

Through Children's Eyes: *Community Collaboration for Social Justice*

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THIS ARTICLE IS DEDICATED IN LOVING MEMORY OF DEB CLUNE.



AS TREES IN UPSTATE NEW YORK WERE CHANGING COLOR during autumn's transition to winter, the staff and students of Riverside School were beginning a transformation of their own. The catalyst for change came when we discovered that Deb Clune, our school psychologist, was struggling to navigate the obstacle course our building had become. A recent amputee (below the knee), Deb now relied on a scooter for mobility and access to all classrooms and facilities. Watching her struggle to maneuver around and between barriers was a humbling experience, one that ushered in a new consciousness in Riverside. By the time winter turned to spring, the third-grade students had undergone a transformation of their own.

The response to Deb's new needs elicited a variety of opinions and reactions about the work we do in schools and how we do it. Some staff supported Deb by simply holding doors open for her, removing clutter, or helping her petition those who were responsible for insuring her access within the building. Others did not believe an educator with such serious limitations could even do her job and expressed doubt that students would respond well to her situation. This minority opinion was alarming, and it set in motion a series of decisions designed to prove it wrong.

A New Perspective

Suddenly aware of the privileges enjoyed by those of us who live without disabilities, and reminded of what I once heard Emmy-award winning journalist John Hockenberry call, "the temporarily-abled," I decided I wanted to experience a day in a wheelchair. At first I wondered how I would fulfill my responsibilities effectively from the confines of a wheelchair. Next, I wondered how students would respond if given the opportunity to experience a temporary disability. With these simple questions as my guide, I designed a disability awareness unit of study for my third-grade students. The unit for both students and teachers allowed participants to spend one school day in a wheelchair following a structured plan that would serve to standardize the experience. Each student would stay in the wheelchair from arrival in the morning until the bell rang at 3:00. The only time a student could leave the wheelchair was after successfully entering a wheelchair accessible bathroom. In a building with over sixteen bathrooms, this meant only one would be available to the student. There were clearly going to be challenges for the children (and participating teachers) to overcome.

Community Collaboration

In order for the students to experience something real and personal, I was committed to following three principles. First, I wanted to allow students to find truths for themselves, by themselves.¹ I knew I



Students monitor the few parking spaces beside the school that are reserved for disabled drivers or passengers.

Photo by Donald W. Wyckoff

could not transmit the deep understanding that comes from personal experience by lecturing, presenting PowerPoint shows, or relying on textbooks, or lecture. Second, I aimed to see that purpose and process were always taken advantage of. Our program was mapped out, but student interest and passion were honored so that students could pursue individual interests along the way. Third, I wanted to support student growth by intelligently directing the possibilities that arose during the project.² Allowing students to follow what had meaning to them meant I would have to be prepared to act as a navigator of the institutional and “adult world” protocols they might not understand. These three principles are all critical components of an experiential learning model.

Lacking both a wheelchair and the knowledge of the challenges facing me, I contacted the Catskill Center for Independence and shared my plan. The staff’s enthusiastic reaction was inspiring. After speaking with my new collaborator, Don Wyckoff (an architectural barrier consultant), I was promised not only three wheelchairs (two child-size wheelchairs and one adult wheelchair for school staff), but support and guidance throughout the project. Mr. Wyckoff made two visits to the third-grade classes to provide an educational component to the program, toured the building and grounds, and created an extensive list of possible tasks for the students to attempt.

An Experiential, Literacy-based Program

As we began this project, we introduced students to important vocabulary words (disability, accessibility, accommodation, and independence) that they would need when speaking and writing about their experience. Brad Zeh, a third-grade teacher, created a pre-wheelchair writing assignment to capture the students’ feelings and opinions about disabilities before actually starting the project. In order to help each student organize her or his thoughts and reactions to a (temporary) disability, I created a Student Log, which served both as a contract (it reminded students of the seriousness of this endeavor) and a journal for students to record their reactions to their day in the wheelchair. Students used their responses to 16 questions to write a personal narrative that documented their experience. A key component of the Student Log was a “Task List” of critical challenges that a wheelchair user would likely face in a typical day (opening doors, entering a bathroom, using a water fountain, accessing a window, ascending a ramp, etc.).

As students traveled the building while in a wheelchair, they discovered many of the daily challenges people with disabilities face. Their frustration with heavy doors, the inability to enter or exit the building without assistance, knuckle-scraping narrow doorways, struggles to cross a snow-covered walkway, and an impossible cafeteria setting, all gave them new perspectives on disabilities. Over three weeks, 32 students—as well as three teachers and our principal—experienced a day in a wheelchair.

