education classrooms, reducing general education teachers' need to expand their own teaching repertoire (Skrtic, 1995).

African Americans, English Language Learners, and children from other underserved groups were disproportionately identified as needing special education services, reflecting the cultural and historical

biases of many teachers and the educational establishment during this period (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010).

The promise of the new law and the contradictions of the requirements made the new special education enterprise controversial and full of complexity. Who belonged in a general education classroom and who needed to be excluded—and under what circumstances? What did special education services look like and where should they be given—in a self-contained classroom, a resource room, or a therapy room?

My teaching experience in those first 20 years after the passage of PL 94-142 mirrors to some extent the changing progression of attitudes and beliefs as localities all over the country struggled to determine what constituted the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities.

A Separate Classroom

My first job was to coteach a new self-contained special education preschool class in a suburban district near New York City. Because it was in a small district, this single special education class served preschoolers with different disabilities, needs, and levels of functioning. In our cross categorical classes, my coteacher and I had the benefit of working with children with very different learning profiles who all could participate in the same classroom community.

Although we were housed in a separate classroom in a reconfigured basement storage room, our class was in close proximity to an established prekindergarten program for low-income children and had daily contact with other young children without disabilities. Most important, the experienced and caring early childhood staff was genuinely welcoming to our special education team and to the children in our class. Our 10 years in the prekindergarten program were intensely collaborative, working with general education teachers, therapists, social workers, and families to figure out what an appropriate education would be for each child who came our way.

Tyler was born with spina bifida and arrived at two and a half with full leg braces and crutches, a shy manner, and no speech. His mother enrolled him in our program when she found that he had been left alone for long hours at the babysitter's home because it was difficult for the babysitter to move him from room to room. Our team figured out how to give him access to every preschool activity, how to get him up and down the basement stairs to our classroom, and how to make sure that he was fully integrated into our classroom and the program. As his language and social skills emerged we recognized that except for his physical disabilities, he was a typically developing preschooler.

Warren, at three, was withdrawn and did not relate to other people, did not respond to language, and wanted to spend most of his time rolling a car back and forth on the rug. He made screeching noises during transitions. Today he would be diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, but in those days he was said to have a language delay. His parents told us that he loved letters, and to our amazement he learned to read at four and used written language to help himself learn how to speak.

We taught many other children with different labels and behaviors during those years, some who blossomed in our small segregated classroom, and others—like the child who spent all day tapping surfaces with a wooden block—who we didn't have the skills to help. What I learned from this period was that for each child and each family—and for the specific experience of disability within that family—there was a huge range of different needs and expectations.

This was indeed what the special education law required, that each educational plan should be individualized for each unique situation. And so in the beginning we created elaborate individualized educational plans (IEPs) for each child, written in longhand on carbon paper (there were no computerized list of goals and objectives in those days), each one addressing what we thought were the most important learning steps for each child and family.

I realize now that most of the children placed in our self-contained classroom in those first years could easily have been included in a general education preschool. In fact, many of the children in our preschool classes, including both Tyler and Warren, went on to participate in general education classes throughout the rest of their schooling, often without having any special education label or services.

That self-contained pre-K class was a first attempt by the school district to define the least restrictive environment for children's special education schooling. It was a beginning step toward inclusive schooling at a time when acceptance of special education was far from universal, when most adults and children were uncomfortable around people with disabilities, and when some parents voiced concern that disabilities themselves might be contagious.

Mainstreaming

In 1987 I began to teach a special education kindergarten, first-, and second-grade class in the same elementary school where I had taught preschool. This time my "cross categorical" self-contained classroom included children who "looked different"—such as children with cerebral palsy or Down syndrome—but also children who did not have noticeable disabilities.

Within our classroom, in spite of the range of ages (five- to eight-year-olds), the children developed a strong social and learning community, accepting each other's skills and struggles in surprising and supportive ways. It was clear to me, however, that it was also stigmatizing for the children to be separated from their age-level peers—to belong to a "special" classroom, sit together as a class at lunch time, and play separately during recess. We were nearby but distinctly different, with all the subtle meanings that can have for children in a school community.

I also felt isolated from the elementary school teachers, who were either uninterested in or actively hostile toward special education practice. The special education law now required children from my self-contained special education class to be "mainstreamed" (as it was then called) into general education classrooms during specific times each week.

But children had to be "ready" for mainstreaming—that is, at the same academic level in a particular subject as children in the general education classrooms. Since few children in my self-contained classroom could participate in the general education academic instruction, they would be routinely scheduled for mainstreaming during physical education, music, or art, or a "choice" or "play" period. Ramon, a shy child, went reluctantly every Tuesday for a half hour to Ms. D's class, but Ms. D. said he only played with the Legos and never spoke to anyone. Denise, a vibrant kindergartner, played in the dress-up area mostly by herself. And Tony dumped the toys on the floor and was not asked back.

Everyone in my school, including me, saw that this was a misguided approach to fostering educational equity. Asking a child from an established social group—my classroom—to enter another fully functioning social group—the general education classroom—was sort of like inviting someone to a cocktail party full of strangers where everyone else knows each other. How could we ask that of a child who was already struggling with language and social interactions?

Toward Inclusion

During the late 1980s a new movement for educational change swept the country: the regular education initiative (REI) proposed the unification and redesign of general and special education systems so that all children would be served in general education settings (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1986). It was during this period that the term "inclusion" came into use, meaning that all children, regardless of disability, would be taught in general education classrooms and would receive all their special services there.

In 1992 a court case affirmed that inclusion in general education classes is a right, not a privilege, and that children could no longer be excluded because of their cognitive or physical disabilities (Oberti v. Clementon, CA). But again, as with every legal step forward, the complexities of the issue became more apparent. Should or could all children with disabilities really be included in general education classrooms?

In 1989 I moved with my self-contained special education K–2 class to a different elementary school in the same school district. Again the class was cross categorical and multiage, and the children had many different kinds of disabilities. Although the children in this class were significantly more disabled than in my previous classes, the atmosphere in this new school was more welcoming, with strong parental support and a school administration and teaching staff ready to take on the challenge of the REI initiative and inclusion.

At this point in my career I fully supported the inclusion movement, feeling that there was no other way for children with disabilities to be completely integrated into their school communities. With grants from New York State and collaborative planning with several committed general education teachers, we moved toward the goal of full inclusion for my students.

Over a three-year period, the students in my self-contained classroom, with all of their unique personalities and various disabilities, became a real part of the school community; there were visits back and forth between both general and special education settings, and half-day placements in general education classrooms for some children, including Rudy, the boy with Down syndrome whom I'd watched playing football. By the third year, some of the most disabled children in my class were fully included in general education classes, with minimal support from me or other special education personnel.

The Benefits and Challenges of Inclusion

There were many positive results to this experiment. The children with disabilities now truly "belonged" to the general education classrooms, starting the day there and taking part in all class activities; they were identified as members of the class, not visitors from a separate and specialized setting. There were positive outcomes for the included children, in spite of their very complex needs.

Serena, a child with a range of neurological disorders, learned to keep her lips together to control her saliva because she realized that the other girls didn't want to sit next to her if she couldn't manage this task. While such a skill is not always under a child's control, Serena was able to accomplish one of her longstanding goals in this general education setting and to establish friendships with other children.

There were positive effects on the children in general education as well. Many of these children, with the help of thoughtful guidelines, honest discussions, and the model of caring teachers, came to understand the special qualities and strengths of the children with disabilities, defending them against bullying in the playground and finding ways to include them in class programs and everyday activities.

The inclusion of children with such a wide range of abilities in the classroom—children who worked hard to accomplish the most basic academic tasks—also helped make some of the most competitive and capable children more aware of the range of human development and of the power of hard work.

There were also ways in which the whole school community benefited. I remember one teacher especially, a veteran of many years, whose style and methods were firmly established for the range of typically developing children he had taught. At the end of the year he told me that he would never teach the same way again and that having Bobby in his class had been the most profound learning experience of his career.

Of course there were problems. For all the good will that most of the children expressed, there were still incidents of cruelty, teasing, and taking advantage of a child's naïveté, as when a boy was induced to take down his pants because someone else said it was the right thing to do. I worried that Serena had stopped making progress in math because her level of understanding was so different from that of her classmates. And there was the nagging thought that the newly included children had left behind the

deep social connections—the friendships that had emerged, the shared play dates and birthday parties—that they had formed over two years in our multiage, multiskilled classroom.

Parents themselves had different points of view about inclusion. For every parent who insisted on full inclusion for her or his child—like the mother who said to me that she "didn't want her daughter to audit life"—there were others who wanted their children to have the individualized instruction provided in self-contained classrooms.

The goal of the inclusion movement at this time was aimed toward social integration, and there were few real attempts to adapt curricula for the included children's individual needs. The major accommodation in most classes was the addition of a one-on-one classroom aide to support the included child. My own role as a special educator was unclear. It was much more difficult to collaborate in another teacher's classroom, no matter how welcoming he or she was, than to teach in my own.

Although the inclusion experience had profoundly changed the beliefs and attitudes of this school community toward disability, I was also aware of the complexities and imperfections of our progress, perhaps especially for the children with disabilities themselves. They were no longer separated and apart, but were they also getting a truly individualized education that would appropriately develop their unique capacities and lead to outcomes that were meaningful for them?

Enduring Struggles

Ironically, my last teaching assignment demonstrated the persistence of the troubling patterns that had emerged as unintended consequences of the special education law enacted 20 years before. Back at my original elementary school, I taught a newly formed self-contained special education class for children who were not "making it" in their general education classroom.

The group, mostly boys, was again made up of children identified as having various kinds of disabilities, and included several children who were labeled "emotionally disturbed." None of these children had the degree of physical or cognitive disability of the children who had been successfully "included" in my last school setting; yet in this school in the same district it was determined that these children needed a separate special education classroom placement in order to learn.

Following national patterns of disproportionate representation, African Americans and Latinos made up the majority of the class. The older boys in this new class were resentful and clearly ashamed of being placed in this "special" classroom—this time housed in an unused storage room on the third floor of the school, far away from their general education peers. My job, it seemed to me, was to keep them quiet and allow the general education staff to get back to teaching.

