Ethnicity and Race

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Seeing Color:

Diversity as a Resource for Teaching

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Abstract

Diversity in our schools is growing however children who are not Anglo middle-class increasingly find themselves marginalized in classrooms, where they receive schooling but rarely a meaningful education. Under the prevailing deficit approach, students who are different from the mainstream in terms of race, ethnicity, language, appearance, sexual orientation, children who come from low income families, from the wrong side of the tracks or those labeled with any kind of 'dis'ability, are considered less able to succeed in school. This chapter will show how, by appropriating an ability approach to all learners and bringing their lives and stories into the classroom, we raise possibilities for better teaching and learning experiences. Pedagogies of ability acknowledge and make use of the myriad colors that make up our classrooms to create the promise of a just and meaningful education for all students.

Introduction

Every child must be visible if we are to succeed as a world class nation.

Gordon, E.W (2009, ix)

When you walk into a Chuck Close exhibit you must stop a good distance from each huge portrait to be able to see it as a whole, the colors mixing optically in your eyes to a meaningful totality. But as you come closer, you find that the entire picture surface is composed of a multitude of tiny abstract paintings. Like a pixilated computer image, the canvas is covered

by an intricate grid of hundreds of tiny squares, each painted painstakingly, with nesting geometric forms in different colors, hues and shades (Figure 1). No two squares are exactly alike in the forms or colors that make them up. Some are similar, never replicas, and this fantastic matrix breathes life and vivacity into the work of art.
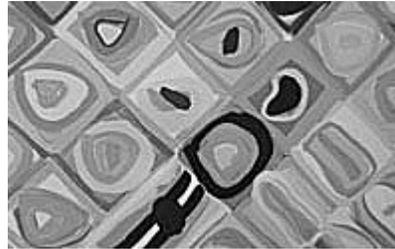
Figure 1: Chuck Close, detail from *Self Portrait*, 1997

Close's work can serve as a metaphor both for the diversity making up the big picture of our schools and for a pedagogical approach that can leverage it to achieve equity in educational opportunities. Looking at 3rd graders in a school setting, for example, we see boys and girls, about 9 years old, who gather daily with a teacher and engage in educational reading and writing activities. Zooming into this image reveals an astounding diversity, variety, multiplicity, range of possibilities and arrays of colors from which the larger picture is composed: many, many wonderfully different children; no two exactly alike; all essential and all meaningful contributors to the whole picture.

The diversity we find in schools today derives from processes of globalization and from increased sensitivity to difference across multiple aspects of being human – from gender, through culture, socioeconomic circumstances, learning and communication styles to personal goals. Yet despite having incorporated different ways of being into many areas of our lives to enrich our own experiences, diversity from dominant mainstream norms in our education system is frequently disregarded or used against the learner, hampering academic success, entrenching stereotypes (blaming the victim) and excluding too many from a meaningful education. The focus seems to be on perpetuating the system at any price, even if that price is squandering the

wealth of abilities, propensities, opportunities and ideas inherent in its diverse human components.

This chapter explores the possibility of creating more socially just education opportunities for all students. It begins with a discussion of current educational policies and practices that restrict children of non-dominant groups from full access to education then delineates spaces of possible action while suggesting pedagogies of hope for a better future (Apple, 2008). The underlying idea is that diversity is a resource from which to draw and from which to segue into teaching the prescribed curriculum. By proactively "seeing color" (Delpit, 1995) and leveraging it for use in our classrooms, while simultaneously changing our use of language and constructing through it a belief in the *ability* of every student to learn and succeed in school, teachers obtain a conduit for creating more equitable teaching/learning experiences in their classrooms.

Appropriating an ability approach to learning means focusing on what children can do and what they bring to the classroom as resources as well as the foundation on which to construct learning. If we learn to respect both the children who enter our classrooms and the knowledge they bring; if we are able to connect the curriculum to their lives and show its relevancy to their personal goals; if we learn to use personal connections as a foundation that will nurture, and engage, and motivate, then every child will enjoy a meaningful education experience within the existing education system.

The Current Picture of Education and Schooling

The vast physical, demographic and ideological changes in the world over the past fifty years together with new developments in technology and information systems and the increasing pace of these changes have profoundly altered the texts and contexts of our lives. The notion that the world is reducible to fundamental components and concepts (such as "an average student") has for the most part given way to the acceptance of complexity and the dynamics of non-linear adaptive phenomena that constantly evolve, unfold and generate diverse, new possibilities. "Such rapid and pervasive change creates the need to develop new ways of understanding the world and of interpreting our experiences" (Taylor, 2001, pg. 19).

