

ARTICLE

“WHY I AM NOT A PAINTER”: DEVELOPING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Cara E. Furman

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I connect John Dewey’s notion that growth occurs through interaction with a diverse community to contemporary discussions of inclusive education. I highlight the importance of materials that offer different access points, the chance for students to listen to one another, and the teacher’s openness to each child’s potential. Though I became a teacher already committed to a classroom community that celebrated a range of capacities, I wasn’t initially able to translate this belief into practice. Integrating practice and philosophy, I share my path to provide insights for other teachers seeking to create a more inclusive classroom.

TAKING EXCEPTION TO EXCEPTIONS

This is the story of a class of painters, puppeteers, puppy trainers, poets, and so much more. It is the story of how a community of first- and second-grade students, wonderful parents and colleagues, and a very wise principal helped me to teach so that each child could pursue a broad range of passions. It is a story about how my students, in recognizing one another’s passions, created a community where everyone, including the teacher, was celebrated.

It is a story that I tell with a joy tinged with sadness. The joy comes from my fondness for the memory as well as a conviction that my teaching that year created an experience that honored my students. The sadness comes from the fact that I tell this story from the margins of educational practices. To speak to these margins, I will begin with a discussion of the place of inclusion within early childhood education. I will then share my journey to becoming a more inclusive educator. I will conclude with a discussion of why inclusive practices are essential to what I have referred to as honoring students.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF STUDENTS: THE LOCATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Reviewing textbooks for methods courses in early childhood education, I recently became extremely frustrated. In texts mostly in alignment with my teaching philosophy,¹ I inevitably come across a short section or chapter typically titled something like “Children with Special Needs.”² I was ambivalent about how to approach these sections with my undergraduates. On the one hand, in most cases the activities in these sections were sound. Additionally, I wanted not only to draw my students’ attention to learning differences but also make this awareness a focus. Not including sections on different learning styles could be one more act of exclusion. On the other hand, I was troubled by the implied message that there were students (those focused on for most of the text) and then “students with special needs” (on the outer edges of the chapters or books). Relegating certain students to their own section of the text echoes the way in which many classrooms label some students as officially other.³ It mirrors the fact that mandating an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (as well-intentioned as this policy may be),⁴ suggests that everyone else can share the same education plan. Despite the fact that the IEP was developed to ensure equity,⁵ in most classrooms I’ve observed, its translation into practice tends to marginalize the children who receive it.⁶ As Alicia Broderick, Heeral Mehta-Parekh, and Kim Reid note, “Historically, the United States has met legal mandates for educational inclusion by bringing first black, then disabled, then non-English-speaking students into public schools, but keeping them separate.”⁷ Dividing students into “regular” and “IEP kids” (to use the term often applied in schools) tends to mean that the unique capacities of all are not only ignored but, when someone is identified as having a unique way of seeing the world, this is also seen as problematic. Following the same sorting procedure, most schools of education have distinct programs in “special education.”⁸

The term “disability” not only distinguishes some as marginalized, but the discourse around disability also suggests that differences are “limitations” and indicate increased “need.”⁹ In this paper, I seek to make the opposite claim: that differences, what Susan Gabel refers to as “ability diversity,”¹⁰ should be looked upon as assets and contributions.¹¹

I do not believe that the terms “disability,” “special needs,” “regular,” “normal,” or “gifted” describe children. In fact as an educator I avoid labeling students, believing that labeling directs the teacher’s attention to conformity instead of to the uniqueness of each person.¹² As such, in the few instances in which I use labels in this paper, I am careful to note that I am drawing on language in use to highlight its lack of applicability.

In not highlighting a particular group as needing special services, I instead want to emphasize that every child needs unique attention and support. Moving away from modifying elements of a curriculum for particular students, I advocate

for an inclusive education that allows for as many entry points as there are students.¹³ By inclusive education, I mean a classroom in which all children are able to explore shared topics through a rich variety of entry points.¹⁴ Such classrooms may include students typically classified as disabled and those identified as gifted. For example, in the urban classroom that I describe in this paper, I had students who had previously been given IEPs. About a third of the children spoke another language at home. My students' families hailed from many different countries. They had access to different economic resources and were being raised in a range of family structures.

