

**DISABILITY AWARENESS
IN THE CLASSROOM**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lorie Levison was both surprised and honored to find herself writing this book, a project which turned out to be profoundly life-changing. In 1968 she was injured in a car crash and has used a wheelchair ever since, giving her the uniquely personal perspective from which to speak on the subject herein. This book has given her the opportunity to share her insightful observations about living with disability in our society. Believing strongly that most people sincerely wish to be more open and accepting with each other, she has spent time as a disability peer counselor, and each school year presents disability awareness sessions to elementary and secondary students. Her personal experience and research speak for the many others with whom she shares the path of disability. Ms. Levison has a bachelor's degree in English and Secondary Education from Prescott College.

Isabelle St. Onge has been developing the concept of this book for several years, based on her fundamental knowledge of her students as people with value, humor, and ability. Several years ago she began to gather black and white portraits of her students, which eventually became the seeds for *Disability Awareness in the Classroom*. She recognized that the photographs eloquently express the humanity and validity of each student's existence. Throughout her 12 years of teaching students with severe and profound disability, Ms. St. Onge has persisted in creating real-life opportunities of inclusion for her students. Her dedication, along with a rarely-failing ability to laugh at life's surprises, eventually led to the idea of project-based inclusion (Chapter 6), a model which is being presented for the first time in this publication. Mother of three boys, Ms. St. Onge has a masters degree in Special Education from the University of New Mexico.

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*Dedicated to
Reilly Patrick McCluskey
Maurice Concha
and
their very special parents*

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This book is a culmination of sorts for both Ms. Levison and Ms. St. Onge, bringing into focus their individual work of many years. The path that brought us to this point was assisted by many individuals, who provided us with their expertise, recommendations, humor and support throughout.

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TO THE READER

This book started out to be “*not* about inclusion.” Yet as it unfolded, it became obvious that there was no way around the issue. Even the title points to inclusion; why else would a book be written about disability in the classroom? The primary intention of this book is to make people feel more comfortable around disability. Whether that is in the classroom or in the supermarket is secondary. However, recent legislature has made it clear that public school teachers will be facing more and more inclusion in general ed classes, as buildings are made accessible and students with severe disabilities are enrolled in school. In response to this situation, there is a need for awareness of unconscious negative attitudes and how to change them, within oneself and in one’s students. As attitudes change, so will ideas about inclusion and how to best meet the needs of students with disability.

The domain of public school inclusion policy is broad and wide, full of varying viewpoints and mixed feelings. At one end of the scale is full inclusion, which promotes the special ed student being included full-time in a general education program. The other end is total separation of students with disability for all educational services. The middle roads, and there are many, propose various ways that students with disability be appropriately included in general education programs. Some propose academic inclusion; others support social inclusion. The key word in this discussion seems to be “appropriate,” with the central question being, “What actually works best for a particular student with a particular disability?”

Appropriate inclusion settings take into account the individual needs of the students, which vary as widely as the disabilities they live with. Many students with severe conditions have personal needs which are best addressed by qualified personnel in the privacy of a self-contained classroom. Using the toilet, having diapers changed, and maintaining cleanliness and grooming, are activities which are better accomplished in an environment removed from others who

might tease or misunderstand. Forcing a child to remain in a setting that is not suitable for these types of personal needs can be an insensitive decision. Another concern is that students who struggle to keep up with social and intellectual peer activity can become overstimulated, tired and depressed. The self-contained classroom offers periods of refuge and rest, where disability is the norm, and where the student is truly without difference, because difference is the rule, not the exception.

Full inclusion in its essence is a worthy goal. It defines a society that accepts and includes people who are different, and values them as individuals. It portrays a school system that expands academic standards to embrace a multitude of skills and various learning styles. It envisions a classroom where every student has a place to learn and grow, receiving the help needed to accomplish a personal, unique potential. Full inclusion points to a future world that supports and furthers local and global unity. Unfortunately, we just aren't at that point in time....yet. Attitudes toward disability are still filled with fear, rejection and discomfort. Attempts at inclusion vary in their success, but all meet with elements of difficulty and resistance. Times are changing, and people are changing. The movement toward inclusion is valid and necessary, and the more carefully the process is planned, the sooner the goal will be reached.

For these reasons, this book proposes a "next step" solution toward the eventual goal of a truly inclusive school system and society. That next step requires the cultivation of sensitivity to the realities of living with disability. Project-based inclusion is the term used to describe a method of bringing together people with and without disability, to learn about each other and dispel misunderstanding and fear, by working jointly on a project. Designing a project for general and special education students provides a perfect opportunity for interaction and communication, allowing the process of acceptance to occur over a period of time. The students get to experience each other, not through textbooks or lectures, but through day-to-day activities with a tangible job to be tackled together. This method promotes authentic acceptance based on firsthand experience. After all, this is how real life unfolds in the "adult world." We work together with all sorts of abilities and personalities, and we learn to accept and know people through the work-place situations. Once the myths and mysteries surrounding a false stereotype are broken down, diversity can be appre-

ciated rather than avoided. And when experience is the teacher, education is at its best; knowledge remains firmly rooted.

The position of this book is basically pro-inclusion, with qualifications. Full inclusion, despite its lofty ideals, can actually be insensitive and damaging to a student with severe limitations and needs. Segregation, on the other hand, has left many people lonely and rejected. Keeping disability hidden is an attitude whose time has passed; it cries out for transformation. Only education and awareness will lead us out of separation and toward inclusion. To achieve this goal, a schoolroom offers the perfect setting for change, and project-based inclusion provides the means to effect that change. The chapters and lesson plans of this book are presented with the belief that many teachers and students throughout the country will benefit from the guidance offered in these pages. Those of us, with and without disability, who have come together to create this book hope the reader will find answers to old questions, and stimulation to ask new questions. On behalf of all students with disability who are committed to attaining a satisfying quality of life, we thank you for taking the time and making an effort to change your little corner of the world.

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Morning Walk

by JAY UDALL

Each morning as I walk to work I pass them:
a young Hispanic man, his body bent
and twisted by some calamity of blood
and bone that has left him to shuffle slow
inches down the sidewalk, his mother
at his side, holding one arm to steady him
and keep him going. She smiles and greets me
as we pass, while her son makes low moans
perhaps only she can comprehend, and only
sometimes. His brown eyes seem locked
inside the stiffness; his head does not turn
to look. He peers out the side, takes in
what he can that way. What does he see?
What does he feel as they make their way
at the incremental pace of love's patience
through hurried streets where fear and anger
often call to each other and answer in kind,
and beauty shimmers in the cottonwood trees
by the river? What does his mother see?
How she must worry about the morning
she won't be there
to hold her son's withered arm.
There is grace in their halting walk,
something to do with how they move
together, the slow, awkward adjustments
of step to step, feet to hard pavement,
finally indefinable.
I cannot completely know
the mystery of their love and suffering.
They do not know that some tortured nights
I have thought of the two of them
walking the streets of morning,
and felt my heart grow calm and still.