Brown and Moffett (1999) describe the new challenges to our schools and education systems in terms of the populations they serve: populations that are increasingly diverse, without a shared history or a set of shared values and cultural experiences, with changing and diverse views of morality, exhibiting increasingly self-destructive behavior patterns and a general rise of violent conduct across society. Further, upsurges in access to information and the capacity for instant global communication coupled with extraordinary advances in technology are both empowering and overwhelming and contribute to expanding the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." The above factors add to the stresses of family life and often result in decreases in emotional and psychological support needed by children in their critical formative years, and increases in the expectations for schools to provide the stability, emotional security, and basic care. Along with the above identified obstacles to academic achievement come challenges to academic and social engagement (*i.e.*, hunger, fear, depression, marginalization, lack of motivation and appropriate health care). These challenges are immense.

Our school systems have, sadly, remained mired within the grasp of a modernist paradigm, still based on an efficiency/factory model, disconnected from the human beings who both compose it and for whom it was created,. Rather than address the issues of diversity and multiplicity that are implicated in unjust academic outcomes for many students, they continue to chisel away at those who are different, trying to fit them into "the box" or when the challenge is too great, removing them altogether. Our school systems are "on a collision course with what we are coming to understand about human learning and the conditions necessary for exceptional learning by all students" (Marshall, 1998, pg. 49).

Focusing mainly on socialization, school systems tend to disregard individuation (Rorty, 1999) and diversity among learners in order to simplify the task of delivering a universal curriculum. This is accomplished by ignoring the context in which learning takes place, sorting learners based on standardized test scores, operating on the premise that one-size-fits-all and continuing to silence the voices of those who are different (Ohanian, 1999). "[The] meanings that emerge from the transactions between schools and the existing socioeconomic order tend to have more to do with channeling than with opening opportunities, with constraining than with emancipating, with prescribing than with setting people free" (Greene, 1995, pg. 51).

There is an element of social justice in the dynamics of schooling since all children have access to twelve years of education and the resources entailed (more or less[i]), are exposed to similar curricula and practices, and are subjected to national standardized testing that attempts to determine how successfully schools have prepared them academically. Yet the system is unjust in its institutional oppression of students from non-dominant groups because by "defining a large part of what is considered to be legitimate knowledge, [schools] also participate in the process through which particular groups are granted status and other groups remain unrecognized or minimized" (Apple, 2008, pg.255).

Diversity as Dissonance: The Deficit Approach

Exclusion is not about difference; it is about our responses to difference.

Sapon-Shevin (2003, pg. 26)

Rooted as it is in a modernist paradigm, the education system reduces differences to unity (as in "Reading level 5.4"), categorizing some students as oppositional and disabling, lying outside the valued center and on the wrong side of the normal/deviant dichotomy (Young, 1990). Student diversity is repressed and discounted to the point of not recognizing who learners are as individuals and not acknowledging the funds of knowledge, experiences and possibilities they bring into the classrooms (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Their communities are disregarded and their cultures disvalued (Pewewardy, 1998).

Children who do not belong to the Anglo middle-class and those "bestowed" with a disability label, are often considered deficient and/or 'at-risk' for failure because of their habitudes and the preconceived attitudes and perceptions of educators (*i.e.*, biological and cultural determinants, standardized test scores indicate level knowledge acquisition, failure denotes little or no effort on the student's part, or uncaring parents …). The above perspectives originate from political, social and economic policies intended to maintain and perpetuate the status quo of American power relations, where the worldviews of white, middle class, Christian men rule. *Their* cultural expressions and identities are considered "normal", while differences

from these are construed as lacking or negation (Ehrenreich, 2001; Fisher, 2007; Flores, Cousin & Diaz, 1991; Goodlad, 1997; Young, 1990).

"[O]perating under the hegemonic illusion of sameness" the general education system ignores the incalculable and limitless possibilities of being human" (Fisher, 2007, pg. 166). It reduces and reifies dynamic processes such as, assuming cognition to be hereditary. This implies that students come to school fully formed in terms of their learning abilities leading to a belief in biological and cultural determinism, which in turn, resigns some teachers to accept that "some children, due to genetic, cultural or experiential differences, are inferior to other children – that is, they have deficits that must be overcome if they are to learn" (Nieto & Bode, 2007, pg. 15). So although students may receive (a version of) socially just schooling, some are *a priori* barred from access to a meaningful education:

> *Labeled students very often become their label; they are regarded in schools only as that which their negative label designates… while all other facets of their lives and identities, their abilities, their strengths, the non-school literacies they know and are learning constantly, tend to fade from view (Ben-Yosef, 2008b, pg. 22).*

Students who feel invisible, unappreciated or unworthy in the eyes of their teacher or peers, cannot, will not and do not learn. Yet we persist in blaming them for their academic failures instead of taking responsibility for helping them find success in school. This biased and discriminatory approach is a self-fulfilling prophesy: many children who are different from the mainstream lose confidence in themselves, not only as learners, but as able and worthy human beings – a feeling they may carry with them throughout life; they lose interest and motivation because they believe they are doomed to fail, so they continue failing; they resist, become disruptive or drop out mentally or physically.

