



Equity Dispatch

The State of Education for Students with Dis/abilities: Equity Considerations



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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

The experience of disability is individualized, so that generalized responses and assistance are inadequate for providing greater opportunity for people with disabilities.

--Rosie Castaneda and Madeline L. Peters in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*

Educate

Before the mid-20th century, Americans had no consistent approach to the care and education of individuals perceived as disabled, and most states excluded significant numbers of children with disabilities from attending public school programs of any kind

January 2014



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Meet the Authors:

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Equity Spotlight

(Danforth, Taff, & Ferguson, 2006). The enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later reauthorized as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was the first federal effort to ensure that all children have access to free public education, regardless of ability (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012). Today, approximately 14% of U.S. children are identified and labeled with disabilities, and served under IDEA (Special Education Advisor, 2010). This legislation and the work that it supports is equity-focused in that it promotes educational access, participation, and outcomes for students with disabilities. But there is still much work to be done to create educational systems that are asset-focused and inclusive, particularly for students of color and students from low-income families who are disproportionately identified as being disabled and removed from the general education settings (Sullivan & Thorius, 2010). Herein, we consider the implications of current schooling practices for students with disabilities, ultimately advocating critical conversations about notions of ability, instructional design that promotes greater inclusion of all students, and greater collaboration among general and special educators. In our view, these shifts can help to ensure that our system better serves a diverse human population.

First, we recognize that disability labels are an attempt to describe variability in functioning and behavior, and as such, they rely on assumptions about normalcy and ability (Gallagher, 2006; Graham & Slee, 2006; Sullivan & Thorius, 2010). As Linton (1998) puts it, "The prefix creates a barrier, cleaving in two, ability, and its absence, its opposite. *Disability* is the 'not' condition, the repudiation of ability" (p. 30, emphasis added). In other words, the disability label assumes that particular differences are deficits of the individual – rather than society at large - that need to be accommodated or corrected (Sullivan & Thorius, 2010). This ability-disability dichotomy fails to acknowledge the diverse presentation of human variability, even within disability categories (Scotch & Schriener, 1997). It also privileges particular groups over others (Graham & Slee, 2006), implicitly undervaluing the different abilities labeled groups possess. One example that challenges this assumption is Temple Grandin's contribution to the design of livestock handling facilities. As an individual with autism, she is a strong advocate for recognition of different minds and thinking styles. By saying "I am a visual thinker, not a language-based thinker. My brain is like Google Images," she clearly presents her unique ability – one that is often framed as a disability (Grandin, 2010).

However, within our current educational system, both teacher education and schooling are often designed with children perceived as normal or able in mind (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002); which makes separate spaces and designated teachers necessary for particular students. These divisions are still common in schools across the country (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011). Data suggest that approximately half of all students with disabilities spend more than 20% of their time outside the general education classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) and 15% spend the majority of their time isolated from general education classrooms (Sullivan, Kozleski, & Smith, 2008). Not only does this deliver a message to students in general education classrooms that their peers are not typical and do not belong (Rice, 2006), it also perpetuates inequities related to access and representation in rigorous programs of study (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2001).

Even when they are physically included in the general education classroom, students identified as having disabilities may be socially and academically marginalized; they may be referred to as inclusion students, offered less rigorous assignments, and physically



After an international career as a school principal; first in Norway, then Egypt, and ultimately Thailand, Dr. Bruce Kramer served the University of St. Thomas as a professor, Chair of the Department of Leadership, Policy and Administration, and ultimately Dean of the College of Education, Leadership and Counseling. His numerous publications center on social justice leadership and ethics in education and his work as an educator, mentor, and leader have earned him numerous awards, including the Diversity Leadership Award from the University of St. Thomas.

Though an advocate of equity in education, Dr. Kramer had not deeply considered the experiences of students with disabilities until he was diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) in 2010. At the time, he was an able-bodied white male in a leadership position at the Saint Thomas University in Minneapolis, MN. The diagnosis triggered an experience of dis ease that pushed Dr. Kramer to look through a new lens at "how we do health, sickness, ease and dis ease in this country (and really, the Western world in general)" (Kramer, 2011). Dr. Kramer acknowledged that the progressive decline of mobility has been his greatest teacher when it comes to issues of equity and justice for people living with disabilities. The revelation that his "able-bodied" status was temporary caused him to reprioritize and reconstruct life as he knew it; this, he argues, parallels the experiences of cognitive dissonance that can lead to critical consciousness (Kramer & Radd, 2013). At the same time, this life change didn't force Dr. Kramer to stop doing what he knows and does best. He has used his

isolated from their peers within the classroom (Baker, 2002). These practices and names have been shown to actually limit opportunities to learn (Baker, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, educational outcomes for students with disabilities are unequal to those of non-disabled peers. According to a recent report from National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, the mean graduation rate across states is 56.6% for students with disabilities (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, 2013).

