Are Literature Circles on Your IEP?

Do Literature Circles “work” for students with special needs, with identified learning problems, or with individualized educational plans? You bet. In fact, peer-led book clubs are not another problem for kids with special needs—they are a very important part of the solution.

Adam, an eighth grader in north suburban Chicago, has dyskinetic cerebral palsy, which causes uncontrolled body movements and some difficulty with speaking. He’s been slow to join in class activities and other students have sometimes been unnerved by his symptoms, but when language arts teacher Elaine Case implemented book clubs, carefully including science fiction titles among the choices, Adam jumped at the chance. Elaine knew of Adam’s sci-fi passion and hoped the right books and the non-threatening structure would help him take a risk. Now, when Adam meets with his five-member book club, he talks with passion and synoptic knowledge about Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy. His CP symptoms seem to fade from everyone’s awareness as he joins in the questions, the arguments, even the adolescent banter. Book clubs have become Adam’s time to shine.

The traditional English teacher practice of assigning a single whole-class novel and then conducting 30-person “gentle inquisitions” has never worked very well for anyone—but it especially shortchanges kids with learning issues. On the other hand, small, peer-led discussion groups can provide just-right books, genuine responsibility and choice, a strongly supportive social climate, and meaningful invitations to join in, not hide from, literature discussion. Properly organized book clubs open pathways for young people who think differently, who need extra support, or who operate on different timetables. And that means more learners will thrive and excel.

Lately I have been talking more often with my friend and colleague Patrick Schwartz, chairman of the Department of Special Education at National-Louis University. Patrick is working in a new paradigm of special education called “possibility studies.” This approach begins with a rigorous set of assumptions about and guidelines for working with students with “disabilities.”

Assumptions

• Each of us already has a disability, or will develop one during our lifetime (e.g., old age).
• Differences among people are normal.
• Diversity is an asset; we learn more from people who are different from us.
• Every classroom is diverse.
• All teachers are special educators.
• School structures and procedures cause some “disabilities” (e.g., rules requiring absolute silence or stillness).

Practices

• The only acceptable label is a student’s name.
• We should “normalize difference” by incorporating students into classroom life instead of sending them away.
• All kids can meet the same educational standards, but not in the same way or at the same time.
• Community building is a key; successful learning requires strong relationships.
• Caring is OK; pity is not.
• Classrooms should support effort-based learning.
• All students deserve the opportunity to take risks and do challenging work.
• Kids should not have to “earn” their way into a regular education classroom; instead, it should be the home of all students, whenever possible.
• No child should ever be moved out of the regular classroom unless there is a written plan to bring him or her back in.
• Medication should be the last, not the first, resort. (Schwartz, *The Dignity of Risk*, forthcoming)

The question, then, is how can we embody these humane and progressive ideals with our students, face to face, in our own classrooms?

Literature Circles is a “best practice” structure that embodies the possibility paradigm. Literature Circles begin with students choosing a book they want to read (and that they can read, fluently and enjoyably) and discussing it with a group of friends. This means that teachers provide plenty of book choices in multiple-copy sets, representing a wide range of topics and reading levels. In essence, students self–select both books and temporary reading groups. Naturally, kids will usually pick books that are roughly at their own level. However, teachers also encourage each student to move up or down the scale of difficulty and to work with constantly shifting groups of classmates. And, because the teacher isn’t making whole-class presentations during book clubs, she is available to support this kind of reaching out.

Many students who are labeled as disabled are actually just fine with higher-order thinking—like discussing the people, events, and ideas in literature. For students like Adam, the main accommodation is simply to offer truly engaging books and to engineer the social system to include him. For other kids, lower-order operations (like decoding the text of a whole book) may make book club participation seem insurmountable. But we know that once these struggling readers get the book or the story into their heads, they have tons to say, as much as anybody. Indeed, the perspectives brought to book discussions by these kids are a huge asset and offer fuel for lively conversation.

So, when students want to read a book that is too hard to plow through fluently, teachers provide help. They make sure that someone—an aide, parent, peer, or consulting special education teacher—is available to read the book aloud or that the book is available on audiotape. Most popular kids’ books are now available on cassettes or CDs. For those titles that aren’t sold commercially, homemade solutions are required. Resourceful teachers enlist parent volunteers, student teachers, and other volunteer labor to record missing titles. Just as building your classroom library is the work of a career, the same goes for books on tape. When teachers provide these kinds of accommodations, they ensure that all kids get to experience the essence of literature circles—discussing the ideas in books.

Of course, there’s more to setting up effective and inclusive book clubs than I’ve been able to mention here. Literature Circles that work for all students don’t happen by magic; careful training and coaching pave the way. And of course, some students will require extra support and monitoring. Happily, though, there are now a dozen professional books outlining the necessary steps and providing a variety of proven approaches.

As the parent of a special education student, I can testify: kids with learning differences often become reticent to join in class activities, a predictable outcome of the failure and embarrassment school has dealt them. But book clubs offer these bruised kids a chance to step back in, to speak up and be heard. The chance to follow your own interests, the sense of control, the predictable structure, the absence of right-answer pressure, and the welcoming of differences—these features embody the idea of “inclusiveness.”