Consider the response of two hypothetical students to a social studies lesson on "The Westward Expansion": John, a Native American, and Elizabeth, an Anglo, whose ancestors immigrated to America on the Mayflower. Based on Rosenblatt (1978/1994), these two learners will probably create widely divergent "poems" from the same text: the first will find defeat, loss of ancestral lands and culture, closing of opportunities and humiliation of his people, while the second will compose a picture of heroes, bravery, idealism, opening of new opportunities and the

victorious expansion of her great country's boundaries from sea to shining sea…. The cultural transmission ("education") receive in schools is often irrelevant, inappropriate, un-motivating or degrading for some students.

Pedagogies of ability

<u>Teaching and Learning</u>

> *I KISS THESE CHILDREN WITH A LOOK, WITH A THOUGHT, WITH THE QUESTION: WHO ARE YOU, WONDERFUL SECRET? WHAT DO YOU BRING WITH YOU? HOW CAN I HELP YOU?*
> Janusch Korchak[ii]

Teaching is the art of inspiring and promoting learning; it is the art of motivating learners to assume agency in their quest for knowledge and in growing their own minds. We have the responsibility of teaching, but it is up to the learner to actually learn, so our teaching must be carefully tweaked and adjusted to support the individual student. Two ideas are important in this equation: a) learners transform their own minds as they build new knowledge and, b) learning ensues in safe environments.

All students come to school with knowledge already learned and stored in their minds. Roschelle (2009) writes that further learning is achieved by attaching new knowledge to prior knowledge in a slow process of incrementally refining and transforming one's schemata. This progression is totally dependent on the learner: we all come to class with an existing set of neuronal networks and tangles and since teaching cannot create new neuronal connections out of thin air, nor erase old ones, "the only recourse we have is to begin with what the learners bring" (Zull, 2002, pg.105). As learning proceeds, neuronal networks are transformed with new connections created in the learner's brain as a result of the learner experiencing and coming to understand the new knowledge. Although "...no

outside influence or force can cause a brain to learn" (ibid. pg. 52), we can create the conditions for motivation and learning to proliferate in our classrooms. The first step is creating safe classroom environments on several linked levels: the spatial, cognitive/emotional and pedagogical (Ben-Yosef, 2008a).

The safe classroom.

Productive inclusionary classrooms can be safe spaces for learning when all students are accepted, heard and their proclivities respected. The physical classroom must serve as a platform for raising the voices of all individuals and groups, "[providing] means for all people to exercise their capabilities and determine their actions…including the interests of the least advantaged… leading to positive self-identity, self-determination and self-worth" (Gale, 2000 pg. 268). Instruction in such spaces should be contextualized within a symbolic "unscripted third space" created between teacher and learners and inclusive of all. "Third spaces" are immanently hybrid: polycontextual, multivoiced and multiscripted; in them "alternative and competing discourses and positioning transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning" (Gutierrez et al., 1999 pg.286). As we accept all voices, we proceed to construct pedagogical bridges between our curricular/ instructional objectives and the lives, goals and passions of the individuals we are teaching (Littky, 2004; Millard, 2003).

> Amy, the homeroom teacher, had a dialogue with David. He complained that he hates math, can't stand being in the class and that was why he had become so disruptive lately (the math teacher had been complaining bitterly about his behavior). Amy tried to find out where the distress came from. They talked about whether David doesn't like the teacher; maybe the time of his math class was too early or too late in the day or maybe it was right after the morning break soccer game that saps much of his energy? Might he be in an ability group that is too difficult for him?
>
> Finally they figured out that there was a child in class who made David feel inferior and incapable, leading him to clowning and disruptive behavior that, David hoped, averted the focus from his math ability to his behavior. Amy and David decided that he should change math groups temporarily and David chose a lower group where he thought he would feel more comfortable "*Because I don't always*

> *feel like making an effort in math*", he later explained his decision to me (Ben-Yosef, 2003b, pg. 228-9).

In addition, by appropriating a multi-directional understanding of the context and interconnectedness of knowledge, we must create space in our classrooms for outside voices from families and communities. These voices inform our teaching as we become acquainted with appropriate patterns of participation, conversation, vernacular knowledge, and interests that are important in our students' lives. When students know that their lives matter in the classroom discourse and that they are equals in the community of learners, their minds become "available for learning" (Ben-Yosef, 2003b; Damico et al., 2009; Roschelle, 2009).

The safe mind.

The primary role of the brain is to safeguard one's survival by constantly scanning the environment for signs of physical, cognitive and emotional danger. In 'survival mode' the brain concentrates on removing physical and emotional harm and is unable to process other incoming information. When potentially harmful situations have been eliminated, the brain is again open and available for learning. The learner's emotions play a particularly important role here: negative emotions instigate fear and the brain reverts to survival mode; positive emotions lead to pleasure which promotes learning, so stressful situations shut down the brain to learning, emotionally healthy safe and exciting environments encourage learning (Wolfe,2001; Zull,2002).