My students were unique and endearing children, but it was also exceedingly challenging to form them into a viable classroom community and to help them grow academically. The renewed focus on educational accountability was just beginning, and IEP goals for the first time had to be written as

grade-level curriculum outcomes. It was a year of frustration as I tried to keep up with different grade-level curricula in each area and to provide three different levels of homework each day.

I remember Frederico especially, a Latino fourth grader who had missed a lot of school in previous years in order to accompany his father back to Guadalajara for the winter migrant farming season. This year he was staying home, taking care of his mother and little brothers during their father's absence. I could see that Frederico was capable and very proud; it was hard for him to acknowledge his problems with learning to read.

But he did learn to read that year, in spite of the many challenges in our classroom. I was shocked to see him two years later, still in a separate special education class in another school; special education had become a long-term placement for him—which, in my opinion, did not provide him an appropriate education. If my earlier teaching assignment had shown me some of the promises of inclusion, this class clearly demonstrated the inequalities of a self-contained classroom. I understood even more clearly how a special education placement could be used to marginalize and stigmatize children and undermine their expectations of themselves.

In this teaching assignment I also had to question my beliefs about the feasibility of developing a strong learning community in a class that included children with serious emotional and behavioral problems. For two of these children, whose anxiety, anger, and aggression resulted in continuous classroom disruption, it seemed that something radically different from my classroom might be necessary.

But what would that look like? In order to provide them with the intensive support necessary to realign their relationship with school, their families, and themselves, should they be sent away to an even more restrictive environment, without the models of other more typically developing children? At this time there were few alternatives in place and only a dim recognition of the need for different systemic approaches designed for our most troubled children.

At the end of my classroom teaching career, we had come closer to an understanding of the least restrictive environment, but still had much to learn about accommodating children's learning needs in order to give those children access to an appropriate education within that environment. In the following decade, accountability and a focus on educational outcomes would continue to shape the progression of educational policy.

Toward the Future

After I left teaching to become an advisor at Bank Street (1995–2008), I observed a new wave of educational reform, embodied most recently by the accountability movement of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The reauthorization in 2004 of the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) furthered the notion of outcome-based education for children with disabilities as well.

Many more children with disabilities are now included in general education classes, and general and special education teachers are collaborating in a variety of ways to provide differentiated instruction. Many special education instructional methods, especially in early literacy, are now part of the standard teaching repertoire of general education teachers (National Reading Panel, 2000). Identification of children's learning needs can be accomplished through the classroom-based [Response to Intervention](#) (RTI) method instead of through individualized testing, and special education services can be provided based on documented learning needs instead of labels (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeir, & LeFever, 2008).

In response to many critiques of special education practice (Skrtic, 1995; McLaughlin, 2010) special education approaches have shifted from focusing on an individual child's deficits to providing both accommodations in the learning environment and specific learning interventions. As most children with disabilities are held to the same curricular standards and participate in the same assessments as other children their age, the school establishment is necessarily being drawn into a reorganization of the roles of special education and general education teachers in the name of accountability and educational equity. With increasingly limited funds, and growing demands for educational improvement, the expertise of all teachers is under attack, even as new research helps us develop a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction for different ages, curriculum areas, and processing patterns (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Lee, Wehmayer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010).

After 35 years as an educator, as I look into the future, it seems to me that effective collaboration remains the most essential component in our society's journey toward a more inclusive educational system. Certainly my best educational experiences occurred as a result of honest collaboration with parents and with general and special education colleagues over ways to help all children achieve their full potential, whatever their developmental pathways.

I think with awe about the collaboration and instructional analysis we now expect from general and special educators in today's complex educational environment, with so many more children with disabilities placed in general education classrooms. How can we promote effective collaboration among all stakeholders in a way that is meaningful, systematic, and as valued by society as other accountability measures are today?

One promising approach, RTI, emerged from the 2004 reauthorizaton of IDEA. This systematic way of ascertaining children's needs for more extensive educational support is based on a child's response to a particular kind of teaching; in its best form, RTI can be a strong tool to promote collaboration among a school-wide educational staff, overriding the need for disability labeling and providing increasingly targeted instruction within the structure of general education.

As discussed by Fuchs, Fuchs & Stecher (2010), special educators and general educators must collaborate on the successive tiers of RTI, and highly trained special educators can take over the most intensive interventions, especially for the most disabled students. All teachers should begin their

careers with a background in general education curriculum and instruction as well as a thorough understanding of difference and differentiation. Special education preparation could then become an extension for only the most experienced and effective classroom teachers (Brownell et al., 2010).

An Unresolved Problem

The education of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities continues to be an unresolved problem for our society, and those children from my self-contained classroom continue to haunt me. In the intervening years schools have become more effective at dealing with children's behavioral issues, especially in elementary school, through mandated system-wide behavioral plans (Lane et al., 2007).

But our understanding of mental illness has also grown. Experts in the field have developed a range of approaches based on differing physiological/psychological profiles and understand the critical importance of starting effective treatment at an early age (Insel, 2010).

Based on compelling research about the negative outcomes for children who show learning and behavioral problems in their early formative years (Stacks, 2005) and the paucity of research demonstrating effective interventions for middle school and older children (Lane, Kalberg, & Shepcaro, 2009), it seems imperative to address emotional and behavioral issues as early as possible through a fully funded early intervention system.

The goal of educational equity should begin at birth, combining the many different service systems for families and young children, so that truly universal early childhood education can be used as the inclusive entry point for all children in our society (Bruder, 2010). Just as we have used the information about effective early literacy instruction to improve reading performance for all children in the early grades, so must we continue to develop evidence-based early intervention programs to help young children and their families develop positive emotional and learning health, thereby making the overall educational system more functional and cost effective (Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011).

Learning from the Past

During my lifetime, children with disabilities moved from "hidden" to "visible but apart" to "included" in schools and communities. As the educational focus has shifted in the intervening years to accountability and outcomes, it may be informative to look at the adult lives of that first generation of included children whom I taught during my career as an educator.

Tyler, the child with spina bifida, went to general education classes in the elementary school across from his home that his siblings attended and for six years got himself up and down three flights of stairs because the building was not accessible for wheelchairs. He was the only child attending general education classes using a wheelchair for most of his 12 years of schooling. In our school district, he was the face of inclusion. But I sometimes ask myself if Tyler also needed to identify with other children who

used wheelchairs—if he was included in his academic schooling but isolated in his everyday physical experience.

Warren, the preschooler who appeared to be on the autistic spectrum, was also a full participant in general education classes throughout his schooling, mostly without a label and without special services. When he was an adolescent, he told me that other kids thought he was "strange." However, in middle and high school he became an outstanding actor and singer and appeared with great success in many school productions. He went on to major in math and physics in college and is now a faculty researcher at a well-known institution.

If he had actually been diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, and that early label had followed him through school, would it have limited his choices and defined him in a different way? Very possibly. And yet, without the subsequent use of this label for other children and the research and programming that it has promoted, society's deeper understanding of autism spectrum disorders would never have become as widespread as it is today.

And for the other children with more severe disabilities who had been included in 1993? Rudy and his classmates were part of general education classes for some of their schooling, but also went in and out of self-contained classes during their middle and high school years. Most did not graduate with a diploma. Now Rudy lives independently in his community and has a job at the supermarket and a wide range of acquaintances. His closest and most authentic relationships are those with his family and with his peers from the early general education classrooms that included him. His mother says that he seems to avoid other people with disabilities.

Serena's disability progressed as she grew older. As with other young people who leave home after high school or college, when Serena's schooling ended she went to live in an adult group home—at this point a normalizing experience for her. Serena's family worked hard to find an excellent facility that gave her independence and expanded her world after she left home. However, there are very few placements (private or otherwise) appropriate for young people with multiple disabilities. For many of these young adults, life after 21 can be a hazardous experience, without the rights and oversight provided by the special education laws.

If there is a lesson to be learned from these children's experience, it is, unsurprisingly, that each child and family has their individual pathway, and that each point of view has its opposite reality. The least restrictive environment can only be defined in terms of the individuality of a child's overall needs at different points in time, not as a place but as a continuum of services that supports the child's educational and adaptive needs as well.

We are still learning how to provide appropriate accommodations and instructional interventions for the entire range of children who are now included learners in our schools, and our ability to truly

differentiate instruction in different curricular areas is still far from developed (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010).

Although many problems remain, it is also true that in the past 50 years US society has become a more inclusive place, with a general acceptance of people with disabilities that would have been unheard of in the 1950s. I look back on my early years of teaching as a time that captured the hearts and minds of the educational and social community in terms of beliefs about disability.

From the edges of society, from separated classes, toward a more situated presence informed by the members of the disability community itself, children with disabilities are now part of the educational fabric of our society. Their presence has indeed extended the scope of educational practice and human resourcefulness to address their needs, and we as a society have benefited from their gifts.

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Doing The Civil Right Thing:
Supporting Children With Disabilities In Inclusive Classrooms

David J. Connor & Kristen Goldmansour

Setting

Fourth-grade inclusive classroom in a New York City neighborhood school, 2011

The room has two desks for teachers and several tables at which students sit in groups of four. The walls are covered with children's self-portraits, teacher-made charts of important content information and strategies for solving problems, vocabulary lists, student-created pie-charts of their multiple intelligences, and lists of class rules.

Characters

Ms. Fansler, a general educator in her late 40s. She has over twenty years of experience and has taught many of the parents of the children in her current class.

Ms. Chavez, a special educator in her mid 20s. She is in her second year of teaching and is enthusiastic about her role of supporting all students, particularly those who struggle the most.

Jayson, an excitable boy who switches topics of conversation very rapidly. His mother describes him as being "all over the place."

Kyoko, a mild-mannered, quiet girl who listens attentively to teacher directions, yet always watches how other students respond and follows their lead. She is the type of student who is often overlooked.

Trevor, a quirky, knowledgeable boy who usually keeps to himself, preferring not to join in group activities.

Twenty-two other *students* from diverse backgrounds, equally divided between boys and girls.