In his seminal work *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, John Dewey¹⁵ argues that learning happens as the student interacts with her environment. The environment includes both the objects and the people in the child's surroundings. Because the child grows when exposed to something new, diversity is ultimately at the root of Dewey's conception of growth. Echoing my claims that an inclusive education is both effective and just, in his closing lines to *Democracy and Education*, Dewey declares, "interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest."¹⁶ In this paper, I maintain that an inclusive classroom like the one I depict not only provides a more just education for children who have been previously labeled as different, it also provides a superior education for all children. While there are many ways in which an inclusive classroom enriches the lives of the students within it, I focus on the opportunities it allowed for children both to express themselves and to share in each other's talents.

Where, as I will discuss, I came to teaching already committed to developing a community that celebrated a range of capacities, I wasn't initially able to translate this belief into meaningful practice. In my many years as a teacher and teacher educator, I found that other teachers also struggled to be inclusive. Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid note that the "on-going legacy of separate classrooms, teachers, and even curriculum" for some learners "makes it difficult to provide real opportunities" for inclusion.¹⁷ Therefore, despite the abundance of research on inclusive practices, in the city where I taught, there were very few classrooms that I would describe as inclusive.

Linda Ware advocates for "counternarrative[s]" to the typical perception about those labeled "disabled."¹⁸ She emphasizes that without these narratives it can be very difficult to imagine how to act otherwise. With this in mind, I seek to write a counterteaching narrative in order to illustrate what it might mean to "grow from all the contacts of life."¹⁹ I am certainly not the first author to provide a narrative of an inclusive classroom. Yet, just as a rich inclusive curriculum offers access points to a range of students, a varied collection of inclusion "counternarratives" is needed for different teachers to explore. Specifically, my story is about an inclusive classroom that operated within the increasingly restrictive educational climate that developed after the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Though the school

environment I describe may seem radically open to many, we too struggled with, and sometimes bent to, external measures restricting what could be taught. Therefore, I share my narrative as an example of what inclusive teaching can look like and also to provide hope that inclusive classrooms can exist even with increasing pressure to standardize instruction.

In choosing to write a narrative about my journey to teach more inclusively, I build on research suggesting that narrative provides an ideal form for conveying both what I was thinking, how my thoughts came about and evolved, and how my thinking entered my practice.²⁰ My goal is to share both my philosophy and how I came to it in the interest of giving others the chance to think through their own philosophy on inclusion. For those already seeking to create more inclusive classrooms, I hope that my narrative will provide support in thinking through how to bring this about. For those who currently see learners as “regular” or as those who need “special” services, my narrative may help in reconsidering these categories.

MY JOURNEY

Situated Philosophy

This paper merges experiences gleaned in the classroom with philosophy. Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz use the phrase “situated philosophy” to describe a practice in which the “particular”²¹ person “begin[s] with concrete and richly detailed case studies and examples, and draw[s] philosophical insights from the analysis of those particulars.”²² Philosophy develops through the close exploration of local experience. Making a case for the importance of interweaving philosophy and experience, Craig A. Cunningham, David Granger, Jane Fowler Morse, Barbara Stengel, and Terri Wilson argue that “for Dewey, thinking done well is an interactive process into real puzzles for actual human persons and marked by open-mindedness and responsiveness.”²³ Cunningham et al. depict Dewey’s philosophical development through engagement with people the authors characterize as on the outskirts of Dewey’s society. They recount how Dewey “famously urged his colleagues to focus less on the ‘problems of philosophers’ and more on the ‘problems of men’ (and he must have intended, of women).”²⁴ Cunningham et al.’s investigations of Dewey’s relationships with different practitioners illustrate how problems of men and women outside of the academy significantly influenced Dewey’s writing. Cunningham et al. also demonstrate how reading Dewey’s writings and engaging in conversations with him influenced the practitioners Dewey worked with as well.

As with Dewey, my own philosophy grew from engaging with those often not heard in society—namely children and, in many cases, children who were struggling to express themselves in conventional ways. My philosophy about ability came largely from working with my students and speaking with elementary school colleagues. That said, philosophical texts, and in particular the work of Dewey, is

deeply entwined with my teaching. Dewey's writing influenced the school I worked at and the community of educators that I joined. Further, reading Dewey after I left the classroom, I found his ideas helped me to first reflect upon and then articulate what I had come to believe as an educator.²⁵

The Suspicion That People Learn Differently

I had always suspected that people think very differently. This insight developed from childhood through careful observation of those I trusted. In watching others work and listening to them talk, I identified a major discrepancy between what I saw and what I sensed they saw. For example, as a child I always walked through art museums quickly. I liked the museums because I liked to be in beautiful places. That said, I would just as soon be chatting with people in a museum as actually focusing on art. Yet, going to museums with my mother made me suspect that the experience was different for others. Often, with annoyance, I wondered what she could possibly be staring at all that time while my father and I waited in the gift shop. Because she was my mother, I chalked it up to her general eccentricity and wondered what was really happening but never asked.

Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I Am Not a Painter,"²⁶ contributed even more to my suspicion that others experienced the world differently. O'Hara writes, "I am not a painter, I am a poet. / Why? I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not." I had always trusted O'Hara to be wise. I connected closely with his poetry. I never understood this poem. This predicament led me to suspect that my confusion came not from O'Hara's words but from my understanding of painting. I wanted to know what painting could add to O'Hara's work that being a poet could not. What might he see differently as a painter? What did O'Hara know about painting that pushed him to know that he wanted to be a painter but definitively was not?

I was first exposed to the term "inclusive education" as a master's student in elementary education. In a course dedicated to the topic, I was challenged to change the language that I used to describe ability and to rethink my ideas about how different people process information. I was eager to take up this challenge but my understandings of how to do so were relatively superficial. Where I could see that people had different strengths—perhaps one person was better at small motor skills while another had a stronger memory for narrative—I did not perceive how differences could lead to widely varied ways of thinking.

All of this is to say that before I became a first- and second-grade teacher, I had an inkling that people saw differently than I did and I suspected this difference mattered, but I had no idea how to apply it to my teaching. Interestingly, David Sousa debunks the common adage that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, claiming that instead, "observational data and research on different learning styles show that teachers really tend to teach the way they learn."²⁷ My own experience certainly bolstered this claim. Despite a theoretical awareness that people learn quite

differently, when I became a classroom teacher I threw my support behind one of my own passions—creative writing. I was convinced that given the right opportunity everyone could be a writer and that each child could find an access point to creative writing. Though I had a room full of blocks and art supplies, and I welcomed my students’ use of them, I did not know how to foster that learning and I did not, to be honest, really believe it was necessary. At that point in my career, I chose curriculum almost exclusively based on what my colleagues were using and my own personal experiences as a thinker and a student.

During my first year, my students and I were lucky enough to have a principal who told me after reviewing a unit I developed, “This looks great except it’s pretty much all literacy, you need to engage other ways of thinking too.” I pointed to some math and she shook her head, saying, “That’s not what I mean.” I had no idea what she meant but I trusted her and so I came up with projects that involved other modalities.

Because I did not know what the students were doing or could be doing as they built and drew, I watched them carefully as they worked. While working on my master’s, I learned about descriptive review. This is a process for using description to look closely at a student. The teacher describes a child or shares a piece of work and then a community of educators describes back what they have noticed.²⁸ After graduating, I chose to work in a school where descriptive review was a monthly practice. This method of looking at a student closely and hearing a larger community’s response to the child significantly expanded my ability to see what others were doing. Listening to a room full of teachers as they explored the same student’s work, I was not only learning about the student but also about how my colleagues approached the world. The more I looked closely at children with my colleagues, the more I was able to notice in my own students’ activities in the classroom.

Increasingly, I saw ways of thinking that I could not describe with words but knew to be different from my own. Children built with blocks in ways I would never have considered myself. Some were innately able to balance the heavy objects with form and grace. I listened to students talk as they made clay boats float in a tub—some intuitively understood notions of density that I had memorized with minimal comprehension.²⁹ From their experiments and questions, I began to understand density. I watched students draw—colors, shapes, and feelings swirling across their pages. It became clear that where I could take pencil to paper and render something recognizable, there was passion, thought, and intention behind much of my students’ artwork. Though some struggled with hand-eye coordination, they made up for this in color choice, spatial orientation, and passion. It was hard for me to say what was good except that I knew that it was.