Several years ago I was assigned to teach a literacy class to a group of graduate students of physical education and health. The students resented having to take the course claiming it had nothing to do with their lives: they would never have to teach reading and writing and this was a big waste of their time! My attempts to defend the canon, explanations that physical ed. was also a literacy and that I would teach them about learners, learning and how to teach in general, just fell on closed minds. So, after two disastrous lessons when I got to know the students better and realized that most of the students had reading, writing and attention challenges themselves (casting their minds into survival mode and fueling much of their negativity), I reverted to a pedagogy of ability and personalized the curriculum: the rest of the semester was all about hands-on projects involving movement and frequent changes of activities.

The reward for all of us was twofold: a flowing, enjoyable rest-of-the-semester experience and the final project in which the students chose to create a motto for our learning center using their knowledge of physical education and media technology while successfully incorporating their predisposition toward things physical rather than academic (figure 2).
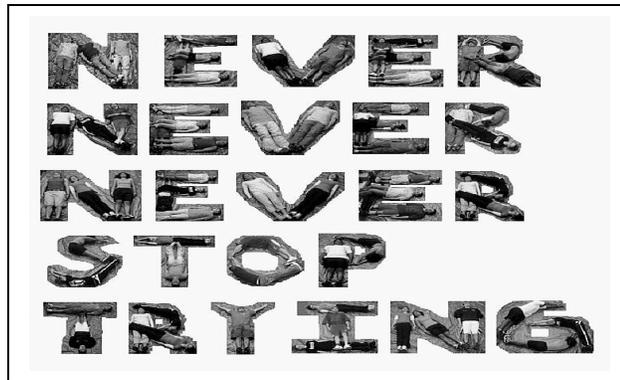

Figure 2: Physical Education students' motto for learning center

<u>*Diversity as resource.*</u>

> *A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these and there occurs a different circuit, a different event – a different poem.*

Rosenblatt (1978/1994, pg. 14)

Imagine if we would focus our attentions on the strengths and abilities of our students; instead of basing schooling on the success/failure dichotomy, we focus on seeking success for every student; instead of indiscriminately dispensing identical instruction (though some benefit), we provide equitable access to education, giving each student the resources necessary to have an equal opportunity to achieve as students and subsequently as adults. Imagine we choose to embrace the normalcy of difference as well as the immense resources inherent in human diversity for the benefit of all students (Ben-Yosef, 2003a, 2006, 2008a, 2010; Chang, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Littky, 2004; Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

Everybody was excited and anxious. Eight choirs from around the city were sitting together in a beautiful new community center waiting for the annual choir meet to begin... It came as a total surprise for me (in the audience) to learn that the first choir to appear at the meet was a choir of children who were deaf and mute. [They began "singing"] in sign language accompanying their teacher who signed along with them, conducted and sang vocally. They sang a song called "A human-being is a human-being is a human-being" (*adam hoo adam hoo adam*):

Yes the sun above,

Will shine here forever

Will shine on everyone

Because you are not alone.

In the world there are millions

Of people, of people

Light and dark and different

Adam hoo adam hoo adam.[iii]

The children in the audience knew the song and the conductor asked them to join in both vocally and following the signs she and the children were making. As they did so, the whole auditorium of hearing and non- hearing kids, speakers and non-speakers, signing and singing to each other "*adam hoo adam hoo adam*", seemed to be the manifestation of an ultimate experience of extending space for acknowledging all children, of acceptance of difference and of the inclusion of others, naturally, into the everyday flow of life (Ben-Yosef, 2003b, pgs. 203-204).

This is not such a farfetched possibility, as the example above indicates. The pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty wrote (1999) that philosophical problems we encounter are made, rather than found, and "can be *un*made by using different vocabulary" (pg. xxii). Our beliefs and language are human constructs that are by no means an accurate account of any kind of reality (*i.e.*, we believe test scores are indicative of the learner's knowledge, when in fact, they mostly reflect test-taking skills). The ultimate goal of all human inquiry, wrote Rorty, is to allow us to live with less humiliation and suffering while increasing our pleasure and hope. So when things

aren't working well for us, we should critically examine our beliefs and the language we use to describe take action to change them appropriately.

Why can't children who are deaf and mute participate in a choir and perform with/for their peers? Imagine the joy added to the world via the children who feel accepted as able to sing, albeit in their own way. Imagine the tolerance added to the world via the experience of all the children in the audience singing and signing "A human-being is a human-being is a human-being". By imagining the possible, the organizers of the choir promoted inclusion and learning for all children through a slight change of language, from "cannot" to "why not?" Envisioning education as inclusionary does not require systematic restructuring or massive infusions of capital. All that is warranted are linguistic modifications reflecting paradigm shifts in our beliefs and personal spaces (our minds, our classrooms), allowing us to appropriate innovative practices that open doors of opportunity for all children.