Opening Scene

Students are working in pairs at their tables, using dice, game boards, counters, and index cards to play math games. Two children are working on a class computer at the side of the room, using virtual manipulatives from a math education website. Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez nod toward each other, signifying that it is time to transition to the next period of the day. Ms. Fansler flashes the lights, a cue for students to become aware of the impending transition.

Ms. Chavez (to whole class): It's time to... Stop! (puts hands out in front of her)..... Look! (points to her eyes)…. Listen (cups both ears)!

Ms. Fansler: Okay, everyone. Please end your math games and put the materials back into the baggies. One of the partners put the baggies back on the math shelf, and everyone else come join us on the rug for Reader's Workshop.

The children begin to move in many directions. The teachers move quickly and purposefully to be in close proximity to Trevor and Jayson and to provide additional prompts if necessary. Trevor begins to show signs of anxiety about the transition. He does not put away his materials and argues with his partner that he has not finished the game. His partner looks confused and is at a loss as to what to do.

Ms. Fansler helps Trevor finish and clean up. En route to Jayson, Ms. Chavez stoops to help pick up dominoes dropped by another child, and Jayson starts to wander about the room. He ends up by the closets, opens the doors, and randomly examines what is on the shelves. He stands far away from the rug. Meanwhile, Kyoko is carefully observing her partner to see where she is going, and moves slowly, without speaking, toward the other children. She is one of the last to arrive at the rug.

Ms. Chavez (from across the room, direct but encouraging): Jayson, move to the rug.

Ms. Fansler (to Trevor): That's right, Trevor. All pieces in the bag. I'm glad that you like this game so much. Maybe you can do it again at the end of the day when you finish doing your science work.

Trevor's face conveys a mixture of being upset and angry.

Hearing Ms. Chavez's prompt, Jayson walks toward the rug. On his way he accidentally knocks over a basket of books, picks them up quickly, and then steps through the group of seated children to "his spot" at the back of the rug. Here he has a little more room to wiggle and likes the feel of the wall against his back. Kyoko sits nearby, eyes following the teachers' every movement.

Ms. Fansler (to Trevor): Thank you for cleaning up with everyone else, Trevor. Take a minute to get ready for the rug, and come join us as soon as you can.

Ms. Chavez (to Ms. Fansler): Shall we begin the minilesson?

Ms. Fansler (to class). Yes, I think we're all ready.

Exclusion as a Civil Wrong

The few minutes of classroom time described above symbolize an important shift in how educators have come to understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to differences among students. Over the last 25 years there has been slow but consistent growth in the numbers of inclusive classrooms designed to meet the needs of children with and without disabilities. In previous decades, Trevor and Jayson might have been placed in segregated settings for all or part of their school day, separated from their nondisabled peers—or even perhaps sent to "special schools" in other parts of the city. Kyoko, on the other hand, would likely have been in general education classes, but without any supports and services.

The history of inclusive education has all of the ingredients of an epic drama: fascinating stories, rich details, high-stakes legal cases, warring factions, ideological battles, unexpected developments, many success stories, and a share of tragedies. In some respects, from the start inclusion could be characterized as a three-steps-forward and two-steps-back process, subject to the push and pull of competing forces.

The actual impetus for the inclusion movement was the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, pioneered by African Americans who mobilized to protest their marginal status in comparison to European Americans. The effort to secure greater access to all that society offered resonated with other marginalized groups, including women, homosexuals, and people with disabilities.

In the disability rights movement, parents were instrumental in aggressively seeking opportunities for their children with disabilities to forge a better quality of life. It is through the actions of parents that the landmark *Education of All Handicapped Children Act* (PL.94-142) was passed in 1975. This law ensured an education for all children with disabilities and established local education authorities (LEAs) responsible for its implementation.

However, although schools created programs for children with disabilities, those children were often placed in segregated "special education" classes, corridors, or buildings. The inclusion movement grew in response to these segregated facilities that served as a form of educational apartheid, separating disabled and nondisabled children from one another. Instead of requesting that their children be included in general education settings, proponents claimed that it was their children's *civil right* to be educated within a diverse classroom, one that truly mirrored the nation's population.

Having the perspective that *all* children are equal citizens within our democracy helps educators understand why parents usually prefer inclusive settings (Fleisher & Zames, 2001). At the same time, we acknowledge the challenges—especially the complexity of collaboration—involved in creating inclusive classroom environments for all children.

Making Inclusion Work: Teacher Collaboration

Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez understand the premise of inclusive classrooms. They do not think in terms of "my kids" and "your kids," but rather share the responsibility for ensuring that all the children in their classroom learn. Both teachers acknowledge that this collaboration is not always easy, nor typical in their school. In the following sections we describe some of the ways in which they have worked together to create their inclusive classroom.

Before They Taught Together: Creating a Partnership

When Ms. Chavez and Ms. Fansler found out that they were assigned to teach with one another, they both had expectations and ideas about how to make their partnership work. As the general educator, Ms. Fansler had taught collaboratively with several special education teachers over the previous decade.

Although only in her first year at the time, Ms. Chavez had been "learning the collaborative ropes" with another general educator and had a broad sense of what worked, what needed work, and what would not work.

Both Ms. Chavez and Ms. Fansler agreed that, before partnering, it would be beneficial to observe each other teaching in order to gain a sense of their two teaching styles in action. After being guests in each other's classrooms, they met for a long discussion during which they described what they saw, what was successful, how students responded, and so on. They also compared their own learning and teaching styles, identifying similarities and differences, and also spoke about their own strengths and weaknesses.

In addition, during this time they shared their belief systems about educating all children and discussed how, as partners, they would share all responsibilities. Their administrator provided them with a list of topics developed by Cook and Friend (1996) (see Figure 1), and together they discussed each area that the two researchers had identified. Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez noted that some areas were "common sense," others were familiar practices, and still others were new to them. They were pleased to have a framework for planning their collaborative classroom, as it provided guidance and encouraged them to prioritize and develop practices they determined would be crucial for success.

In brief, Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez were relieved that they did not have to create their inclusive classroom from scratch and were able to gain a sense of how they would begin to work collaboratively. Eventually, they would come to use all six of the coteaching models that Cook and Friend described, noting how some were particularly suitable for individualized instruction, some were better for group lessons, and some were better for whole class work (see Figure 2). In conversations, they acknowledged that coteaching requires a division of labor that values and maximizes differing areas of expertise (such as writing Individualized Education Programs). As with most partnerships, both teachers realized that thinking through how to manage theirs would take more time than they had originally anticipated, and they decided to meet once a week for a month in preparation for teaching together.

As They Taught Together: Reflecting on Practice

Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez also found that getting together each week during the school year to reflect on their coteaching was as important as their preplanning had been. At those weekly meetings, both teachers evaluated which aspects of the lessons were going well and which were in need of improvement, discussed any students who were "on the radar" for whatever reason, worked on solving problems that had arisen, and of course, mapped out the following week—including who was responsible for which tasks. Through assessing which instructional methods and modifications were working for Jayson, Kyoko, and Trevor (and for other students, both with and without IEPs), Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez determined what changes they needed to make in their practice.

Viewed by both teachers as a "sacred space," the weekly meeting was a place where they honored a commitment to planning, revisited the multiple demands involved in coteaching, and focused upon the most important tasks at hand, asking themselves: How do we maintain and improve our inclusive classroom? What can be done differently to support students academically, socially, and emotionally? By keeping these questions in mind, and honoring their arrangement, Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez were able to coplan more effectively than they had with previous teaching partners.

Strategies for Access

Forming a partnership and reflecting on their practice were both in service of the heart of their work— the daily strategies they implemented to make learning accessible to all of their students. At the beginning of the semester, both teachers reviewed their class roster to verify which children had IEPs. Ms. Chavez then reviewed the IEPs and subsequently created an individual profile on a single sheet of paper (serving as a "snapshot") for each of those students, noting ways in which Jayson, Kyoko, and Trevor (as well as other children) would require additional supports and services (see Figure 3).

Together, the teachers talked about each student's needs. While it was important (and legally necessary) for the teachers to know the official categorization of the children's disabilities, they also understood that a disability label is a double-edged sword. On one hand, labels can give parents, teachers, and even students themselves information about a particular "difference" (Mooney 2007; Robison, 2007; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001). On the other hand, a label can unduly influence how individuals of all ages are perceived within a deficit-based framework, emphasizing what they cannot do (Reid & Valle, 2004). Although Ms. Fansler found labels interesting, she believed in seeing and working with children herself before ascribing the perceived characteristics that accompany categories.

Jayson, for example, had been determined to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). His ability to focus fluctuated dramatically. Kyoko was identified as learning disabled (LD). She experienced difficulties in processing auditory language and also struggled in using expressive language, both orally and in writing. Trevor was recognized as having Asperger's syndrome (AS). He exhibited a significant discrepancy between advanced academic skills and basic social interactions.

Knowing this information about their students helped both teachers plan, using the principles of [universal design for learning](#) (UDL). The concept of universal design originated in architecture, and stresses that all buildings, from their inception, should be designed to provide access to all community members, thereby negating the need to retrofit the existing structure. In applying the same principle to learning, teachers design lessons that provide all students access to learning, thereby allowing all children entry points into lessons, opportunities to be engaged, interactions to facilitate processing information, and choices to provide evidence of learning.

For example, providing six minutes for all students to have a "quickwrite" about a common topic they know (such as when they feel happiest) allows children to gather their thoughts, write at their own pace,

and choose the format (such as sentences, paragraphs, bulleted points, lists, poems, or phrases) they prefer. Once they have completed the quickwrite, all the students have the opportunity to share their thoughts about the topic because all of them are now prepared (albeit in different ways) to participate.

In addition to creating their lesson plans using UDL principles, Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez employed a range of individualized strategies throughout the day to support their students. While the teachers designed them specifically for students like Jayson, Kyoko, and Trevor, these strategies were often beneficial to many other children in the class as well.

