

The 18th Annual Reach for the Rainbow Conference, June 7, 2007

Introducing Mara Shapon-Shevin

18th Annual Conference Keynote

RFTR staff enjoyed a day with Mara at the TASH Conference in Reno, Nevada where learning came naturally during her interactive workshop. We look forward to two similar workshops titled, *Inclusion through Music and Movement* at our Conference! Mara is a professor at Syracuse University, well known for teaching inclusive education and community living, as well as for its NCAA championship teams. She co-authored *In the Pool, On the Stage and at the Concert* which appeared in these pages *Spring, 2005* with Paula Kluth, our keynote speaker that year.

Inclusion: A Matter of Social Justice

How can we create schools that will help students thrive in a diverse society?

By Mara Sapon-Shevin

Picture this scenario: John, a quiet 12-year-old sixth grader at your local middle school, goes through the cafeteria lunch line at noon. After he pays for his food and drink, he starts to put his tray on a table already occupied by other students. One of the boys at the table says, "Go away." John leaves the table and approaches the students at another table. There he is told, "Get out of here." John walks away and puts his tray down at a third table, realizes he's forgotten his straw, and goes back to the lunch line to get one. When he returns to the table where he left his lunch, he finds his tray gone.

How would you assess this situation? Is there a problem here? If so, whose problem is it? What should the school officials do about this situation? Should John be removed from the school because others don't want to sit with him?

Perhaps your assessment is that the social climate in the school is highly problematic and that something should be done to build community and develop more appropriate social skills among the students. Perhaps you would extend this analysis to issues of race, class, language, sexual orientation, gender or ethnicity, questioning what problems might be operating in the school and how these issues could be addressed. Probably, you would find the other students' behaviour inappropriate, unacceptable for future citizens of a global community.

What if I told you that John is a student with a wonderful sense of humour, a love of mystery books, an impressive golf swing, and also, by the way, Down syndrome? Would your analysis change? Would you now see the situation differently? Would you say, "Oh he's special ed!" Might you conclude, as did the hearing officer at John's due-process hearing on inclusion, "Well, this behaviour shows conclusively that inclusion doesn't work and that John should be in a special school with others like him where he won't be treated like that"?

The above story is true. John is an amazing golfer, and he does have Down syndrome. And the hearing officer did issue that outrageous exclusionary statement.

This situation raises other questions. If the students treat John this way, how do they respond to the girl who is overweight, the boy with severe acne, the student who has two lesbian mothers, or the girl who just arrived from Cambodia with limited English skills?

Do we believe that students at this school are welcoming and accepting of all forms of diversity – except disability – and that this issue is only about special education? Or does this story help us think about the ways in which schools both mirror the broader society and create it? How might we use the story of John's

mistreatment to think about the policies, practices and norms in our schools that encourage or impede positive responses to difference?

Dentists often give patients a red 'disclosing tablet' to help them see where their tooth brushing is still inadequate. We can use John's presence as the disclosing tablet of our schools. We can view John's school experiences as indicators of imperfections in our schools' curriculum, pedagogy, social climate and teacher preparation – a needs assessment and a progress report on the road to creating inclusive world (Sapon-Shevin, 1996).

John's story is a telling indication that inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice. Inclusion demands that we ask: what kind of a world do we want to create and how should we educate students for that world? What kinds of skills and commitments do people need to thrive in a diverse society? Removing John from his middle school will not teach his classmates understanding, generosity of spirit or any of the skills that they will need to successfully work, play and interact with the wide range of people they will encounter in their lives. Removing John will not teach students to be active allies to those who are experiencing discrimination or oppression.

Lessons for Inclusive Schools

Inclusive classrooms can teach us important lessons that go far beyond individual students and specific settings and help us create the inclusive, democratic society that we envision for our students and society. How can we realize this vision? Here are four ways:

Challenge Exclusion

"You can't be in our group!" "Let's not let Lilly be on our team/in our club/at our party." "You're not my friend – I don't play with people like you." Most adults have experienced exclusion some point on the basis of race, age, sex, family background, class, sexual orientation, religion, language or physical characteristics. The list goes on and on. Exclusion, however, is not about race or language or gender – or any other difference. Rather, the culture of exclusion posits that isolating and marginalizing the stranger, the outlier, is appropriate, acceptable and sometimes even laudatory. Exclusion is not about difference; it is about our responses to difference.