First, our concept of social justice must expand from '"equal distribution" to "the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation" (Young, 1990, pg. 39), or "Recognitive justice" as referred to by Gale (2000), "that includes a positive regard for social difference and the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards its achievement" (pg. 267). This linguistic/ ideological change allows us to recognize all of our students as worthy human beings deserving of our educational efforts. The next step is believing that all children are able and willing to learn, concomitantly accepting diversity as a reflection of the multiple ways of being human and of the infinite possibilities inherent in different minds. Pedagogies of ability centered on the individual student's strengths and interests as they relate to the prescribed curriculum allow us, metaphorically, to paint a huge picture of meaningful education compiled of the myriad pixels of every student's unique propensities and their contribution to the whole classroom experience.

Personalizing the Curriculum: starting with the learner

Sagor (2002) wonders at the motivation of teenaged skateboarders who, with a success-to-failure ratio of 1/100 when learning new tricks, continue to struggle and persevere seemingly without any extrinsic rewards (i.e., grades or pay). Why is this kind of engagement found so naturally outside the classroom but rarely inside? Sagor finds that motivation to learn emanates

from attempts to satisfy five basic human needs: the need to feel competent, to belong, to feel useful, to feel potent and to feel optimistic. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) added the need for immediate feedback and the relevance of the material learned to the learner's life. Thus, learners will be intrinsically motivated to learn, engage in the learning process and persevere despite hardships and setbacks if they feel that learning is relevant and useful to their lives, that they are competent to achieve the learning goals (Vygotsky's ZDP) and that the learning connects them to a community of people with similar interests and abilities.

To understand our students' motivation to learn, we must become familiar with their worlds (*i.e.,* individuality, family circumstances, neighborhoods), and what "baskets full of knowledge" (Lake, 1990) they bring with them to the classroom. Then structure the curriculum to incorporate those experiences, for "education, in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life experience of some individual" (Dewey 1938/1997, pg.89). The personal experience becomes the starting point of the learning journey as well as the foundation upon which it is constructed.

Darling-Hammond & Friedlander (2008) describe inner city schools that have beaten the odds helping students from non-dominant groups achieve academically and thus dramatically transforming their future possibilities by focusing on individual experiences. A key concept implemented in all of these schools was personalization: "By knowing students well, teachers are more able to tailor instruction to students' strengths, needs, experiences, and interests. "Personalization substantively influences students' investment in learning by nurturing strong relationships and accountability between students and teachers" (pg. 16).

Reading to Fly: An equalizing pedagogy.

Imagine yourself reading a book for pleasure: Do you read every word, every paragraph or every chapter, remember every detail or analyze the characters and the plot? Do you have to report to anyone on the information or pleasure you got from the book? So why do we ask all this of our students? May you stop reading if the book doesn't interest you? May you read only the action parts? May you read (like I do with suspense novels) the end first and then proceed to the beginning? So why do teachers require students to do so?

This is how we drive many children away from reading "our" books, mushrooming into an aversion of reading any books. Hence, *Reading to Fly* (Ben-Yosef, 2010), a creative reading methodology within a pedagogy of ability that personalizes the curriculum to benefit and empower all readers. It is an approach to teaching reading that accommodates readers' interests, experiences and strengths, sanctioning individual responses to texts. This methodology is based on the idea that independent reading is a personal journey in search of meaning from texts by invoking the imagination - wherever and whatever appeals, excites, engages. Creative reading is inclusive of language, culture and ability levels: every reader may respond to the text as they choose, according to their ability, interests and motivation; every reader can achieve success.

When *Reading to Fly*, readers can respond to a text in any way they wish (a list of possibilities is provided, but other ideas are accepted), such as creating a sound track for future "film", or a poster advertising it, enacting a skit regarding an issue, creating a short video presentation, drawing a cartoon sequence, creating a travel brochure, "boxing" the book, singing, dancing or researching a topic. Below are a few examples[iv]:

✓ After reading *Far North* by Will Hobbs, a student created an advertisement for the future film, very carefully selecting the actors that would best fit the roles (Figure 3)
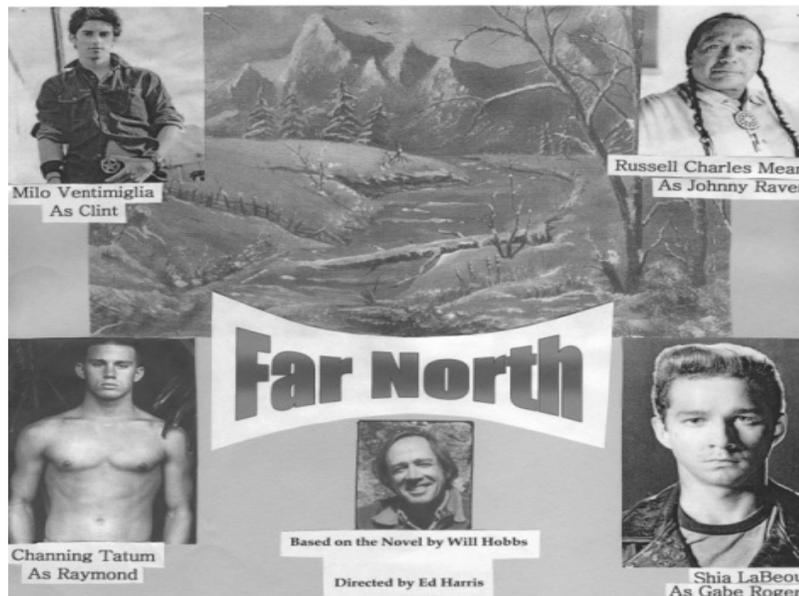