When we think critically about disability labels, we must also recognize the presence of race and class bias. Students of particular racial backgrounds and language minorities are disproportionately identified as disabled and are more likely to be segregated in separated classrooms or schools (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Artilles, 2011). Although placement decisions are often "shrouded in scientific practice and procedure," qualitative research has demonstrated the prominent role of staff assumptions about ability and normalcy in the identification process (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011, p. 2238). According to the 26th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), Black students are overrepresented in almost all special education categories and they are especially likely to be given stigmatizing labels such as intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed (ED) (Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). In addition, American Indian/Alaska Native students have a higher rate of identification for specific learning disabilities (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). Economic status is also associated with disability identification. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2013), around 45% of children with disabilities are from low-income families and children who are impoverished showed an increasing tendency to be identified or served in special education. When students of color are identified as having a disability, they are also more likely to be segregated from their classmates (Sullivan & Artilles, 2011). For instance, in Indiana, African-American students are about 2.5 times more likely to be educated in a segregated setting for more than 60% of their school day when compared to students of other races (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, n.d.). Because these students do not receive full access to the curriculum, they often experience difficulty accessing postsecondary and career opportunities (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Skiba et al., 2008).

To ensure that all students are fully included in high quality educational experiences, educators must look to new paradigms that do not simply relocate identified students or have them spend time in the general education classroom, but transform educational practices such that they acknowledge the diversity of learners and focus on changing disabling school environments and practices (Ware, 2002). To achieve this, transformation of teaching preparation and professional learning is vital since current divisions between general educators and special educators contribute to a sense of division in responsibility (Rice, 2006); all teachers should be prepared to assess students' needs and ensure that all strategies are tailored to address them (Skiba et al., 2008). Special educators and paraprofessionals can and should share their expertise with general educators, working to develop collaborative relationships that will benefit all students (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

Transformation in the design of learning environments with the full range of students in mind requires engaging students in ways that call upon different learning modalities (e.g., auditory, visual, and tactile) (Flores, 2008). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one framework that may be particularly useful in this paradigm shift. According to the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) (2013), students who have different ways of building knowledge can succeed when lessons are presented in multiple ways (e.g. illustrating concepts through multiple media, explaining in language that is indigenous to linguistic minorities, or providing background information for new concepts). Because students have various modes of learning, UDL's guiding principles also require providing "multiple means of action and expression" (CAST, 2013), which means that students should have the opportunity to choose the presentation or expression style that fits them best. Because learning is a social construct, teachers should provide "multiple means of engagement" to motivate students (CAST, 2013). In this framework, students with a

experience as a platform from which to engage teachers, students, and the general public around education, ability, and social justice leadership. As part of this work, Dr. Kramer writes a blog, [Dis Ease Diary](#), about his journey with ALS. He has retired from his administrative post but continues to write, give lectures, and work with doctoral students.

In a recent interview, Dr. Kramer talked about how being diagnosed with ALS has prompted him to think about education, teaching, and student-teacher relationships in new ways. He argued against a problem-focused approach to disease and disability. "Problems can be fixed and they are finite in nature and they are bonded enough and can be solved," Kramer elaborated. Dis ease and disability are not problems, they are "constant companions" (Kramer, 2012). As an equity assistance center, we commend his aim to bring to the public eye the life lessons his experiences – an experience often thought of as on the margins of disability (Kramer & Radd, 2013) – have prompted.

Upcoming Events

Illinois

May 22-23, 2014

[2014 Chicago International Conference on Education](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

May 27-31, 2014

[National Conference on Race and Ethnicity](#)
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

May 5-7, 2014

[The 74th Annual Statewide Special Education Conference](#)
Grand Rapids, MI

March 20-22, 2014

[2014 Equity Network Conference](#)

variety of needs, skills, and interests can be given equal opportunities to learn (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002).