Then one day a second-grader, Anita, handed me a picture of an angel with “I made this for you” and a hug. I have been given quite a bit of student art. Some is more artistically impressive than others. Always I appreciate the gift but in this case, I could not take my eyes away. Cut from construction paper, it was one of the

most beautiful angel renderings I had ever seen. Anita was a deeply religious child. Because of the beauty and the intention that seemed to seep from it, it felt as if I had been given a blessing. I was touched deeply by the gift. My mind shifted. I still could not explain with words what made great images but suddenly I began to see that that was because drawing does not speak in words.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey explains that, “every medium has its own power . . . and that the basis for distinguishing the different traits of the arts is their exploitation of the energy that is characteristic of the material used as a medium.”³⁰ Access to different mediums allows people to capitalize on what each medium has to say. Because each medium speaks in a particular way, the attempt to explain that medium in words is necessarily a limited translation lacking the depth of the original expression.

In a chapter entitled “Arts as Epistemology: Enabling Children to Know What they Know,” teacher researcher and situated philosopher in her own right Karen Gallas writes about the way that a variety of mediums, “drawing and painting, music, movement, dramatic enactment, poetry, and storytelling,”³¹ helped her students make sense of the “required science curriculum.”³² Gallas documents the experience of a particular child, Juan, who was just learning English and struggled with traditional school tasks such as reading, writing, and math. Being encouraged to draw enabled Juan to access the curriculum at a sophisticated level. Gallas argues that “often initially separated by language, cultural, and racial barriers, I have learned that the creative arts, rather than labeling our differences, enable us to celebrate them.”³³ From Juan and his classmates Gallas learns what Anita taught me, that often a given medium helps someone express aptitudes and intentions better than another mode of expression. I determined that if I were to have a classroom that valued all students’ aptitudes, the environment needed to be full of a variety of materials. In this way, I could help students find and develop their own personal language.

Learning to See and Work with Other Approaches

I came to understand that, for many of my students, their ways of seeing, organizing their views of the world, and responding to them differed drastically from my own. As the teacher, I could not always actively join a particular child in his world because I did not always speak the language. That said, I could keep children company and allow their words and actions to translate. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Jacques Rancière, quoting the educator Joseph Jacotot, argues that “A material thing is first of all ‘the only bridge of communication between two minds.’”³⁴ Working with the same material, people are able to learn together. The material can connect and ground very different approaches. According to Rancière, the teacher does not need expertise with the particular material. Instead, through careful questioning, one can teach what one does not know. As the learner answers the questions, both the teacher and the learner come

to understand the material better. For example, without a strong background in science, I started doing water experiments with my students. In one experiment, I gave them a tub of water and a few materials (such as soap) to put in the tub. I asked the children what they noticed about the water as they introduced the new material. Together we learned some properties of water.

Again writing of Juan, Gallas comments that he “was teaching me once again a lesson that I seem to have to relearn each year: When given the opportunity, listen to the children. They will show you what they know and how they learn best, and often that way is not the teacher’s way.”³⁵ From listening to how a child answered questions as well as watching how she engaged with materials, I developed greater access to her learning process. For example, one extremely verbal child, Jesus, consistently puzzled me with his resistance to writing. He chose every day to write at a desk across from where I worked with other children. With a desktop computer dividing us, Jesus could not see me. As I met with his classmates, Jesus would poke his fingers under the table in what I came to realize was a greeting. During a descriptive review that revealed that Jesus used a variety of situations as opportunities to communicate, a colleague suggested that Jesus might resist writing because it felt too isolating. Jesus’s approach to the world was highly social and writing, at least in the short term, impinged on his desired mode of experiencing the world.

To explore new ways of thinking, I also immersed myself in learning opportunities outside of school. During my first year of teaching, I enrolled in a poetry writing class and then spent the summer taking a medieval literature course. The more I wrote for myself, the more creative I became with my writing curriculum. Aware of how much this work in literature and writing had influenced my thinking about teaching, I began to immerse myself in areas in which I was less confident. I took a year-long workshop in math pedagogy that consisted mostly of solving math problems. Over one summer, I traveled to the Dominican Republic as part of a course on environmental research. There I engaged in scientific inquiry. In my third year of teaching I attended a teacher inquiry group focused on visual arts. The culmination of my work was to build a small house out of wood. It was challenging and inspiring to practice carpentry, a craft I had found difficult as a child. Each experience I had out of the classroom made its way back into my work with my students. As I expanded the ways I saw the world, I thought more deeply about the range of ways my students might be processing and organizing their own experiences.