Figure 3: A poster for the "movie" *Far North*

✓ In response to *The BFG* by Roald Dahl a student created several huge (paper) jars in which she placed written and visual responses to the main character and the story line (Figure 4).

All students succeed (rarely have I received a poor response), and when students associate reading with a positive, pleasant, successful experience, reading becomes less daunting and more intriguing for all readers, regardless of prior labeled abilities. Once readers realize their power to seek and find personal meanings in a text, texts lose their intimidation factor (as if that barking dog suddenly curls up at our feet) and the reader can assume agency of knower and able interpreter. The sensation of having power over texts enables students to delve into textual analysis required in the curriculum, even with texts that would have trounced them in the past. *Reading to Fly* evens out the reading field.
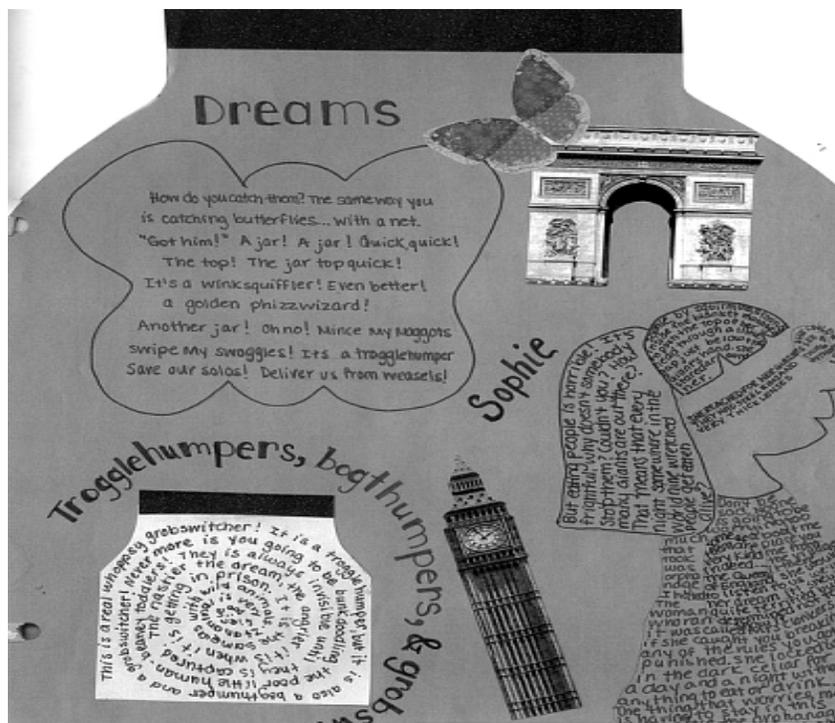

Figure 4: A jar filled with dreams from The BFG

Seeing color in a Tel-Aviv school.

> *There isn't a human being who can't succeed. If he can't succeed at one thing, he can at something else. If we believe that every person has the right to succeed, we will search every route to get there.*
>
> A. Yahalom, Tel-Aviv principal (Ben-Yosef, 2003b, pg. 160)

An ability approach based on "Recognitive justice" (Gale, 2000) and the idea that all children can and want to learn was conceptualized in an inner city elementary school in Israel. The school (K-6), located in Tel-Aviv, is situated between two huge bus depots and an outdoor market, surrounded by sex shops and crumbling buildings. The neighborhood is the poorest and most decrepit in the city and the residents are a mix of Israeli citizens and work migrants. The student population was about 300 (at the time of my research 2000-01), half of which were children of illegal migrants from 35 different countries speaking 18 different languages and living in constant fear of arrest and deportation. All of the students were from economically impoverished families.

Over and above the multiplicity of origins, mother-tongues, and educational histories, the diversity of gender, race, class, individual learning styles and motivation, there was a great diversity of social and emotional issues the children were dealing with (acclimating to a new country, culture and language, living in highly stressful situations of dysfunctional families, poverty and fear) that impacted academic processes, and as the diversity of its student population grew, the principal and teachers realized that within the prescribed curriculum and the routine school functioning the children's educational needs were not being served.

