

Introduction

We begin with a vision:

Imagine that you are planning a dinner party at your house. What are your hopes and intentions? You want everyone coming to feel welcome and included. You want to provide food that all guests will find appetizing and nourishing. And you want your guests to interact with one another in friendly and congenial ways.

As you think about your party, you think about the guests and who they are. Your friend Robin uses a wheelchair. You'll have to think about accessibility. If you arrange the food buffet-style, will she still have room to get around the table? Your friend Carrie is lactose-intolerant and doesn't eat any dairy products. You'll want to think about the menu so that she'll be sure to have plenty to eat. Your friend Abdullah is Muslim and doesn't eat pork or anything made with lard, and Sharon is on a very low-fat diet. You try to think of what you can serve that will meet everyone's needs.

Some of your guests are very outgoing and will connect easily, but two of your guests, Wynetta and Darrel, are shy and sometimes feel left out. You think about what you can do to make them comfortable, and you hatch some great plans for introducing them to others and asking them both to help with the last-minute salad preparations so that they can have a job and feel engaged during the early stages of the party. Finally, you think about the party itself, and you plan a mixture of time spent in informal getting to know one another and in a short icebreaker that you think will help people to connect and laugh with one another.

Your party is a huge success. Everyone has a great time.

The food is bountiful and well received, and you notice some wonderful connections forming between guests. You reflect back on your planning process and realize that by thinking well about each person who was coming, you were able to design a party that worked well for everyone, meeting individual needs without stigmatizing anyone or isolating him or her from the group. You didn't just make the menu you made last year and then, realizing it wouldn't work for Abdullah, tell him he had better bring his own food. You arranged the physical space so that everyone (including Robin) was able to maneuver around the room, and you didn't leave it to chance that Wynetta would connect well. You also realize that you didn't think about your guests as members of categories: African Americans, vegetarians, physically impaired, socially insecure. You certainly didn't divide your guests into two groups: the "normal" or "regular" ones and the ones with "special needs." Rather, you thought about them as individuals with multiple identities, any of which could contain strengths or embody challenges. And while planning for them as individuals, you were also able to think about them as members of the temporary community you were forming at your house—meeting their needs within a context of commonality and friendship.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH SCHOOLS?

This is a book about inclusion and inclusive education—a core value and set of practices that support the belief that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or labels—should be full members of the general education school community, with their individual needs met within that general education context. What is at stake, I will argue,

is as a way of imagining not only what we want the educational system to look like but what we should want for our children and for the world.

It's within schools that children and adults learn some of the most basic lessons about who matters in the world. This book presents the argument that it is only within inclusive schools that anyone can become a fully loving and competent human being and citizen. And so, I will argue, inclusion is good for—even essential—to a thriving democracy.

This book also argues that inclusion is straightforwardly excellent educational practice that, when implemented thoroughly and conscientiously, can create learning environments that are actively better for all students. Inclusion is as powerful educationally as it is politically. Inclusion is not a favor school systems do for students whom they perceive as “disabled,” but a gift to our common humanity—a way of reconceptualizing our schools and our society.

This book describes the many characteristics children bring to schools and classrooms and how the educational system can meet their individual needs within a common, welcoming context. I will explore what our schools could look like if they took inclusion to heart as an organizing principle and value. I will articulate why this matters now, as our nation stands at an educational crossroads deciding what it wants for its children, its schools, and the wider world.

Unlike other books about inclusion and disability, this one will not focus on “categories” of children; you will not find separate sections on how to educate those with cognitive delays, for example, or strategies for organizing instruction for students who are labeled “learning disabled.” I will argue, instead, that we must see all children as individuals with multiple identities and design curricula and instruction that is re-

sponsive to many aspects of a child's life. I will explore strategies that cross "categories" of children, showing that good inclusion is good teaching. And I will discuss ways of creating accepting, open, humane classrooms that welcome all children and that meet their individual needs within a context of shared community.

It is important that schools do inclusion well—and that doesn't mean throwing diverse students together with little planning, support, or resources. I hope to convince you that if we create quality inclusive schools, we will have better children, better teachers, better curriculum, better pedagogy, and a better collective future.

THE VISION

To many people, the word "inclusion" is associated primarily or exclusively with the practice of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Although this is certainly one definition, it is a limited one, and one that often solidifies differences in ways that are counterproductive. The truth, however, is that all children come to school with a wide range of characteristics and that every child has multiple identities, all of which affect his/her school experience and achievement.

In the first section of this book, I explore a vision of inclusion that goes far beyond issues of disability and special education, although it includes them. I argue that an inclusive school is one which attends thoughtfully and well to all the differences that students bring with them to school. These include differences in race, ethnicity, language, family composition, gender, religion, sexual orientation, dis/ability, socioeconomic status, and so on. Teachers must pay as much attention to a child's race, family background, home lan-

guage, religion, and interests as to an overarching label the child has been given, such as “retarded” or “gifted.” And we must also not pay so much attention to differences that we forget the powerful human similarities that cross all boundaries.

THE CHALLENGES

There have been many challenges and objections to the concept and implementation of inclusion in schools. Some of these have been practical (space, time, training, resources), and some have been more basic—inclusion has been dismissed as a bad idea that conflicts with the essential goals of schooling. Often, the practical and logistical complexities are raised as a smoke screen for more deeply held beliefs about human diversity, equity, social justice, and relationships. By exploring the ways in which inclusion has been challenged, we can explore underlying beliefs about education and democratic schooling that manifest themselves in current school practices and debates.

This section of the book addresses these challenges head-on, responds to the most commonly raised *yes, buts* about inclusion and inclusive schools—from parents, teachers, school leaders and policy makers—and explores myths and beliefs that impede inclusion and inclusive practices.

GETTING IT RIGHT/DOING IT WELL

In many situations, inclusion has failed because teachers, administrators, parents, and students have been underprepared and inadequately supported. Simply dumping students in regular classrooms without addressing issues of exclusion, teasing, curriculum modification, peer support, and peda-

gogical differentiation dooms inclusion to failure. It is critical to differentiate between a good idea badly implemented and a bad idea. It has been said that there is no good way to do the wrong thing. But it is also true that the right thing done poorly or thoughtlessly is unlikely to be successful.

This section provides practical examples and strategies for making inclusion successful. It addresses issues of dealing with diversity, curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom climate. It describes how we can create classrooms and schools that are consistent with our vision.

Inclusive education is an idea that has gained incredible visibility in the last twenty years; there are journals of inclusive education, conferences devoted to inclusion, inclusive education teacher education programs, and textbooks and articles that address inclusive practices. Many schools explicitly name inclusion as part of their mission statement, and litigation regarding educational practice has forced many districts to increase the extent to which they serve students with disabilities in the general education environment. It is unlikely that inclusion—as a concept or a practice—will go away. It is not simply an educational reform but an entirely different way of conceptualizing educational practice.

At the same time, there have been numerous challenges to the principles and practice of inclusion. Many schools have racially reseggregated, and some school districts have pulled back from their commitment to integrating students of different racial groups and abilities; charter schools and proposals for privatization threaten the very notion of democratic schooling and the implementation of inclusive practices. With so much hanging in the balance, we cannot wait any longer to embrace a commitment to inclusion. The book concludes with an exploration of the urgency for making our

schools inclusive in order to ensure—and I don't believe I am overstating this—the survival of a democratic society. Part Three allows us to explore real schools and real classrooms that have implemented inclusive practice—chances to see inclusion in action and to understand that the vision of inclusive education is within our grasp and worthy of our dedication.