A Selection of Strategies in Action

Jayson

Seating options. Not long into the semester Ms. Chavez provided Jayson with a visual menu of seating options so that he could make an effective choice about sitting through a large group lesson (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). This menu included sitting close to the teacher, being able to lean on a shelf or table nearby, standing at the back of the rug, or choosing a chair. A smaller version of the visual menu was posted near the meeting areas, as a reminder for Jayson to make a good choice. Although Jayson wanted to move most of the time, these limited options provided him with the opportunity to become more comfortable sitting (temporarily) and therefore more receptive to learning.

Movement Breaks. Interestingly, both teachers noticed how Jayson was able to focus better while (or after) moving. Ms. Chavez accordingly created options for movement breaks that included stretching, carrying materials, doing exercises, or taking crab walks. Depending on his energy level, Jayson was either asked if he needed—or was directed to take—a movement break. Afterward, he could choose his best listening spot. This brief strategic interlude meant that Jayson would most likely be the last student to arrive at the rug, minimizing or eliminating his waiting time.

Participation card/focusing techniques. Although both Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez used a range of cues effectively to help students stay on task (including nonverbal hand gestures, verbal prompts, and gently touching shoulders), they determined that Jayson needed additional support. Furthermore, they wanted him to use refocusing techniques that involved self-monitoring so that he could eventually internalize and therefore own a strategy to help him focus and remember to participate (Iseman, Silverman, & Jeweler, 2010). Ms. Fansler made up an individualized card for Jayson that stated that the area he was currently working on was to "determine importance" and "identify one or two key ideas." Subsequently, he improved both in participation in class discussions and in keeping on topic.

Kyoko

Previewing and priming. A quiet child who never called attention to herself, Kyoko could easily be overlooked. However, as an individual with auditory processing problems, she was a student who

greatly benefited from previewing information, thereby priming her brain to "get ready to learn" (Jensen, 2005).

Ms. Fansler realized that Kyoko needed to preview key vocabulary and instructional materials and to have the opportunity to connect prior knowledge to new content before she could actively participate in class. At the start of a language arts class, she told Kyoko: "We are going to learn about *prediction*. This is a type of guess using information you already know." Ms. Fansler gave Kyoko a simple laminated index card and customized a message for her, using an erasable marker (see Figure 4). The highlighted words were permanently on the card, and those beneath were created for the specific lesson. Since being given this support, when Kyoko left minilessons to do her independent work, she knew which information was important and exactly what to do.

Participation card/verbal prompts. Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez were aware that they needed to both "provide the language" to students who did not participate sufficiently in class discussions and to enhance their understanding of content (Tobin, 2005). For example, practicing verbal prompts that model possible responses allowed Kyoko to anticipate the language necessary for her verbal participation in a particular lesson.

Verbal prompts were also listed on a prominently displayed poster; they included: "I agree with…," "I don't agree with…," "I was wondering about…," and "I don't understand the part when…". After implementing this strategy, the teachers observed that Kyoko was not only using the targeted language but opening up in general, noticeably making more verbal contributions to the class.

Check-in. After Ms. Fansler gave directions, Ms. Chavez noticed that sometimes a few students appeared confused and needed clarification about what they were expected to do. Kyoko was one of these students and required time to "reboot" in order to switch activities. To avoid having Kyoko become stuck within in a transition, Ms. Chavez purposefully checked in with her (and with other students), seemingly at random, to make sure that they knew what the next task was and how to complete it (Meltzer, 2010).

Trevor

Visual schedule and written directions. Ms. Chavez decided that to support Trevor's transition between lessons and his readiness for work, he needed a visual schedule or checklist in the room (Reiff, 2005). Along with Ms. Fansler, she decided that it would be a good idea to create a class version to be universally implemented, and made a large visual schedule that contained pictures and words and included an arrow to show the sequence of activities. Once posted on the wall, this visual reminder proved to be helpful for all students. Trevor was then given a personal schedule, customized to help him prepare for ending activities and shifting to the next task.His schedule showed clearly what the expectations were for "finishing up" (e.g., placing materials on the correct shelf, putting his work in his class cubby, and making sure his desk was clear), and which activity followed.

Timers and clocks. Children often do not have a completed product when a classroom activity has ended. Both teachers were therefore aware that setting a timer at the beginning of an activity could help convey the related concepts of "being finished" and "having to stop working," and could benefit all the students. Placing the class timer next to Trevor and his partner allowed them to track how much time they had left, set goals in relation to how they could best use that time, and countdown to help Trevor anticipate the signal for transition and prepare for stopping the game.

Break system. Ms. Chavez noted that Trevor, like Jayson, had trouble maintaining interest, focus, and motivation to sustain independent work. She recognized that Trevor often needed to engage with topics that were of particular interest to him, which essentially served to recharge his battery for working on topics that interested him less. She therefore established a break system with him, setting goals around chunks of work but also allowing him to alternate between the required task and self-selected activities that interested him more. Once he could switch between tasks, Trevor demonstrated better self-regulation and was able to sustain his attention to focus on schoolwork (Betts, Betts, & Gerber-Eckard, 2007).

Implications for the Field

As two career-long educators working in inclusive classrooms in New York City, we know the challenges of creating and maintaining such settings and the many forces that can detract from, inhibit, and even purposefully impede success. Nevertheless, we remain committed to inclusive education.

Citizenship Within a Democracy

Twenty years ago, Skrtic wrote, "Special Education…[is] the profession that emerged in twentieth-century America to contain the failure of public education to educate its youth for a full political, economic, and cultural participation in a democracy" (1991, p. 24). The alternative to inclusive education has been segregation, a tacit acceptance of attrition for students "marked" with disabilities. With segregation comes devaluation, a loss in cultural capital for individuals. This form of disempowerment actively disadvantages students who have been labeled as disabled. Statistics on the overrepresentation of students of color in disability categories, high dropout rates, unemployment, underemployment, and incarceration are testimony to system that fails too many of its citizens (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The goal of schools should be to give all citizens access to knowledge and skills that provide them with the power to negotiate our complicated world and ultimately become employed. Furthermore, students should learn with, and from, each other—coming to know true diversity in terms of physical, cognitive, sensory, and emotional differences. In this way, artificial notions of "normalcy" that have served to diminish and devalue "disabled" children for so long can begin to change. As microcosms of society, classrooms must come to reflect, exemplify, and engage with actual diversity within America's population.

Teachers as Partners

In many ways, Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez's classroom may appear idealized. We acknowledge that developing strong, professional relationships may not come easily or quickly to educators who have been enculturated into working alone.

At the same time, we have seen enough classrooms like theirs to know that they can and do exist. When they do, they are created by teachers who engage in reflection about their practices, driven by a constant desire to improve their own skills in order to better coplan, coteach, and coevaluate their students. Over time, those teachers come to learn how to both give and take, when to step forward and when to step back, when to lead and when to follow. In sum, they learn by experiencing partnership with a fellow professional, as is required in other fields, such as medicine, science, law, and law enforcement. Sharing the responsibilities, challenges, and rewards of teaching provides ongoing, job-embedded real-life professional development. Such experiences are organic to each situation, and call upon both educators to prioritize a shared focus on the children they instruct.

We also recognize that teachers need committed support from administrators to grow and sustain collaborative practices. Educators in schools where coteaching is not working must ask, "Why is it failing?" If certain elements are missing, then the likelihood of success is significantly reduced. Research on successful inclusive classrooms emphasizes the importance of examining educator beliefs and values (Villa & Thousand, 1995), applying the principles of universal design for learning to their practice (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002), promoting professional collaboration (Friend, 2005), building community (Sapon-Shevin, 2007), and challenging ableism—the discrimination against people with disabilities (Hehir, 2005). All educators must be aware of these factors and evaluate what can be changed in their school in order to collectively move in the direction of inclusive education.

Using Individualized Strategies

It is perhaps stating the obvious that learning is a highly complex phenomenon for all individuals and that within any classroom, students learn in many different ways. A major fear of both traditional special educators and many parents of children with disabilities has been that specialized attention will fall by the wayside on the superhighway of general education. We understand these concerns and the anxiety about the potential for losing something that was fought hard for and is assured by law: individualized instruction for students with disabilities.

However, we assert that inclusive classrooms predicated on universal design actively incorporate individualization on an as-needed basis. In Ms. Fansler and Ms. Chavez's class, Jayson, Kyoko, and Trevor all received attention and customized support for their academic or behavioral needs. Throughout the year, both teachers monitored the children's progress and adapted their strategies. At various times, for example, they knew that Jayson might need fewer breaks or more; Kyoko might internalize some sentence starters, and different ones could then be taught; and Trevor might begin to

generate his own checklists. The concept of individualized instruction is not lost, but actively encouraged—and expected—in an inclusive classroom that is grounded in pedagogical flexibility.

In closing, while much can be written about inclusive classrooms, we have focused on three broad areas inextricably intertwined when considering the *why* and *how* of supporting inclusive classrooms; the value of having classrooms that mirror the diversity of our society; collaborative teaching; and using individualized strategies. We believe that each area merits further exploration and discussion within school communities that are earnestly seeking to maximize equal access to education for all children within our democracy. For us, creating inclusive classrooms is the civil right thing to do.

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Figure 1: Precollaboration Discussion Topics

	Topic	Examples of Questions to Consider
1	Instructional Content	▪ What has been selected, and why? ▪ What are some other potential sources of content?
2	Planning	▪ How do we each usually plan? (How have we each planned in the past?) ▪ How often should we meet? ▪ What should be the goals of our planning session? ▪ How will we "chunk" planning lessons and units?
3	Instructional Format	▪ How should the content be taught? ▪ · What are some methods that we each prefer?
4	Parity	▪ How will we establish equality in the classroom? ▪ How will we maintain equality in the classroom?
5	Space	▪ What are some possible furniture arrangements that we can use to support different learning experiences? ▪ How can we provide the maximum access to students who use a wheelchair?
6	Routines	▪ Who will do what? (Start lessons, signal transitions, check notebooks, collect and grade homework?)
7	Noise	▪ What rules/reactions should we have when the noise level becomes too loud?
8	Discipline	▪ What will be our mutually agreed-upon policy that will show a united team? ▪ How can we avoid "good teacher"/"bad teacher" situations?
9	Feedback	▪ When and how can we dialogue about how the lesson went?
10	Student Evaluation	▪ What are the ways that will be used to evaluate students?
11	Teaching Chores	▪ Who will do daily tasks such as taking attendance, setting up the technology, checking supplies, or cleaning the board?
12	Confidentiality	▪ What will be agreed upon in terms of confidentiality and trust?
13	Pet Peeves	▪ What are some things that each of us can't stand? (It helps to learn about these early on.)
14	Other issues?	▪ Is there anything we've missed?