Creating Community by Exploring Individuality: Curricular Changes

Increasingly aware of different talents and ways of seeing, I changed the types of activities and materials available in my classroom. My units became more inclusive. I brought collage, painting, carpentry, puppets, blocks, acting, and song into my curriculum. For one homework assignment, I sent home a piece of blank paper

with a note saying that children could embellish the paper however they wished and with any materials they chose.

More inclusive assignments led to increased enthusiasm and effort in my students. Writing of the “desirability of starting from and with the experience and capacities of learners,” Dewey notes that when a child’s “natural impulses”³⁶ are followed, the child tends to be more committed to the work. In my classroom, I never enforced completing homework assignments, believing that a young child’s ability to do work at home typically reflects a family’s ability to help the child complete it. As a result, homework tended only to be done in houses where the families (based on self-reports) forced their children to do it. The blank paper assignment was the only homework that every child completed. In fact, most students turned their work in early and expressed eagerness about sharing their creations. The work showed signs of hard work and careful attention.

In that assignment, the children’s interests came through and so did their talents. The diverse products included a necklace, a three-dimensional replica of the city where we lived, a football-themed board game, math problems, and a drawing of a sonogram. I learned about the content the children were interested in thinking more about, such as math and a newborn baby. I also learned about the materials that interested them. Where one child labored with scissors to make a necklace, another made a crayoned rendering of the ocean semi-three-dimensional by taping on goldfish crackers. The different interpretations of this assignment also showcased different ways of approaching the world. I was joyously surprised by every single one.

Over the course of the year, the students picked up on my valuing of individuality. They began to notice each other’s work and express appreciation for it. The more children were noticed and affirmed, the more their individual strengths began to grow. Every day we had “worktime”—an increasingly vibrant period when students chose their own projects. Harrison, who was often somber and self-conscious, became ebullient as he made puppets out of recycled materials. I got the idea to make puppets this way from visiting the art room of another school. To support the work further, I read some books with Harrison about puppet construction; but the true insights came from his classmate, Ellie. She had made her own puppet independently. As the three of us studied her work, Ellie carefully explained what she had done so Harrison could make his own. Engaging in the inquiry of one child brought me in contact with content from other schools, published material, and another student. Together we created something new.

The culminating unit that year was truly interdisciplinary. In studying bridges we looked at the history of the Brooklyn Bridge, as well as different bridge structures. The students shared what they knew about bridges they had crossed and famous bridges they or their family members had seen. For the final project they chose how they would express their learning and whether to work with others or alone. There was a great deal of movement as students tried a range of mediums.

Children built with blocks, endeavored to make a more permanent structure out of wood or cardboard, and also wrote stories about the Brooklyn Bridge. When we shared our bridges, families were thrilled with the range—commenting that no projects looked the same and yet the level of craftsmanship was high in each case. The subject matter brought us together and gave us the opportunity to explore in different ways.

The last day of school, with no materials out in the classroom and nothing left to do, I told the class that we would have a talent show. I gave them about an hour to practice. My father, visiting that day, worried as he watched them rehearse. Because the children were all approaching the task so differently, they appeared unfocused to him. He suggested that an hour wouldn't be long enough. I knew much of the rehearsing had already happened since we had been exploring and then sharing our talents all year. I expected the students would come up with something good. I trusted that coherence would come out of the busyness that my father saw as chaos.

Even so, I was blown away. Each child came up with something distinctive and adeptly performed. Our performances included a Hindu song, a Marx Brothers skit, a self-choreographed dance, miming, and an explanation of how to care for a puppy. My students looked safe and unself-conscious. After each child finished, the room erupted in applause. I was amazed. As much as every performance fit with my estimation of the child's talents, each was also powerfully unexpected. The period ended magically. One child began to sing a familiar tune and the room exploded in song. Some sang the chorus, others took a verse, a few provided the beat, and many danced. It was so smooth it seemed rehearsed, and that was when I knew that they knew each other, really knew each other, and they also knew themselves. Following Dewey, in cultivating growth by honoring the differences of the individual, a community culture that was both inclusive and larger than any of us came to be.

THE NEED FOR INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

According to feedback from parents, the inclusive curriculum supported individual children's intellectual and social growth. As one father noted early in the year, his child's confidence and interest in school soared after a student-led presidential inauguration celebration. We were united in this project by the common theme of exploring the presidency, but students chose to investigate through activities ranging from researching and drawing eagles to making block versions of the White House. The father expressed his gratitude. His child struggled with reading because of an early illness. By the end of kindergarten, this child had decided he was unsuccessful at school. The father commented that the child's confidence, and with it his reading ability, had dramatically improved in the weeks leading up to the celebration.