Documenting What Happens

An important part of this project was the opportunity for students to share what they experienced with others. Given the access we had to digital technology, I challenged students to make a film documenting

their experiences. Knowledge is power only if students can use it to change social conditions, and we hoped our documentary would help spread awareness.³ So we equipped third graders with digital cameras and camcorders over several days. After all of the third grader students had a turn in a wheelchair and behind the lens, they worked with Barbara Havlik, our school librarian, to make a “day in the life” film. Students provided narration for the documentary using comments they had written in their essays.

Some of the problems encountered by students were fairly predictable. “It was impossible to pick a pencil off the floor,” wrote Jasmine. Recess was challenging, too. Ari complained, “I could not go through the snow with my friends because it was too deep.” During a special movie day, Tommy protested: “I felt left out by having to sit in the wheelchair while other kids were lying on blankets on the floor.”

Classroom accessibility posed problems for all the students. The seating arrangement and access to one’s own desk were both difficult. Some students wished for taller or wider desks, while others suggested a horseshoe seating arrangement for easier access. Adianna offered this suggestion: “When I was handing in my work, the path of travel was not accessible. I would make spaces between the desks.”

Other problems were not foreseen, as Pooja explained: “At lunch somebody called me ‘wheelchair girl.’ I wanted to cry. I was embarrassed. I thought that I was going to start crying in front everybody.” Ian summarized what many of his peers felt: “I have changed the way I feel about people in wheelchairs because I thought they were always mean. I got scared because they looked different. Now I know they’re not.” This change in attitude was universal among our participants and constituted one of the most gratifying outcomes of the project.

Following the month of wheelchair use, the students worked on an adaptive technology invention project aimed at making tasks easier for people in wheelchairs. Students suggested new inventions, ranging from the practical (cup holders and seat cushions) to the fantastic (chairs with 10-foot hydraulic lifts).

Face to Face

In our second year of the Third-grade Disability Awareness Program, I chose to address a weakness of the program—too little contact with people with disabilities. We met a charming man, Larry Quarltere, who suffered permanent spine damage and is now quadriplegic. Mr. Quarltere lives with severe physical challenges, but has set for himself very high expectations.

After meeting Mr. Quarltere in the classroom and learning about the amazing ways he has overcome many obstacles in his life, the students were invited outside to see his customized van. Throughout his visit, Mr. Quarltere welcomed the nearly endless barrage of questions from an excited, curious, and informed group of eight-year olds. The dialogue between Larry and the kids was critical to our program; it breathed new life into our work. What began as a visit with a guest speaker developed into an inquiry-based experience that encouraged students to reflect and construct their own pathways for learning.⁴



A student learns about overcoming disabilities from a guest speaker.

Photo by Donald W. Wyckoff

After Mr. Quarltre drove off, we returned to the school building. As we entered the main doors, one of the students called out, “Hey! How would Larry get in here?” Since Larry has severely limited use of his arms, the answer was, “He wouldn’t.” This upset the kids and inspired them to begin their quest for improved accessibility (and independence) for people with disabilities. The third-graders were now expressing interest in social responsibility and discovering their own agency as active citizens.

Democratic, Inquiry-driven Social Action

As the next phase of the project began, I felt it was my responsibility to present the students with options to pursue their goals. Supporting student-generated learning became my primary role. I contacted Mr. Wyckoff at The Catskill Center for Independence and received all the tools needed to conduct an on-site survey of our school, including a copy of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) *Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities*. My fellow third-grade teacher, Marissa Gallusser, and I set up a study to measure accessibility in our school. The students were divided into research teams using two devices, an accessibility stick and a door pressure gauge. The door pressure teams tested the most commonly used doors in the building (interior and exterior), providing us with multiple measures for each. The results showed that nearly every door in the building was out of compliance, each one requiring double or triple the maximum force recommended by ADA guidelines. Two other research teams investigated obstructions in the path of travel (the path one would follow in the course of a day). These teams focused on level changes (depressions in floor surfaces and spaces between or in surfaces) and vertical rises (objects that rise up from the floor beyond one-quarter inch).

When the students met to share the results of their door pressure

measurements, there was a quiet frustration among the group. Everyone understood that Larry, and any other individual with similar disabilities, would have to struggle with the doors in our building. The students discussed their options. Some wanted to picket at the district office while others recommended writing letters to the U.S president, our state governor, or the city mayor.