To compensate, they began a process of reconceptualizing schooling in general and rethinking their roles and responsibilities in the lives of the children. The result was a child-centered pedagogy focused on "the real needs of the child" and anchored in three essential concepts: 1. The equity of human worth; 2. The acceptance of all people, and 3. The right of every person to succeed. The overarching goal was to create a safe place to which the children could come willingly and where they would receive a meaningful education through "experiences of capability" that would motivate them to work, study and achieve continuing success. By focusing on what the children could do, the Tel-Aviv faculty established new priorities where dealing with social/emotional issues took precedence over academics, helping the children first become "available for learning" before expecting them to perform in class.

By focusing on what the children *could* do, the Tel-Aviv faculty established new priorities where dealing with social/emotional issues took precedence over academics, and helping the children become "available for learning" came before expecting them to perform in class. Once the child was ready, all major subjects had flexible ability groupings such that the child and

teacher (parent too, when available) would decide on placement. When children felt strong they could request to move up a level; in times of stress in their lives, children moved down to relieve academic pressure.

   To address the needs of their transient population, teaching was focused on themes and skills that would serve the kids in any school or country they ended up in (reading and writing in two languages, math, computer skills, accessing information systems, report writing) rather than a specific content. When the 6th graders had to write reports on a topic of their choice for social studies and present it to the class, I heard about Jerusalem, Stalin, Ferdinand Maximilian the Emperor of Mexico, Ben-Gurion and Moldova, complete with PowerPoint presentations and background music.

   The school had no comprehensive comparative assessment and grading; students were evaluated only against themselves: dialogue between teacher and student was used to assess each child's progress in the prior two months and to set goals for the next two months. Report cards were descriptive and written in different languages as necessary for the child's parents to understand. Diversity was embraced to express inclusion as well as to leverage teaching and learning. I first came to the school in December and the computer laboratory bulletin board was covered with holiday cards that the children had made: "Merry Christmas" with Hanukah menorahs, "Felice Navidad" above a picture of slaves building (Mayan) pyramids, or "Happy Hanukah" (in Hebrew) surrounded by a menorah, dreidles, an elf and Santa's face…. (Figure 5).

חנוכה שמח

לואיס

Figure 5: "Happy Hanukah" greeting card, Tel-Aviv School

In preparation for the upcoming Jewish holiday of Purim when children dress up and gifts are given to the poor, the 4th grade teacher asked the students to tell about their own celebrations that include wearing costumes. After telling their stories the teacher said:

> *There are parallels between the customs of different people. The reasons for the holiday can be different, the reasons for giving gifts can be different…but these correspondences show us that all people are equal and similar…[Purim is a very important holiday] because it is relevant to every people. It is relevant to Joanna from Ghana and to Emreh from Turkey. On this day eve-ry-body is happy. Every child in the world can be happy, no matter where he comes from (Ben-Yosef, 2003b pgs. 212-213).*

A very colorful school indeed.

Getting to Know Our Students

> *What happened to us, what we did, what we hope to do, what we feared, what we ate, who we met, who we hate, who we love, what we created, what lies we told and were told, our victories, our losses, and all the other things that make up life are the things that we remember and learn. They become the story of us*

Zull, 2002, pg. 228

If we are determined to create a pedagogy of ability, we need to find out what abilities and propensities are available in the classroom and what better place to find this information than through the students' own stories? This is a reciprocal process: we learn from and about students so they can better learn from us. Hilliard, an inner-city teacher, says she is always trying to learn what her students are 'experts' in:

> *I want to know what they know so we can make some natural and relevant connections to their lives… My students know about community politics and police brutality. I can't feed them a steady diet of cute little animal stories and happy middle-class kids. Their experiences have to be part of our curriculum too (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pgs. 52-53).*

By perceiving, accepting and valuing the myriad colors, hues and nuances that make up classroom populations as well as each individual learner in the form of multiple versions of reality, multiple ways of knowing, multiple literacies, intelligences, imaginations, needs and struggles (including the teacher's own), diversity in all of its wonderful expressions becomes a

dynamic source for opening minds, extending horizons, enhancing and enriching educational experiences of all students.

Self-Portraits

Self-portraiture activities can give us access to our students' lives and their stories as they present and represent themselves in writing and/or in art (Ben-Yosef, 2009). Self-portraiture gives us insight to the "richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience" in its rightful context, while "conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pg. 3). This methodology resists harmful generalization and averaging while giving voice to peoples' achievements, struggles, dreams and ways of being.

When we create a self-portrait to tell our story it is an act of self-representation, a description of us as we see ourselves and as we want to be seen. The creation process is a learning experience on its own: learning about the possibility of seeing ourselves from different perspectives and realizing that human beings are multifaceted. By sharing our stories with each other in a space that is safe and accepting, we create bonds and cross borders into each other's lives, growing our understanding of differences and commonalities as well as empathy toward other peoples' experiences; we expand our horizons and our knowledge of the world (Brown, 2006).

The following are two examples of how teachers can use self-portraits (in any format) to modify instruction and inform assessment.