That year, I also noted tremendous growth, as I tracked students' development through traditional means like reading assessments and more unusual methods

such as biannual narrative reports.³⁷ Based on these assessments, I found that students made more formal growth that year than during other years.

Ware notes that “benefits to both disabled and non-disabled students have been reported” as a result of inclusion.³⁸ Where my students certainly gained from the richness of the materials available and the opportunity to pursue their own interests, I believe that they benefited as much if not more from being in a space where “ability diversity”³⁹ was recognized and celebrated. As parents exclaimed after our bridge-building celebration, our classroom stood out because the students’ final products were so very different from one another.

Ware writes, “It is not even enough to imagine the perspective of the other; we must also try to share deliberations with the other person.”⁴⁰ To be inclusive, we therefore must engage in nonhierarchical conversation with others. In the aforementioned poem, “Why I Am Not a Painter,” O’Hara models this activity. In declaring, “I think I would rather be a painter,”⁴¹ O’Hara suggests that he values being a painter enough to wish he were one. The phrase “I am not” suggests that to be a painter is to hold a particular set of talents. I find O’Hara’s acknowledgment extremely respectful. Additionally, by showcasing Mike Goldberg’s painting in the text, O’Hara recognizes Goldberg. The stanza that describes Goldberg’s work is the same length as that which describes O’Hara’s, positioning both men and their different professions as equals. Further emphasizing the men’s equality, in the fourth and final stanza O’Hara concludes by juxtaposing his and Goldberg’s works. O’Hara and Goldberg stand on the page side-by-side. O’Hara’s interaction with Goldberg led not only to the poem “Why I Am Not a Painter,” but also to another poem called “Oranges.”⁴²

Cunningham et al. conclude their article on Dewey’s relationships with diverse practitioners by arguing that “exclusion is not only politically unfair; it is also intellectually limiting, even dangerous.”⁴³ Restated as an affirmative, inclusive education offers a more equitable approach because it encourages individualized growth for all students.⁴⁴ As Dewey writes, “the very process of living together educates.”⁴⁵ O’Hara not only recognizes Goldberg with his poem, but in attending to Goldberg’s work, O’Hara’s poetry also develops. In accessing the perspectives of others, “we are nourished.”⁴⁶ Specifically through communication with others, both the speaker and the listener grow in turn.⁴⁷ Through communication, one sees the world more richly. As Dewey writes, “one cannot climb a number of different mountains simultaneously, but the views had when different mountains are ascended supplement one another: they do not set up incompatible, competing worlds.” Instead “one statement [or view] will emphasize what another slurs over.”⁴⁸ As exemplified in our talent show, the children in my class had the opportunity to share from their different mountains. This led us to a deep and nuanced common perspective. Therefore, by building a community that included the perspectives of all, the classroom was better suited to everyone’s learning.

As I argued earlier, where many K–12 schools and schools of education encourage inclusion, figuring out how to enact inclusive practices poses challenges. Though predisposed toward a more inclusive worldview, my own education in school and society had left me with many preconceived notions about how people think and operate. Even after taking a course on inclusion and then teaching in an environment that supported it, making the paradigm shift to a more inclusive perspective and practice took years of self-examination, listening to colleagues, observing children, and immersing myself in new content areas.

Once asked by a professor of education, “Why should anyone listen to what just one schoolteacher had to say about just one group of children?” the creative and inclusive early childhood teacher Vivian Gussin Paley responded, “Because it is the only way to find out what one teacher thinks.”⁴⁹ Making a similar point, Gal- las emphasizes that where her data about children’s needs cannot be generalized, what can be generalized is her consistently open approach and eagerness to grapple with new questions.⁵⁰ When I share my classroom stories with future teachers, I too maintain that any specific actions cannot be generalized. I do not promise that anything I did will be successful with another group of children (although sometimes it is), and I do not speak to what children with different abilities and needs from those I’ve worked with would need. I further acknowledge that there were certainly luxuries in my teaching environment, such as relative freedom of curriculum, that other teachers do not have. Instead, what can be generalized are certain elements of my thinking process. My education students and I now focus on what it means to approach teaching as an inquiry. Specifically, we talk about how I learned to be self-reflective, to study my students, increase my content and pedagogical understandings, and make the classroom open to a range of abilities. Some of my students will be able to make large curricular changes to make their classes more inclusive, while others will bravely seek to work within the cracks of highly restricted programs. I support both, for I have learned that teaching, at any level, is working with students, colleagues, the environment, and my own abilities to create a classroom that honors individuality. In this spirit, I urge my readers to focus on the habits of mind that support responding inclusively as opposed to any particular actions.