After some debate, we began with our principal. She advised us to contact our school district’s deputy superintendent, Mr. Austin. Two students wrote a polite letter to Mr. Austin, and he quickly agreed to visit us. During his visit, the students explained the seriousness of the issue, presented our data, and requested an action plan to remedy the violations. Mr. Austin explained how the school bureaucracy worked and prepared the children to wait for a response from the administration. He thanked us for our efforts and pledged to take our data to the

district’s architect and get back to us in three weeks.

No Parking

The students’ focus next turned to illegal parking in the school’s designated accessible parking spaces (“handicapped parking”). Unfortunately for those drivers who lacked permits, the spaces were in direct view of our classrooms, and the eyes of the third-graders were always upon violators. We added a Riverside Cares parking ticket to our arsenal of compliance strategies. Drivers who used these spaces without a visible permit were given a red Riverside Cares “ticket” which informed them that they were parked illegally, their license plate was recorded, and if they parked there a second time, they would be reported to the police. It became common in our classroom to hear, “Mr. Sider! Look! Someone is parking without a permit! Get a ticket!”

Ticketing cars was my job, and, much to the students’ frustration, I wasn’t always able to leave the classroom. Our most common violators were parents and delivery people. When confronted, some drivers appeared apologetic, but many just saw our efforts as yet another inconvenience in a string of inconveniences that led them to park in the designated spaces to begin with.

Our first serial offender was a delivery truck driver. We asked him not to park in the designated spaces, but he continued anyway. The kids wanted to do something, but what? “Call his boss!” someone suggested. Instead, the kids hung large handmade signs in bold crayon print, “DELIVERY TRUCKS: NO PARKING.” These bright white signs, lashed to the pole with blaze red yarn, did the trick.

Following Up

Winter turned to spring, but we had not heard back from Mr. Austin. Two students were dispatched to the computer to write

him a letter and remind him of his promise. While we waited for Mr. Austin, the students decided to take matters into their own hands. Realizing the only remedies to render the heavy front doors accessible would be automatic door openers or a call button, teams set out to gather prices and information for both solutions. A call to The Imperial Door Company in Tonawanda, New York, provided the information the kids wanted (price, installation fees, warranty period, and prices for service contracts), while inquiries at local hardware stores provided us with prices for battery-powered doorbells (the kids preferred the fancier types which would give the school secretary a choice of sounds).

Mr. Austin arrived and reminded everyone of his earlier warning: bureaucracy takes time. The students had to agree with that observation. According to his research, the problems with the doors fell into two categories. First, the school district was required to meet the ADA guidelines for the interior doors, and the work would be scheduled. Second, the specifications on the exterior doors were not required. So there was some good news, and some bad news, in Mr. Austin's message.

The students were not empty-handed; they came prepared with their own information and prices for ways to fix the problem. Mr. Austin was happy to record their new information and, in parting, thanked them for being so conscientious. When I asked what we should do next, the students responded clearly. They wanted to take action to make the front entry to the school more accessible. We moved forward.

Celebration

The children decided to raise money to buy their own call button. The prices ranged from \$12.00 to \$40.00. Not an unreachable sum, but how to raise it? The kids recommended a car wash, bake sale, book sale, art sale, etc., before choosing to do work in teachers' classrooms in exchange for a donation to our cause. When our workday had ended, we earned a total of \$55.00. It was enough money to help all visitors enter our school by purchasing a call button.

The next morning, Mr. Wyckoff called to say how moved he and his colleagues were. They would donate an approved call button so the kids wouldn't have to do the classroom work. I thanked him, but told him it was too late. Knowing that the bell he was offering (with a universal symbol and Braille text) was superior to what we would have purchased, I agreed to accept it. I greeted this unexpected gift as an opportunity for the students to devise a new plan for a responsible use of their hard-earned money. In a final and impromptu planning meeting, I explained the situation to both classes and asked for their input.

They decided to invest their money in new signs to hang at the designated parking spaces. After some discussion and editing, we decided on a simple message: "No Student Drop-off or Pick-up, No Deliveries." With that settled, we turned our attention back to the doorbell. On the last day of school, with less than an hour to spare, Mr. Wyckoff delivered the new call button. We gathered at the main doors to celebrate this improvement.

From Frustration to Liberation

This project began with a simple consciousness-raising goal in mind. Many of the children were excited to have their turn in the wheelchair and expected to enjoy a day of freewheeling fun. But for most, it actually turned out to be a day of hardships and physical discomfort. I will remember the looks on the faces of the students who, despite all their might and determination, could not exit through the main doors of the school. (Their frustration was doubled by the realization that, in an emergency, they would have to rely on others to carry them out of the building.) I will remember my days in the wheelchair and the cold I felt in my legs and feet (due to poor circulation from sitting). Writing on the board was nearly impossible due to a limited reach and rolling wheels. With wheels unlocked, the wheelchair rolled as I pressed chalk against slate.