Inclusive classrooms can help us challenge practices of exclusion. In an extensive research project, classroom teachers implemented Vivian Gussin Paley's inclusive rule from her book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (1992), and documented the consequences (Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998). Not only did students learn active ways to include other students in games and activities, but, more importantly, issues of inclusion and exclusion became topics for discussion: "Let's talk about what happened today during free play when Matthew wanted to join the girls in the housekeeping corner." "What shall we do about the contradiction between your right to choose whom you play with and other students feeling left out and sad? "What should you do if you can tell that someone wants to play with you but doesn't know how to ask, or asks, inappropriately?"

Many teachers hesitate to initiate such discussions because they fear making issues of exclusion worse. They hope that by not talking about the way children are treating Larissa, somehow the problem will go away. Or they fear that they lack the skills or the classroom norms for such a discussion. These concerns are genuine and worthy for our attention, but if we wait until everyone feels ready to address them, we may wait a very long time. Failing to address what all the students have already observed communicates that exclusion is inevitable. Even imperfect attempts at challenging exclusion can communicate that the way in which we treat one another matters and that doing so in the classroom is a priority worthy of our time and attention.

Deal with Teasing and Bullying

Teasing and harassment are issues far broader than disability. We need not wait for our schools to experience shootings and murder, such as those at Columbine, to respond seriously to the ways in which students can become harassed, marginalized and excluded.

In the children's book *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), students tease Chrysanthemum about her name. The first teacher, Mrs. Chud, tells the children to put their heads down and she attempts to ignore the behaviour, which, not surprisingly, escalates. The second teacher, Mrs. Twinkle, not only notices the students' teasing, but also inquires about it and responds to the teasers in a thoughtful, productive – and non-punitive – way.

One important principle for dealing with teasing and harassment is for teachers to respond to insults or injuries that occur in public with an explicitly educational and public response – for example, “What you said is harassment on the basis of race/sexual orientation/physical appearance, and here at Woodrow High School, we treat all students with respect.”

Try Other Perspectives

Recent world events provide opportunities to discuss new perspectives. What makes someone our enemy? What makes someone dangerous? What can we tell by looking at someone? What can't we tell? What happens when we act from a very limited perspective? What do we learn by reaching across perceived borders of difference? Can you be friends with someone in kindergarten if you're in fourth grade? What about differences in skin color? Language? Family background? What do we lose and gain by changing our lenses and perceptions?

Foster Courage, Challenge Oppression

Bob Blue's song *Courage* tells the story of a girl who witnesses the exclusion of a classmate, Diane. She makes connections between Diane's exclusion and recent social studies lessons about 'gas chambers, bombers and guns in Auschwitz, Japan, and My Lai' and about the fact that many stood by silently. At the end of the song she says,

I promise to do what I can to let it happen again. To care for all women and men I'll start by inviting Diane.

Students respond to this song powerfully, more than eager to discuss their own experiences of exclusion and their responses. Students can and do respond with courage to exclusion and bullying. One mother told me that when students were bullying a boy on the bus, her seven-year-old daughter left her seat to sit with the target. She told the other students, “Stop. That's not nice.” We can all emulate this young girl's courage.

Everyone needs strategies for responding with courage to oppressive language and behaviour, and bringing students, parent, teachers and administrators into a dialogue on these strategies can strengthen our resolve.

Active Allies of Social Justice

Students in inclusive classrooms are learning to ask, “What do we have to think about on this field trip to make sure that it's physically accessible for all the kids in our class?” and “How shall we plan for the class party so that everyone has something to eat, given allergies and religious dietary limitations?” I have seen

students in inclusive settings learn to be both comfortable and sophisticated in understanding differences and becoming active allies on behalf of other students. These questions can extend beyond the classroom: How can students confront racism in their community, English-only legislation, sexual harassment in the workplace, homophobic advertising or representation? Inclusive classrooms can be places in which students learn to take powerful stances against oppression of many kinds, recognizing their own agency and power to change the world (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

If we move beyond seeing inclusion as a special education concern, beyond seeing those to be included as those with disabilities, then we have the potential to challenge and transform far more within our schools and society. We need to question the words we use – isn't what we call 'special education' actually 'segregated education' for many students? Why are only some students included in inclusive classrooms? What about making a commitment that all students be included, renaming 'inclusive classrooms' simply 'classrooms', or 'standard practice' (Sapon-Shevin, 2001)?

When one person is oppressed, no one is free. When one student is not a full participant in his or her school community, then we are all at risk. By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for us all.

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