Educators can and should also engage in critical conversations about the notion of disability (Ware, 2002). This requires “a continuous interrogation of rarely questioned assumptions of what disability is; what a disabled person needs, wants, and deserves; and the responsibilities of education and educators in relation to such matters” (Danforth & Gabel, 2006, p. 1). Radd and Macey (2013) provide two practical methods of professional learning for engaging in such critical conversations. The first is through writing reflection journals or blogs. In the context of reflecting on notions of ability, educators can first describe their current practices: “How do I serve students identified with disabilities?” or “What are the student profiles of the individuals I have identified as having disabilities?” The second step is to interrogate the practices: “What are the assumptions and values that inform my practice (e.g., why do we pull students with disabilities out of the classroom)?” Third, to confront the narrative, educators should ask: “Who benefits from this practice? Are these practices necessary?” Finally, educators can reconstruct the narrative based on their reflection and mentally test the things they could do differently. Radd and Macey (2013) also suggest collective learning within groups that include students, families, and community members, who may be able to assist in challenging the assumptions that only students without disabilities are capable of facing challenges and meeting high expectations. Allowing family and community members a voice in the conversation could contribute to greater understanding of students’ needs and their assets; in turn, the decision-making processes can better promote positive academic and social trajectories (Harry, 2008).

Every child deserves access to and the ability to participate in high-quality learning experiences. Deconstructing notions of ability and disability and decreasing disproportionality within special education are important steps toward inclusive educational systems. Designing learning spaces and experiences to authentically engage all learners is another essential step towards systematic change, one that will require close collaboration among educators, family members, and communities. Ultimately, critical reflection on disability, including its intersections with race, gender, nationality, and class, can lead us to the creation of “democratic, inclusive, accessible communities where biological and cultural diversities are not construed as deficits” (Danforth & Gabel, 2006, p. 2).

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



"ASK helps me face the unknown."
-- an ASK parent

Kalamazoo, MI

Minnesota

February 21-22, 2014

[Minnesota Conference on Science Education](#)

Mankato, MN

October 16-17, 2014

[2014 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)

St. Paul, MN

Ohio

June 16-18, 2014

[OERC Conference: Connecting Research, Practice, and Policy](#)

Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

February 28- March 2, 2014

[Wisconsin Education Association Council: Winter Leadership Academy](#)

Dells, WI

Virtual Equity



Library



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About Special Kids (ASK) is an Indiana-based support organization for families of students with special needs. Family members that contact About Special Kids are connected to trained parent liaisons who are also parents of children with special needs. These individuals assist families in finding resources and accessing community supports. ASK also maintains a database of resources for families.

ASK was founded in 1987 by two parents and two professionals who provided the initial funding for the organization. In 1990, the organization began training parents of children with special needs to serve on First Steps Local Interagency Coordinating Councils. With the help of multiple grants, it has since expanded its network of parent-to-parent supports and special projects, including assistance to Indiana University School of Medicine pediatric residents and provision of services to participants in MDwise, a Medicaid managed care organization (MCO). These projects work to ensure that some of our most-often marginalized children have access to services and supports.

This organization stands out in its work *for* parents *by* parents, and in its efforts to ensure that family voices are represented when students with special needs are discussed at the policy level. We commend ASK for its exceptional work throughout Indiana.

Empower

Something to Read!

[Using Peer-Mediated Learning to Advance Equity for All Students](#)

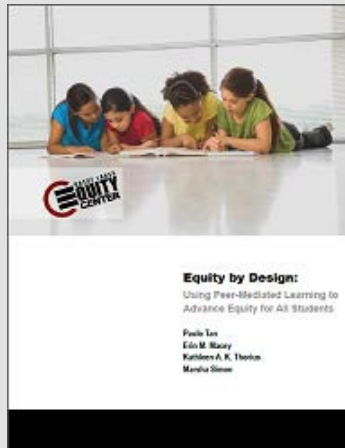
Peer-mediated learning (PML) is a pedagogical approach that shifts some of the power over teaching and learning from teachers to students and encourages students to work collaboratively with a full range of peers toward mutually agreed-upon goals. When conceived of as a learner-learner or teacher-teacher model, PML can

facilitate students' understanding of one another while promoting meaningful social and academic learning.

This article begins by describing four core principles of PML:

- We learn through active engagement
- All individuals are capable of active engagement
- All individuals are cultural beings
- Collaboration is a priority

In addition, strategies are provided to foster a supportive classroom community and cultivate collaboration. These strategies include using universal design for learning, teaching and modeling self-determination skills, guiding conflict resolution skills, using student-driven projects, and advancing projects through questioning.



Something to Use!



The Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Exchange is a free website where educators can create and share lesson plans and other teaching resources that employ the universal design for learning framework. It is easy to navigate and use, and you will be inspired by the rich array of resources available in this network.

Something to Watch!

Inclusive Learning: Everyone's IN

Watch this engaging 11-minute video to view profiles of eight schools that are working toward academically and socially inclusive learning environments. Each school implemented contextual solutions to prepare teachers and empower students. Learn which strategies they employed to ensure that all students feel safe, supported, and successful!



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