The physical realities opened our eyes and hearts to those struggling with issues of physical independence, and inspired us to take many more steps. Deb Clune, our initial inspiration for this program, remarked, "I think the biggest thing I have noticed since this program began is the higher level of awareness in the entire building. It is hard to really understand what it is like to be totally dependent on a vehicle of some sort in order to get around or how

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Students investigate whether spaces can be navigated with a wheelchair.
Photo by Donald W. Wyckoff



hard it is to access the world from that position.” The evolutionary nature of this program would help prepare students to understand later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality.⁵ As we met new challenges, we felt the burden of our silence give way to the liberation of our raised voices.

Applied Learning

One of our proudest moments occurred during what was supposed to be an exciting, democratic, school-wide vote for new playground equipment. Catalogs were distributed to all classes and votes were to be tallied to choose the winning structure. As we were sitting on the classroom rug prioritizing our choices, a voice rang out. “Hey! A kid in a wheelchair couldn’t get on this equipment!” Time stood still. Many faces dropped, envisioning the new equipment dissolving before their eyes.

We had a problem, but we also had an idea of how to solve it. The kids quickly reorganized the choices for playground structures into two piles; those that were wheelchair accessible and those that were not. The principal was summoned and the problem explained. I was proud to be in the presence of such genuine student vigilance and self-discipline.⁶ Mrs. Murdock assured the class that any play structure chosen would have to be wheelchair accessible and that, in fact, the item they liked best was already known to be accessible. Through this spontaneous event, I recognized that the students’ attitudes did not develop overnight, but over a longer time. It also proved to me that when I take seriously questions that arise from children’s lived experiences, there is the possibility that both teacher and students will be transformed.⁷

Fortunately, the frustrations the third-graders faced were mitigated by their actions during this program. This was not just an exercise on paper.⁸ The students’ accomplishments—the improvement to the infrastructure of our building—were the material reward for their hard work.

Open to All

Riverside School now boasts brand-new wheelchair accessible cafeteria tables, a call button at the main doors, student-monitored designated accessible parking spaces, two wheelchair accessible bathrooms, and a pledge to have all interior doors meet compliance standards according to ADA. But the most important system change lies within our students. I believe it is the responsibility of engaged citizens, and especially teachers, to develop such critical awareness.⁹ Through these experiences we are cultivating critical consciousness and deep compassion which mature through service.

Our collaboration with the Catskill Center for Independence proves that it not only “takes a village to raise a child,” but that meaning is found when a compassionate and giving community is created.¹⁰ In America, we have a culture of not seeing.¹¹ We often fail to see (or choose not to see) the struggles of people within our own community. Children rarely encounter disability issues in the curriculum or the mass media. This democratic learning experience empowers students to become self-reliant activists who recognize that people with disabilities face many struggles, often in silence

and virtually invisible to those of us who are temporarily-abled. Where there was silence, third-graders joined together, transforming silence into language and action as they experienced personal and group empowerment.¹² I believe the children (and their teachers) have awakened to a deeper and broader perspective. We have moved from silence to speech through acts of unforgettable liberation for ourselves and others.¹³ With respect to social action, I have learned that administrators, bureaucrats, and politicians respond to the steady eyes and passionate voices of their own children.¹⁴

This service-learning project provided critical awareness, one that joined compassion, understanding, and social responsibility. The project was about what we learned, not simply about what we did. It is my hope that the children who participated in this program will travel through life with open eyes and open hearts, and that their memories of this experience will serve them and their community well. 🌍

Notes

1. Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Miseducation* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 21.
2. John Dewey, *Education and Experience* (New York: Rockefeller, 1938/1997), 89.
3. Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6.
4. Ira Shor, 31.
5. John Dewey, 47.
6. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those who Dare to Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 15.
7. Chandra Mohanty, in H. Giroux and P. McLaren, eds., *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 148.
8. John Dewey, 89.
9. Paulo Freire, 11.
10. John Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (New York: New Society, 1992/2005), 15.
11. Noam Chomsky, 21.
12. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 42.
13. bell hooks, in *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, G. Anzaldúa, ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 211.
14. The third graders’ “advocacy video” can be viewed on the district website, at www.oneontacsd.org/Riverside.cfm?subpage=505277.

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