As challenging as forging a more inclusive classroom can be, the stakes in succeeding are extremely high. As Kliever writes, “to be considered fully human requires acceptance into relationships in which the experiences that form our individuality are recognized as communally valuable.”⁵¹

NOTES

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11. Karen Gallas, *The Languages of Learning: How Children Talk, Write, Dance, Draw, and Sing Their Understanding of the World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), xv.
12. Baglieri et al., "[Re]claiming 'Inclusive Education'"; Ware, "A Moral Conversation on Disability," 155.
13. Kathleen M. Collins, *Ability Profiling and School Failure: One Child's Struggle to Be Seen as Competent* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003); Kliewer, *Schooling Children with Down Syndrome*; Shapiro, *Everybody Belongs*.
14. Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid, "Differentiating Instruction for Disabled Students," 195; Celia Oyler, "Democratic Classrooms and Accessible Instruction," *Democracy and Education* 14 (2001); Slee, "Inclusion in Practice."
15. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1944).
16. *Ibid.*, 360.
17. Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid, "Differentiating Instruction for Disabled Students," 195.
18. Ware, "A Moral Conversation on Disability," 144.
19. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 360.
20. For a detailed overview of this research see Cara Furman, "Reflective Teacher Narratives: The Merging of Practical Wisdom, Narrative, and Teaching" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 2014), chapter 3.
21. Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen K. Abowitz, "A Situated Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy and Education* 24, no. 2 (2008): 269.
22. *Ibid.*, 4.

23. Craig A. Cunningham, David Granger, Jane Fowler Morse, Barbara Stengel, and Terri Wilson. "Dewey, Women, and Weirdoes: or, the Potential Rewards for Scholars Who Dialogue across Difference," *Education & Culture* 23, no. 2 (2007): 29.
24. *Ibid.*, 57.
25. See Karen Coates, "Wet Work and Dry Work: Notes from a Laconian Mother" in *A Narrative Compass: Stories That Guide Women's Lives*, ed. Betsy Hearne and Roberta Seelinger Tries (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 68–79, for an evocative description of the way in which reading philosophy and mother became meaningful in conjunction with each other.
26. Frank O'Hara Poems. <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/smonte10/files/2010/08/OHara-Poems.pdf>.
27. David Sousa, *How the Brain Learns Mathematics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008), 69.
28. For a more detailed discussion of descriptive inquiry, see Margaret Himley and Patricia F. Carini, *From Another Angle: Children's Strengths and School Standards* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
29. For a more complete discussion of this activity see Eleanor Duckworth, "Tell Me More:" *Listening to Learners Explain* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), chapter 1.
30. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 253.
31. Gallas, *The Languages of Learning*, 130.
32. *Ibid.*, 131.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Jaques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 32.
35. Gallas, *The Languages of Learning*, 132.
36. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 194.
37. In these reports to families, I wrote descriptively about academic and social development. Focusing on assets, I drew data from observing students and looking at the work they produced. These reports were not evaluative but gave families suggestions for activities to support further learning.
38. Ware, "A Moral Conversation on Disability," 153.
39. Gabel, "Some Conceptual Problems with Critical Pedagogy," 183.
40. Ware, "A Moral Conversation on Disability," 156.
41. Frank O'Hara Poems. <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/smonte10/files/2010/08/OHara-Poems.pdf>
42. *Ibid.*
43. Cunningham et al., "Dewey, Women and Weirdoes," 57.
44. Oyler, "Democratic Classrooms and Accessible Instruction."
45. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 6.
46. Kliewer, *Schooling Children with Down Syndrome*, 5.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 110.
49. Patricia M. Cooper, *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.
50. Gallas, *The Languages of Learning*, 10.
51. Kliewer, *Schooling Children with Down Syndrome*, 5.

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Cara E. Furman is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Maine at Farmington. Email: cara.furman@gmail.com.