Source: Modified from Cook and Friend (1996)

Figure 2: Advantages of Coteaching Models with Class Configurations

Format	Class Configurations	Advantages
One Teach, One Observe	▪ Whole Class	▪ Provides a systematic observation/data-collection system ▪ Creates the opportunity to switch roles ▪ Facilitates individual assistance to students ▪ Allows teachers to gauge student engagement and learning ▪ Permits teachers to give peer feedback to each other ▪ Maximizes opportunities for student learning
One Teach, One Drift	▪ Whole Class ▪ Individual	▪ Guarantees individualized attention for any student ▪ Creates the opportunity to switch roles ▪ Permits teachers to give feedback to each other ▪ Maximizes opportunities for student learning
Station Teaching	▪ Small Group ▪ Individual	▪ Provides an active learning format ▪ Increases small-group attention ▪ Encourages cooperation and interdependence ▪ Allows strategic grouping ▪ Increases response rate ▪ Permits teaching students with different aptitudes and skills ▪ Utilizes differentiated instruction ▪ May create options for student choice ▪ Allows both teachers to be perceived as equal
Parallel Teaching	▪ Half Class ▪ Individual	▪ Provides effective review format ▪ Encourages student responses ▪ Reduces pupil–teacher ratio for group instruction ▪ May encourage student competition ▪ Can accommodate students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles ▪ Allows both teachers to be perceived as equal ▪ Allows teachers to immediately check information/content area with each other
Alternative Teaching	▪ Small Group and Large Group ▪ Individual	▪ Facilitates enrichment opportunities ▪ Offers absent students time to catch up ▪ Keeps individuals and class on pace ▪ Offers time to develop missing skills ▪ Allows for integration of class transfers
Tag Team Teaching	Whole Class Individual	▪ Creates a dynamic classroom ▪ Encourages and acknowledges multiple interpretations ▪ Provides multiple opportunities for presenting information ▪ Models listening, speaking, and working collaboratively in a partnership ▪ Encompasses varying approaches

Source: Modified from Cook and Friend (1996)

Figure 3: Examples of IEP Summaries

IEP Summary: Kyoko
Student's learning profile and areas of strength: • Strong reading skills   • Strong visual skills   • Strengths in active working memory   • Self-motivated and can complete independent task   • Enjoys working with partners and small groups
Areas of need: • Weak auditory processing and therefore missing important information   • Weak word-finding skills; has a hard time forming language on demand   • Needs to improve use of "Wh" questions and to check for clarity   • Needs to expand ideas and topics during writing   • Needs to self-advocate in group activities and share ideas and thoughts
Strategies that have been successful: • Word banks and visual verbal prompting   • Structured partner activities (group jobs and responsibilities)   • Extra processing time   • Previewing and priming with visual cue prior to group activities   • Regular positive feedback specifically in regard to her verbal participation in class   • Written directions for a tasks so she can self-correct   • Graphic organizers with visual cues when necessary
Notes: Kyoko is quiet but not shy. She will often initiate a task without checking first to see if she is doing the correct task. She needs to be encouraged to ask for help and to stop and check her work using class visuals and/or peers.

IEP Summary: Jayson
Student's learning profile and areas of strength: • Diagnosed with ADHD   • Learns best with tactile and kinesthetic activities   • Strong math skills   • Decoding on grade level   • Has a lot of ideas for writing projects   • Enjoys working with partners
Areas of need: • Struggling with inference in reading   • Needs to improve independent reading and stamina; currently reading for approximately five minutes independently   • Struggles with organization of materials   • Can have a low frustration level for difficult tasks   • Needs to improve conflict resolution skills   • · Struggling with independently managing multistep tasks
Strategies that have been successful: • Breaking schedule for self-regulation and movement   • Seating options   • Hands-on multisensory materials for minilessons

- Clear positive feedback after completion of tasks
- Written directions for all tasks
- Graphic organizers with tasks broken down

Notes:

Jayson enjoys academics and has a lot of great ideas to share. He really likes working with his friends. When he gets frustrated or overstimulated it is a good idea to remind him to take a break

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IEP Summary: Trevor

Student's learning profile and areas of strength:

- Diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome
- Learns best with visual concrete presentation of materials
- Decoding above grade level, comprehension on grade level
- Good writing skills
- Enjoys participating in group discussions, especially in social studies
- Enjoys working with his friends and familiar peers

Areas of need:

- Beginning to struggle with inference in reading; can miss important information
- Needs to improve independent reading and stamina; can lose focus and engage in self-stimulatory behavior after approximately eight minutes
- Struggles with organization of materials and finishing tasks on time
- Can become very upset when transitioning, especially when ending preferred tasks and when the transition is unplanned or unexpected
- Needs to improve conversation skills with peers

Strategies that have been successful:

- Break option for self-regulation, calming down, and sensory integration
- Visual cues for abstract concepts (these should be embedded in whole class visual charts)
- Individual daily schedule with specific new information about the day
- Written directions for all tasks
- Graphic organizers with visual cues

Notes:

Trevor's independent work skills have improved a lot lately. He has mastered the use of his writing folder and the graphic organizers. This has greatly improved his ability to write independently and get all his ideas on paper. He can independently decide when he needs a break, and when the break is over he is rejoining the group activity. His next step is to be able to rejoin the group quietly and get right to work.

Figure 4: Participation Card for Kyoko

If you aren't sure what we are talking about you can:

- Check the bolded words on the white board
- Ask the teacher, "Can you repeat that?"
- Give a signal that you need a "check-in"

Overcoming Barriers To Coteaching

Seamus O'Connor

If you will not bend, your students will break.
Emily Sims, "Sharing Command of the Co-Teaching Ship: How to Play Nicely with Others"

My coteaching partner for the first three years of teaching has never let me forget that I called her insane in our first performance review together. I meant it as a compliment, though. I told our principal how grateful I was that Carol[1] was "insane enough" to grant me equal authority in planning and delivering lessons. We all laughed at the time, but we all also understood the kernel of truth inside the overstatement. The responsibility for leading a class is stressful and strenuous enough on one's own. The only thing more terrifying is giving equal authority to someone else in the room who may totally oppose your methods.

As a high school special education teacher in a New York City public school, I have seen some of the best and the worst results that [Integrated Co-Teaching](#) (ICT) can produce. I have partnered with several talented teachers of various levels of experience, including Carol, an English teacher with whom I have shared a room for all three years of my career. This ongoing partnership has given me a chance to examine the ways we approach the problems inherent in coteaching.

Every partnership has reminded me that it's much easier for general and special educators paired in ICT classrooms to carve out separate (and usually unequal) roles than to actually collaborate. In addition to entailing the risk of relinquishing authority, good-faith coteaching involves opening up your every act in the classroom to observation and commentary by another professional, questioning your fundamental beliefs about teaching and schools, confronting sharp personality differences, and changing or scrapping potentially all of your usual classroom procedures.

It may come as a surprise, then, that many teachers, special and general educators alike, have positive perceptions of coteaching (Damore & Murray, 2009; Hang & Rabren, 2009; Austin, 2001). One reason is that highly effective coteaching produces incredible results. Special and general educators believe that students with disabilities perform better academically in cotaught classrooms (Hang & Rabren; Austin). In addition, Walther-Thomas (1997) reported that all students in integrated classrooms can show signs of improved social skills and academic performance. Reports (though not specific data) from my own district support these perceptions (Office of Special Education Initiatives, 2008).

Coteaching at its best also leads to professional growth for both teachers. A partner invested in your success can help you identify blind spots in your reflection on your practice. In addition, having someone in the classroom with a complementary skill set can relieve stress about your weaknesses as a teacher. With such opportunities for increased support and professional development, it's no wonder that effective coteaching leads to higher motivation in both practitioners (Ripley, 1997). These benefits

present a strong case for taking on the challenge of overcoming the significant barriers to building a successful teaching partnership.

Laying the Foundation: Schoolwide Structural Supports

Coteachers can hold positive views of coteaching while simultaneously feeling intense frustration with the practice. They often complain about administrative direction and oversight. Numerous studies on impediments to coteaching cite the lack of collaborative planning time, administrative support, preservice and in-service training, and resources (Austin, 2001; Damore & Murray, 2009). My school's teaching staff is fortunate to have an administration committed to the success of ICT. Our principal has increased the number of teachers in the school's special education division over the last three years and doubled the number of special needs students in integrated classrooms. This rapid increase in the presence of special education students was jarring to some teachers, especially veteran general educators who had rarely been called upon to support students with Individualized Education Plans. The increasing population of students entering cotaught rooms for the first time was also caught off guard, wondering why they had two teachers and who was "in charge."

Our principal smoothed our transition by offering opportunities for inquiry and discussion as well as for professional development about better serving our integrated student body. He also instituted many ongoing administrative supports for coteaching. Teachers in our school learn in the late spring who their partners will be, allowing them to start their planning during the summer. Most importantly, coteachers are given a full 43-minute period every day to plan together. Designated common planning time is often cited as the most significant condition for effective coteaching, with at least an hour per day seen as needed for a successful partnership (Walther-Thomas, 1997). Additional planning time leads to truly collaboratively designed units and a common understanding of the goals and activities in each lesson plan. Our school also offers the rare privilege of paid overtime for planning with a coteacher.

Accountability for coteaching is firmly established as well at our school. The assistant principals for both special education and for the relevant content areas co-observe all of my ICT classes. Praise and criticism are commonly directed at how well both teachers deliver or clarify procedures and directions, at each teacher's effectiveness in preparing and employing differentiated instruction, and at the shared efforts to maintain a productive classroom atmosphere. These initiatives and feedback opportunities have made teachers more comfortable with providing differentiated instruction and participating in coteaching. As a result, our students have begun to internalize the expectation that some of their peers will be served in different ways during the same lessons.