June A pre-service literacy graduate student of Chinese descent, June was getting a Masters degree in literacy after 20 years of working in hi-tech. She created a self portrait using collage as her media (Figure 6). Sharing her work with the class she said that she constantly deals with splitting headaches due to her worries about her son who is now a teenager and needs to begin applying for college; about money, her health and not eating right; she feels the clocks are ticking too fast and she hasn't enough time for getting everything done; she feels she is drowning in responsibilities with little time for reading, which is so important to her yet she feels guilty whenever picking up a book for pleasure. The nuts "spilling" from her head represent feelings of "going crazy".

Figure 6: June's self-portrait

Listening to June, I reflected on how I could relieve some of the stress she was feeling and make the classroom experience safer for her. Knowing her strong academic abilities I took away the time pressure for projects and papers; I also asked her to forgo a class project to have time to read a book for pleasure. Another outcome of this sharing activity was that a fellow student whose son had just gone off to college said she would be happy to talk with June about their experience and walk her through the application process.

Desean was a student in a developmental reading college preparatory class where students come after full days of work from which they finance their education. Many of them commute from a distance to get to school and some go home after this evening class to families, children and more work. As a result, students often fall asleep during class, come in famished and need to eat as we are trying to read and write, very often homework is late and attention is easily lost. My approach is to focus on what the students *can* do and what they *do* get accomplished and to guide them on a personalized path upon which they can succeed. The semester begins with students telling about their lives, journeys, goals. The following is Desean's narrative self-portrait:

I am/ by Desean
I'm a man born with a smile,

Even though daddy hasn't been around for a while.
I'm a man half beef patty, half Dominican rice,
With the soul of Tupak Shakur and Harlem Renaissance.
Everybody clicks to my ambiance.

I'm a man whose older brother had him hanging with older fellas,
The same man who watched his bro die from a younger felon.

I'm a man whose innocence was lost in his teen years
Due to a father who disappears and reappears,
A man who went through more stress than any of his peers.

I'm a man whose legal drinking age was 15,
A man who has been in and out of county bars,
A man who hopes that if he makes it,
His talents will take him far.

Desean was very talented, intelligent and with a good command of language, writing and drawing (which he perfected in the years of doodling in school). He hadn't had opportunities of good schooling in the past (he belongs to multiple disenfranchised groups) and was back in school trying to find a better future. Desean mixed with a dubious crowd, that on one occasion during the semester sent him to the hospital, and his work in a distant borough sometimes ended too late to allow him to get to school on time. So I created a program for him whereby we were constantly in contact via the internet and he used the long train rides to and from work to do his homework. He always had a weekend to do the work before it was due and after some adjusting, he did well and passed the class.

Other students' needs were also addressed to the point where they could succeed if they kept up. But I think that for all of us, students and teacher, the strongest impact of the class had to do with its being based on a pedagogy of ability, the idea that we are all worthy human beings, able learners and knowledgeable teachers. We learned about and from each other and as time went on we shared life stories, experiences, advice and information. A community of learners evolved. Everyone was included and where there was a will, a way to succeed was found.

Conclusion

Bringing the students' stories, histories and diverse ways of being into the classroom is the foundation upon which a socially just inclusionary pedagogy can thrive. It means valuing the students more than the curricula as teachers become gate-openers rather than gatekeepers; it means

finding ways of engaging every student in learning by allowing in their voices and out-of-school worlds; it makes quality education accessible to *all* students. This is a process of acknowledging that we are all similarly worthy and differently able; everyone has valuable knowledge and insight with which to enrich learning environments and our stories, our lives, our voices are of the essence to learning. "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible" (Hooks, 1994, pg. 41). Being able to see differences as diverse abilities and as resources for learning, informs and improves our teaching as we relate the curriculum to our students' lives and trigger motivation and engagement. By seeing many colors and including them in our pedagogy we are all rewarded with exposure to a wide and bountiful world of possible human relationships to consider, opening our eyes and enriching our minds. It is a gift of understanding multiple ways of being human that we give our students as well as ourselves.

We can't change much in the grand scheme of things, but we do have the power to change oppressive and exclusionary conditions in our classrooms. Acknowledging everyone as an equally worthy member of our learning community, a member who can contribute meaningfully to the classroom dialogue, someone we can learn from as well as teach, someone who has the human right to succeed in school and get a meaningful education, all this provides us a palette of multiple colors, materials, ideas and perspectives to use in imagining and creating our art of teaching for socially just access to education.

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Endnotes

[i] Schools in low socioeconomic communities are usually well behind those in wealthier suburbs in terms of learning materials, technologies and facilities that open up future possibilities, sometimes to the point of "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991).

[ii] Korchak was an educator before and during World War II or Two in Poland. Although he wasn't Jewish himself, he accompanied his young Jewish students when the Nazis came to take them, so they won't be afraid. He was murdered with them all in Auschwitz.

[iii] One of the song stanzas (translated from Hebrew). Hebrew lyrics and music by Dudi Shechter.

[iv]