But of course, an excellent support structure for team teaching is no guarantee of successful partnerships. Ultimately, two professionals—perhaps partnered for the first time, perhaps coteaching for the first time, perhaps entirely opposed to the idea of coteaching—must cooperate and lead a class.

Equality

Unfortunately, as Sims (2008) plainly states, in coteaching situations "[T]he special education teacher is often viewed as subordinate to the general education teacher" (p. 61). In so many partnerships, the belief of general education teachers that they can or should do most of the work in planning lessons becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Austin, 2001). I realized the hard way that waiting for a general education teacher to offer me equal authority over the class is not an effective tactic. Because integrated classrooms are not the norm at most schools, there is generally a sense that the special education teacher is "moving into" the general education classroom, especially when coteachers are partnering for the first time (Sims). When the collaboration is imbalanced, special educators have to be proactive in demonstrating their trust, faith, and capabilities in order to establish equal standing.

In my first year, I felt sometimes that my partners were not interested in giving my ideas as much weight as theirs during planning sessions. Too often I retreated, figuring that I wouldn't be heard anyway. I started using common prep periods to work on my self-contained classes. I got into the habit of reviewing lesson plans on the morning of a class, or even in some cases on the way into it. Those classes suffered terribly, with increasing failure rates among both general and special education students.

I tried to reverse this course by expressing my commitment to my shared classes, starting by asking about the everyday practices used by my partners. I made a sincere effort to show without prejudgment that I wanted to know more about how the class was governed. For example, I asked Carol why she never gave grades below 50 out of 100 on major assessments, even when the work only met 20 percent of the standards. She explained that receiving crushing grades on assignments they'd submitted could make it mathematically impossible for students to raise their average enough to pass, thereby removing their incentive to work further. When I understood and agreed to the policy, it didn't at all change the way our classroom ran, but it did establish me as an equal voice in the partnership. Carol's willingness to open her method to discussion proved that she considered me an authority on her level.

In partnerships where I felt left out of the lesson-planning process, I found that my coteachers were generally open to letting me make plans on my own if I just asked. When I took on that role, I asked my partners to review my lesson plans with me to generate discussion about what vision we had for each day or unit. This showed my commitment both to the class and to the partnership, while also clearly establishing the expectation that lessons would be planned collaboratively.

Giving Trust to Gain Trust

The critical first step of proving competence may be up to the special educator, but thereafter both teachers must build on that trust by demonstrating more faith in each other without waiting for particular reasons to do so. Otherwise, at least one partner will be unable to take the risks and make the spontaneous decisions necessary to reach the goals of each lesson. With a coteacher in the room, having mutual good faith is the only way to avoid class-wrecking divergences or collisions.

In my first semester, my coteacher and I were unsure of how to help the seniors in our multicultural literature course grasp what "culture" meant. I proposed a visual metaphor: holding an empty bag and adding an orange at a time until the students could agree that it was definitely a "bag of oranges." Then I would repeat the process, adding oranges for "music" and "holidays" until the students could agree it was a "culture." At the time, this proposal sounded sensible only to me. But my coteacher let me try it in front of two classes of students and she prompted them when my explanations weren't clear. The students picked up on her evident regard for the demonstration, and a few of them actually appeared to learn from that exercise. That particular coteacher had started the semester by admitting anxiety about teaching special education students, but she showed no lack of confidence in me or in our ability to do well for our classes.

I have thought back to that incident many times when a teaching partner has pitched an idea that sounds unrealistic to me. It helps me remember that while some lesson plans really are crazy, the people I work with aren't. Experimentation is a crucial part of learning as a teacher. The risks teachers take every time they try to connect with their students are much less daunting when another teacher is able to support the attempt, scary though it may be.

Differing Philosophies and Worldviews

It becomes much easier to trust a partner when you know where they derive their motivations and teaching philosophies from. All five teachers I've partnered with were firmly committed to teaching in low-income communities, but each had his or her own perspective. The degree to which our philosophies aligned, however, did not determine the success of each partnership. My partnership with Carol, for instance, is the greatest pleasure of my career—and her approach to teaching could hardly be further from my own. Our classes work so well because Carol and I offer each other respect, encouragement, openness, and honesty.

Carol, a lifelong New Yorker and product of both Catholic and public schools, brings an informed empathy to her teaching. By the time they reach high school, many of New York's students believe that school has little connection to their outside life, so Carol's mission is to convince them that their ideas and opinions will always be valued in her classroom. Her academic standards are high and she works to convince our students that they should expect to reach them. Carol is caring and personable, but most of all relentless in her efforts to increase our students' confidence and engagement.

My own philosophy of teaching draws from my education in the affluent suburbs of Fairfax, Virginia. My peers there and I assumed that success in high school and college was a natural and indispensable aspect of preparation for employment. I was lucky to grow up in a great school district where I never had to question the value of what I would get from my efforts in the classroom. However, because I believe in schools as the best institutions for enabling upward social mobility, I was unprepared to cope with the

jaded attitudes of some of my students. I did not expect to have to "sell" my students on the idea of school, because I didn't understand that many of them had been enrolled in failing schools for years.

Carol and I actually shared most of the same hopes and expectations for our students, but initially our basic beliefs about the way students and schools should work manifested themselves in unproductive ways. For the first few months, Carol was all carrot and I was all stick. Seeing each other as committed to an unsuccessful strategy, we each pushed even harder to have our own ideas about motivation and rewards dominate our classes.

Finding Common Ground

Our differences meant that we had to work hard to find common ground, which we were able do through intense communication in preparation for the spring semester of our first year together. We discussed our goals, our strengths and weaknesses, and our vision of the ideal classroom, but we also talked about the smaller things—for example, when students could take the bathroom pass, and whether we would accept late homework beyond a week after the due date. These basic decisions saved us from potentially disastrous conflicts and questions of authority down the line (Sims, 2008).

Because we wanted the students to see us as equal authorities, Carol and I agreed to share the talking during each lesson. In the beginning, this meant that we each carried a copy of the lesson plan with us, marked with the initials "C" or "S" to indicate who would lead each activity. This also provided a convenient way to extend our mutual respect: If one of us was dead set on trying a given activity, that person could mark it as her or his own talking-turn and take responsibility for it.

With regard to classroom procedures, to prevent confusion Carol allowed me the final authority over bathroom pass usage. We openly deferred to each other on students' attempts to submit late homework and stood by the other's opinion, so the students could see us actively compromising.

Accepting and Reflecting on Differences

Of course, we did not always agree on judgment calls made during class. For instance, Carol was more likely to repeatedly tell students to put their phones away, whereas I would try to enforce a no-strikes, hand-over-the-phone-or-see-the-deans policy. My way led to many more class interruptions and showdowns, but I was sure that it was the only way to uphold the school's ban on phone use in class.

In such instances, Carol and I used every available minute after or between classes to mutually reflect on the issue. I was embarrassed sometimes when she told me to back down, but she always explained her reasoning, and it was clear every time that she had the students' academic progress in mind. With Carol's help, I learned to read the mood of our students more subtly, and to pick my battles more effectively.

It was this pattern of mutual reflection on our differences that helped us learn how to maximize each other's strengths. Because we honestly explained our concerns and motivations after any disagreement,

we both felt comfortable taking risks in the classroom with a fellow teacher to back us up. It didn't take long to realize that if I let Carol gently remind students to put their phones away as long as they were still working, the students were more likely to surrender their phones to me if I caught them clearly slacking.

It turned out that our students (perhaps remembering my "bad cop" past) responded more quickly to my calls for attention, even if it was only for me to hand off direction of the next activity to Carol. Every discussion Carol and I had came down to two questions: Whose way is best for the students? And if our approaches are equally effective, which of us is more enthusiastic about his or her idea? We then let the more motivated coteacher run with that plan, and reflected on it again later.

During a vocabulary unit, I wanted our students to build comprehension through analogies, the method I had used to learn new terms when I was in high school. Carol wanted our students to make multicolored flash cards with images to represent each word's meaning. I let her take the lead, and found out that discussions between students over how to draw the meaning of words like "vast" or "indisputable" lead to deep understanding of the terms. I didn't believe in the power of analogies any less, but I had learned a new kind of study skill to pass along.

Even with a partner's support, the fear of blundering is constant for new teachers. For me, that meant that nothing was more comforting than frequent and honest appraisals of everything I was doing. Who better to provide that than the teacher who had seen my every move, heard my every word, and depended on them for her own success? Carol and I perfected the two-minute recalibration of a lesson between periods by getting right to the point: "Will you lead those questions next time? I confused the students." "Don't use that metaphor—they don't know what a capella groups are." We also used our paid planning time to delve into what had and hadn't worked, and helped each other by engaging in self-reflection. This type of systematic analysis not only makes each teacher more effective but also makes coteachers more capable of collaboration (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010).

Carol and I run an annual unit on the Harlem Renaissance that I wanted to improve this year by adding a more differentiated final assessment. I devised a project with five options for artistic expression of the ideas and themes studied in our unit.

My idea, though, only went as far as presenting our students with those options at the start of the unit and asking for work products at the end. Carol proposed that we spend a full day practicing each of the five options, presenting the class with a model of our own making on each day.

Carol is a talented poet and painter, and I could have let her handle all the modeling. But when I went through the process of actually writing a poem that exemplified my expectations, I recognized that there were several skills that I would have to practice with the students that hadn't occurred to me before. Carol experienced the same revelation in her preparation, and our lesson plans included much better support for our students as a result.

That experience spoke to the heart of what I think coteaching is about. Teaching with a partner can often feel simply like give-and-take at the beginning: "OK, we'll try your flashcard idea today, but you'd better not object to the way I write the test." My partnerships have started to excel when we have recognized that coteaching is not a zero-sum game. Both teachers can learn more, improve their practice, and see more success in their students during every lesson if they practice mental flexibility—finding a way to get behind an idea that they may not understand or trust initially.

More Than Preservice Preparation

The interpersonal skills required for successful collaboration develop as coteachers become more comfortable with each other personally and professionally. An opportunity also exists in education degree programs to prepare all teachers for coteaching, but it is often missed. Some of the skills required for successfully navigating teaching partnerships, such as conflict resolution strategies and templates for cooperative reflection, could be productively addressed in preservice coursework (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010; Austin, 2001). Given the continued growth of inclusion programs nationwide, there is an urgent need for teachers who can enter the field prepared to share a classroom.

But highly effective coteaching is dependent on more than preservice preparation. It starts with a clear administrative commitment to inclusion through providing planning time and forums for discussion on best practices, and continues with requiring accountability of all coteachers. From there it depends on the willingness of teachers to share authority and responsibility and to reflect on how their own philosophy and practices support student learning in concert with their partner's.

Carol and I appreciate each other's reflections so much that often our light discussions of lesson planning turn into deep analyses of how we can better reach our students or improve our school's culture. Carol once remarked that those discussions did not always produce the answers we sought, but were "good for our brains." That kind of professional growth is what makes coteaching worth overcoming all the barriers to it.

[1] "Carol" is a pseudonym. She was my coteacher of three years and an integral part of my writing process and a thoughtful collaborator during the drafting of this essay.

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From Access To Interaction:
Prioritizing Opportunities For Interpersonal And Intrapersonal Development For Children With Physical Disabilities In Inclusive Classrooms

Daniel Atkins

I am the father of a seven-year-old second grader, and the other day when my wife, Kim, and I dropped our son off at school I noticed something wonderful. It might not have seemed that way to others, but that's how it felt to me.

Owen was seated at a small table for morning work, a period of time before morning meeting when parents are allowed to remain in the class. I was lingering, as I often do, standing nearby and observing his activity. He was using the time to work on his painting of a neighborhood scene. The project was part of the class's exploration of their school's neighborhood. It occurred within a curriculum unit on communities. Some children had completed their sketches and were starting to fill them in with paint. Others had finished entirely; the teachers who were circulating around the class were tacking those students' paintings to the walls.

Owen was still in the drawing phase. But he was making good progress. With a black marker, he diligently traced the pencil lines that composed a row of stores on a city block. It seemed he wanted to, or was supposed to, finish this tracing process before starting to paint. While Owen was capable of making such a drawing by himself if given a significant amount of time, the detailed nature of the penciled renderings suggested to me that these outlines had probably been done with the help of one of his two head teachers, his one-on-one paraprofessional aid (para), or perhaps one of the school's occupational therapists.

Owen uses a wheelchair to move. The most visible aspects of his disability relate to his legs. But as those who work closely with him know, reduced core and arm strength and endurance as well as difficulty in motor planning are his greatest challenges to writing or drawing with the speed or duration of his typically developing peers.

His is a collaborative team-teaching second-grade class with two head teachers, one certified in special education and the other in general education. Six of the 20 students in the class have physical disabilities of some kind. As far as I can tell, most—though not all—of the children in his class with motor disabilities have them as a result of neurological disorders such as cerebral palsy. Their physical differences from their typically developing peers run a large spectrum. One child appears to have orthopedic issues related to one leg. A number of children have motor issues that clearly affect the way they move and produce speech in significant ways. All of the children in the class work within the same curriculum and have the same academic goals.

That Owen was supposed to trace over the pencil lines with a marker appeared to me to be a helpful modification of the activity by whoever set up its process. The row of stores in his picture looked familiar. When I asked, Owen confirmed that it was a drawing of a street where we often shop. Due to the time constraints of his fast-paced, general education curriculum, he would never have had the time to complete this sketch entirely by himself. But it seemed clear he had conceived and planned it and had played a significant role in its creation.

A girl came over and sat beside Owen. I recognized her as someone with whom he was developing a school friendship, Maria[1]. She had recently asked him for a playdate, something I hoped to plan in the near future. They had played together in the yard after school a few times. Maria asked Owen about his drawing. When he placed his marker on the table, she picked it up and continued the process of tracing the many pencil lines that still needed ink.

I glanced around to see if anyone noticed. Owen clearly did not mind. He watched Maria trace and they discussed his picture. She asked him questions about it and mentioned that hers was done. Maria must have been bored, I thought.

"He can do it," I said, smiling at her.

Maria kept drawing. Owen watched her and they talked. Then Kim came over. She saw what was happening and asked if she could look at Maria's painting. Maria got up from the table and took Kim over to where it hung on the wall.

Owen picked up the marker and resumed tracing. Soon, Jason[2] arrived in the classroom and came over to our table. Jason is Owen's para, his one-on-one aide who helps him physically negotiate his school day. Then Maria returned and asked Owen if she could help trace some more. He said yes.

I directed an awkward smile toward Jason. I think I was hoping he would intervene. He did not.

"I think Owen should do it," I said, as gently as I could, this time reaching out for Maria to hand me the marker. She did, and I handed it back to Owen. I stepped away from the table and looked again toward Jason. Now I wondered if I should have just stayed out of it.

"She likes to be helpful," Jason said, complimenting Maria. "She is not shy."

"Yes," I responded.

After using the marker for a few more minutes, Owen handed it back to Maria. I stayed back. I had given my input. It was time for me to leave. But part of me was curious: I wanted to know what would happen when a teacher noticed. I also wondered about my own thoughts.

Over the years, I had grown accustomed to paying close attention to issues around Owen's physical integration into the schools and classrooms he had attended. In the past, a scenario like this might have

concerned me, made me question the manner in which his teachers were facilitating Owen's participation. But I was not worried now, and this felt good. Yet, I wondered why.

I gathered my coat and bag and walked to the door. As I did, I saw one of the teachers moving toward Owen's table. She asked Owen if it was ok if Maria helped him finish with his ink lines. He said yes. The teacher commented on the many lines in his picture and the fact that Maria had finished her project. She explained that when it came time for painting Owen would complete that process by himself.

Jackpot, I thought. What a skilled and experienced teacher Owen and his classmates have. I practically floated down the school stairs and out of the building into the brisk, late fall morning.

Still, I wondered: why had I not been anxious even before I had witnessed the teacher's "solution"? As I realized later, the simple fact that this "problem" had occurred in the first place had excited me. It was an example of what I have come to think of as a core moment of inclusive education. As Owen's father, I defined these core moments as those that were, at their essence, made significant not by the fact Owen had or had not gained access to an interaction or activity in the first place, but rather by what occurred within the interaction or activity itself once it started and as it unfolded.

Priorities

Owen's disability is always part of who he is as an individual. But it was not the primary determining factor in this moment. It hadn't prevented his full participation. Furthermore, the teacher's awareness of Owen's disability had not overdetermined her response to the way the interaction played out. The teacher had not reacted by feeling the need to affirm Owen's physical independence the way I had when I said, "he can do it." Can or can't were not really the issues of priority in this situation. The issue was how.

The different way in which Owen physically interacted with the activity and the different way in which Owen and Maria socially interacted within the activity had not distracted the teacher from the priorities of the moment's educational core. To me, it was an excellent example of a teacher holding on to priorities and supporting Owen and Maria's methods of pursuit of those priorities that had emerged in the moment.

What was the educational goal of the neighborhood painting project? Was it to independently draw and paint a picture in a limited amount of time? Probably not. The children had recently gone on trips to various sites in the school's vicinity. Was the goal to learn a list of facts about the neighborhood? If so, the children might have been seated at desks listening to a teacher make a presentation. I imagine one goal was to introduce the children to the components that make up a physical neighborhood in order to start them thinking about the more abstract concept of communities.

By focusing on whether or not Owen was tracing all of the lines in his picture by himself, I had, in the moment, missed the point. But the teacher had not. Owen and Maria were discussing his picture as they

shared the marker. That discussion was consistent with a central goal of the larger strategy for learning. I did not consciously realize it at the time, but I sensed it. This was the real reason I was not anxious. Something felt right to me. Owen was inside one of those moments that are the essence of child-centered, experiential learning.

What children will think about, experience, say, hear, learn, or do when these moments occur cannot really be predicted. And it is not realistic to expect all teachers to be immediately experienced at scaffolding these interactions to support the social, emotional, cognitive, and academic growth of each of the children involved. But educators and parents can and do plan for these moments.

Teachers craft curriculums and activities to create rich opportunities for their students and then observe and guide and take it from there. As teachers' experience grows, I would imagine they begin to develop ideas about what might happen and what they hope will happen during those moments.

What was, I wonder, Owen's teacher's initial reaction when she observed he was not working independently on his drawing? She did not appear to hesitate in her assessment that this difference was consistent with the educational goals of the activity. Had she planned for this moment? Probably not for this exact one. But she did not appear surprised by Owen's behavior or, just as significantly, by the behavior of his classmate.

From Access to Interaction

I would not have predicted the specifics of what happened. And, through later reflection, I came to question my own initial reaction to the way Owen, his classmate, and his para behaved within this activity. But even at the time, I too was not surprised when Owen continued to interact with his environment in ways that were different than most of his peers, even after he had reached the table and achieved physical access to the activity.

In fact, my experience observing Owen—as well as other young children with significant physical disabilities—for seven years now, in schools, classrooms, playgrounds, and recess yards, as well as on playdates, has convinced me of one thing: differences manifested by physical disabilities experienced from infancy do not disappear in the moments the child achieves access. Rather, it is precisely in these moments when access has been achieved that their differences are allowed to fully express themselves. Access is the entrance to interaction. Interaction is a process through which difference discovers itself and others discover difference.

Access happens when Owen enters the recess yard. Interaction initiates its ever-forming impact when a ball kicked from across the yard flies into his face. Access has been achieved when Owen waits at the starting line of a relay race. Interaction asserts its demands when he and another boy crash into each other and the boy bruises his leg on the aluminum of Owen's wheelchair. Access is momentary relief for Owen from rushing; when you move slowly you are eternally in a rush. For once he has arrived at school

on time. Interaction is immediately rushing once again, with the help of a classmate, to complete a drawing assignment before morning meeting.

When the ball in the recess yard hit Owen in the face, I couldn't help smiling to myself. When he crashed into the other boy and this time it was the other child who got bruised I couldn't help feeling a twinge of significance in the moment. Not because Owen has to "face these issues at some point" and "learn how to deal with them." Certainly not because anyone got bruised. I experienced positive impressions of even these far from subtle moments because I recognized what was happening in school mirrored what I knew to happen in our lives all the time. We had reached one of those once uncomfortable now routine moments when we had fewer models on which to draw in order to know how to best support integration of physical difference into the often physically and spatially determined narratives of our days.

What happens now? I can almost guarantee that question was on the minds of the children who were standing around during recess on these occasions. But I would also venture that the paraprofessionals, other parents, and recess supervisors were wondering the same thing. As far as I was concerned, any reaction was fine, as long as it did not have to do with the boring and repetitive question of why Owen was here in the middle of the yard, in the middle of all this commotion. Or with the flip side of that question, uttered to myself on many other occasions: why is he off to the side over there? As a matter of fact, why are all the kids in wheelchairs and walkers off to the side over there? I was used to asking myself those questions. I had learned that if I wanted them to stop, I'd better also be prepared for what happened when I got what I wanted.

When teachers recognize that a new expression of difference or need will probably emerge out of a structured access, they take the first step toward being better prepared for sorting through the moment's priorities. This seems a crucial shift from conceptualizing access as an equalizing force or a physical place that has been reached.

When confronted with the daily realities of the busy school day, theoretical formations of accessibility often find themselves hopelessly lost in that giant gulf between common sense and intricate logistics. When planned for in detail, however, access seems to me to embody potential in the way that curriculum does. Interaction is like experiential learning. Both are necessary, both integral. But one leads to the other. Access is not a goal in and of itself. It is a means to an end. It is the starting point for learning.

Choreographing Interaction

Identification of such social, emotional, and interactive priorities within the goals of child-centered, inclusive education may seem somewhat straightforward, especially for experienced teachers. But in practice, consistent pursuit of these priorities for children with physical disabilities is hard and may require a greater sense of urgency.

The busy day is even busier for children with physical disabilities. Their focused attention and energy is demanded by its multitude of transitional as well as, ideally, many immersive moments. A subtle yet critical shift can creep into this cumulative experience. The process of scaffolding the child's inclusion in the activities or interactions of the day can too often become conflated or confused with the process of scaffolding the child's physical ability to gain access to those activities or interactions.

Lead teachers who successfully integrate children with physical disabilities into meaningful learning interactions (especially in classrooms where there are multiple adults) carefully plan the choreography for access in advance. This planning and implementation requires constant involvement of paraprofessional aides, as well as intermittent consultation with, and assistance from, physical and occupational therapists. But the teacher needs to lead the process. And for one simple reason: they know where and when the core interactive moments will occur.

Teachers are the choreographers of these climactic moments in the educational and social experiences of the day. They have the pedagogical training and practical experience to privilege the developmental and educational significance of these moments. Thus, teachers must take ultimate responsibility for leading all the members of the classroom community through this intricate dance.

Of course, situations often arise with unanticipated challenges. During the first few weeks of school, for example, I would imagine that teachers with children with physical disabilities in their classrooms experience periods when the process of scaffolding access overshadows the process of scaffolding interaction. Such is the learning curve of any educational environment. I would also expect this to happen at select times throughout the year, as new activities, materials, and physical arrangements are introduced into classrooms and other school spaces.

It would be unrealistic to think that constant shifting back into a reactive mode on the part of teachers—in order to respond to what may, at times, seem like a constant stream of new challenges to access—will not be an inevitable part of the process of inclusion. However, in the face of this reality, it is even more crucial that teachers avoid coming to conceptualize such a reactive mode as a long-term substitute, either by default or by misconception, for proactive strategies that promote development through inclusive interaction.

Getting Past, Getting to the Table

When Owen was younger, his educators expressed concern he was not talking enough in certain situations. They wanted him to work on verbalizing his needs, to actively ask for assistance more often, rather than waiting for help to arrive. They were trying to anticipate the challenges he would face in later years when he did not have as much support from adults. Owen expressed his needs clearly to us at home, at times quite assertively. But we saw this was not true in school and that the discrepancy was greater than typical differences between home and school behavior.

We understood the concerns of his educators and had no doubt they came from a place of deep caring for Owen and his future. We did, however, come to question some of the strategies employed to encourage his verbal expression and the way these strategies suggested priorities for how Owen spent his time in school.

We began to wonder if attention to the logistics that were necessary to accommodate Owen's physical differences had begun to distract some of his educators from the underlying goals and priorities of the child-centered, developmentally focused practices that they had, ironically, played a large part in introducing us to in the first place.

On a number of occasions I observed educators intentionally remaining in Owen's path of travel within a crowded classroom or hallway after they became aware he was behind them, trying to get around and toward a destination. The educators made it clear to Owen, and to us if we happened to be there, that they were waiting for him to verbalize his presence—to say excuse me, or something to that effect. The goal, as we understood it, was to help him build independence by encouraging responsibility for knowing when he needed help. Educators in future years would not always be able to anticipate his needs in the moment.

This frustrated Owen and resulted in less verbalization of his needs in such situations with a number of his educators. His lead teachers quickly realized this, and we had a number of productive and helpful discussions with them. These conversations with Owen's teachers were collaborative moments of shared commitment to meeting his needs. But in retrospect, I feel our joint understanding of why this strategy failed to stimulate further independence did not fully take into account the broader developmental context.

One of the things we discussed was how it was harder for Owen to produce fluid speech while focusing on a physical task such as navigating his walker or wheelchair. This was true; it was an important issue for us all to recognize. But I must admit that, at the time, part of me did not want to waste another second talking about these transitional moments—about, for example, what happened to Owen on the way to a classroom table, or the best way for him to get to that table.

I knew that I was one parent among many and that my time to speak with Owen's teachers was limited. And I was growing tired of feeling like our communications were continually taken up with details about Owen's physical access within the class. It was an unrealistic wish, but I wanted these discussions to be in the past. I wanted to have arrived at a point where we could assume agreement and understanding on the details of access so that we could move beyond them. I also wondered if Owen's teachers appreciated just how much time he spent both literally and figuratively trying to get to the table across all aspects of his daily life. I wanted Owen simply to be at the table, one way or another. If we had to have another discussion, I wanted to talk about what happened at the table.

Years later, I can more clearly express how my conceptualizations of Owen's experience, and of other children's with similar challenges, have developed over time. I do not believe that young children with physical disabilities experience physical barriers in a way that internalizes these barriers psychologically. I believe that up to a certain age they experience themselves as agents of social participation in the same way that typically developing children do, focusing on the potential for interaction rather than the barriers to it. They assume access until they are socially instructed otherwise. The most significant issue they face is not physical in nature, but is instead the experiential reality of having to negotiate social, emotional, psychological, and educational challenges while potentially having a fraction of the amount of time that their typically developing peers have participating in situations that stimulate growth and development in these areas.

It is important to understand how few opportunities some children with physical disabilities have to focus primarily on interaction without having to dedicate significant levels of concentration to their physical ability to achieve that interaction. I have observed the potential for children within this experience to feel powerless, bored, confused, angry, frustrated, and passive.

Constant dwelling in transitional as opposed to immersive realms of experience puts young children at risk of coming to associate their problem-solving ability and reactions to new emotions—and, it seems to me, of associating learning in general—with their ability to perform physically and to negotiate physical barriers.

Around the Table

Acknowledgment of these risks benefits the process of inclusion primarily and precisely because they can be isolated and mitigated in ways that do not attempt to deny the fact that young children with physical disabilities will inevitably be socially instructed about the barriers all around them. That will happen, and it will be an important developmental process. But prioritizing interactive inclusion above all and with urgency allows us to help children parse out their unique developmental challenges amid the broader incremental challenges of social, emotional, and cognitive self-awareness that all children face.

Around the table, so to speak, children learn about themselves and about their disabilities as one difference among many as they explore their own social, emotional, verbal, sensory, and cognitive processes. They learn about their disabilities, including disabilities that make it difficult for them to produce speech or to move their muscles, in the same way that all children learn about the many different aspects of themselves.

Perhaps as much we strive to take for granted the classroom table as that rich place for developmental interaction and growth for all young children, those of us who produce physical output in typical ways may reach a point where our conceptions of independence—how we represent ourselves at the table— can potentially become conflated with our assumptions about physical independence—how we get to

the table or how we perform our outward communication when we are there. But if we make sufficient room for reflection on and close observation of a physically disabled child's ability to learn and adapt to her or his own unique circumstances over time, we can start to fully conceptualize that child's developmental process in the same way we do for typically developing children: by always assuming that they are the agents of their own learning and adaptation.

Teachers who assume intrapersonal adaptive competence on the part of all children know that a child's relative ability to produce physical output in typical ways does not represent that child's processes of cognitive input. Such teachers do not confuse traditional assumptions of physical independence with a child's potential for future independence because they know that the goal of education is not to produce independent children, but independent adults.

In the 21st century, the ability of an individual adult to lead a happy, productive, socially—and yes, economically—independent life will not be determined by that adult's relative physical independence. Instead, it will be linked to social and emotional maturity, competence, and confidence in one's ability to relate to others and oneself and to set goals and achieve them. And this has everything to do with supporting the social and emotional empowerment, self-awareness, self-esteem, and cognitive development that occurs through childhood interactive experiences.

Once again, this is also true for children whose physical disabilities make it hard for them to verbalize a word with their own body or to move a muscle. When they are in environments where they can start to observe their own interpersonal and intrapersonal processes of mind and develop methods of independent thinking in the context of shared and agreed upon arenas of our society, rather than constantly being bombarded with experiences that teach them that the process of just gaining entrance to those arenas is incredibly hard work, they will have the psychological energy left for the work they do when they get there.

They may produce their physical participation in different ways. But when they sit around a table with other children, they will be receiving input and producing output while using these receptive and productive processes to observe themselves through the arcs of social experience, self-awareness, and self-esteem as they are supported through childhood. They will develop a deep and wide-ranging curiosity about the world beyond their own abilities and differences that perhaps—if they are lucky—will be valuable to others, but that will without question be invaluable to themselves.

[1] Maria is a pseudonym.

[2] Jason is also a pseudonym.

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