TEACHING TO DIVERSITY
The Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning

Jennifer Katz
Foreword by Faye Brownlie

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Dedication

To Jorel, whose journey has shown more wisdom, insight, and resilience than we will ever know, and to all the children—past, present, and future—who have taught me more than I can ever teach them, thank you for your many gifts, with a prayer for a more peaceful and loving world for you to grow up in.
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Foreword

For many years I have believed that, as teachers, we each need to have a mental model for learning, a model that we can articulate and apply to our everyday work of teaching and learning in classrooms, a model that we can use when collaborating with our colleagues to improve learning opportunities for all our students. Without this personal model, we can too easily be swayed by slick packaging, charismatic speakers, teacher-proof programs, out-of-school directives, and the proclamation “evidence-based.” We are working in challenging times: teachers have never had more choices; at the same time, we have never had more diverse students in our classrooms; nor have we or our students ever had such easy and rapid access to information. How do we balance the demands on our time and attention? How do we make the wise choices that best inspire student learning?

Enter the voice of Dr. Jennifer Katz. She is a passionate educator. She cares deeply about making a difference in the lives of her students, which is clear from the outset in her book, Teaching to Diversity. She presents her model of what counts in learning, and describes what she as a teacher does in order to cultivate this learning—for all students—in inclusive classrooms. Peppered throughout the text are vignettes of complex students who have pushed her thinking. We can all identify with these students—we have met them and others in our own classrooms. And thus we begin our journey to discover the “three-block model” of “universal design for learning” (UDL), a model based on accessibility and choice, on discovering students’ talents and needs, and on linking them explicitly to key curriculum goals.

In my model of learning, UDL and “backwards design” are the organizing frameworks. To this model, Jen adds the lens of “multiple intelligences” (MI) and MI centres. Block One is the backbone of her UDL model. Naming it “social and emotional learning,” she centres it on building community. Who can argue with the premise that all learners learn better when they know themselves, respect themselves, are resilient, and embrace an inclusive classroom that values diversity? In her classroom, each school year opens with her “respecting diversity” (RD) program, a sequence of nine easy-to-follow lessons to develop self-awareness and other-awareness in students. The RD program uses MI not only to help teachers teach or students learn more effectively, but also to build community in the classroom, creating a bond among students that moves that community forward, not just the individuals within it. The implications of this are considerable. Curriculum is designed to connect to the lives and interests of the students. Also in Block One is curriculum design, following a “backwards design” model.
Knowledge of the curriculum is critical; planning is key; learning is organized in large chunks—term-by-term, built from integrated curricula, grouped learning outcomes, essential questions, and inquiry. Lessons move from modelling, through guided practice in centres, to individual performance. While the approach may initially seem daunting, it is based on the premise that teachers are professionals, and as professionals, they are prepared to personally and collectively design the work they will do with their students.

Block Two, Inclusive Instructional Practice, is presented in two chapters, including a sampling of specific lessons to teach collaboration. If all students are to belong and learn in the classroom, then all participants in the classroom must actively work on including others, by helping others be the best they can be at all times. In Block Three, Systems and Structures, the focus is outside the classroom itself, and considers how we can better work together to improve learning for all students. Specific examples of what administrators have done in schools to support teacher collaboration and inclusive education are presented.

I believe that all students can learn. I also believe that we, collaboratively, have the skill and the knowledge to teach all students—and the responsibility to do so. This belief resonates throughout Teaching to Diversity. Repeatedly, reference is made to creating and maintaining a compassionate classroom, a classroom where students learn that they are stronger and smarter together, and that all voices count. Special attention is called to First Nations learners and to our responsibility to improve learning for them.

Jen has a clear vision of her mental model. She offers it to us, to continue to add to our own models and to make a greater difference in the learning and the lives of all our students. You may not agree with all that Jen says, but she is sure to cause you to ponder and reflect upon your teaching—and isn’t that what professionalism and learning are all about?

—Faye Brownlie
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Faye Brownlie, a friend and mentor, who, after co-teaching in my classroom, urged me to make the move to the university and to write this book, helped me find a publisher, and took time out of a hectic schedule to write the Foreword. I am grateful for her time, her wisdom, and her support. To Myra Laramee, who spent beautiful summer afternoons cloistered with me in her living room, sharing her experiences and her expertise, Megwetch. To all the Portage & Main staff—Annalee, Catherine, Marcela—and my editor Jean, thanks for supporting my passion and perfectionism, and for persevering!

Thank you to the Faculty at the University of Manitoba, in particular, Zana, Charlotte, Rick, John, and Bob, who both formally and personally have supported this work. To Alan Schroeder, John Van Walleghem, Karen Priestly, Ron Sugden, Joan Zaretsky, Terry Price, Bobbi Ethier, my graduate students, and all the members of the Manitoba Alliance for Universal Design for Learning, the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, and the Canadian Research Centre for Inclusive Education, who have taken on this work and helped disseminate it—thank you.

I am profoundly grateful to all my colleagues who opened their doors and shared their classrooms and students with me. Your dedication to the well-being of “our kids” is inspiring. I hope this book brings support, inspiration, and joy to your teaching.

To all the family, friends, mentors, and spiritual teachers who have guided my spirit, nurtured my heart, and enlightened my soul, my heartfelt thanks. A special thank you to Reb Zalman, Reb Nadya, Reb Shefa, and Reb Victor for helping me to connect my past with my present, and my spiritual life with my profession, I am eternally grateful. I have been blessed with a sisterhood of incredible women who have mentored, nurtured, and prodded me to grow and learn. To Gina Rae, Ida Ollenberger, Kathyrn D’Angelo, Marion Porath, and Pat Mirenda, my thanks for your love, your support, and your ability to extend my thinking and pose the right questions. To my sister, Vivi, my soul mate, David, and to my soul sisters Lisa, Andi, and Dafna, there are no words for what your friendship and support mean to me. This work would not exist but for you.

This project, as with all of what I do and how I live, is dedicated to the two guiding women in my life: my aunt Sheila, who introduced me to my love for special children and gave me the confidence to believe I could make a difference, and my mother who for forty-five years has dried my tears, listened to my stories, and shown me how to live life with love, integrity, compassion, service, and spirit. I do my best to share your legacy.

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Introduction

Student/Teacher Vignettes

T.

In December of 1996, in my first year as a learning assistance teacher, my principal walked into my office, plunked a thick file on my desk, and said, “He’ll be here in January. Do something.” That night, with a cup of tea in hand, I read the contents of the file, a biography of another lost child. His file, I would realize years later, told an all too common story, but at the time, I had no idea how far along my own professional journey this child would move me.

From the file, I could see that T. was officially in grade 6, and was by heritage half African-American, half Caucasian. The early records noted that he was verbally precocious and mechanically adept, and he had challenged adults immediately, even in his kindergarten year. His teachers, confused by his ability to express advanced ideas and concepts articulately, mistook his difficulties with short-term memory as a negative attitude when he would reply to questions with a shrug and say, “I don’t know.”

Although he could take apart and put back together any electronic device, he could not do the same with words. By grade 3, he was on a modified educational program. Dressed as a rapper with a hood pulled low over his head, he covered his challenges with a fast retort, verbal inflections down pat. And yet, his grade 4 teacher had noted that he was deeply sensitive, that he would offer insightful and empathetic responses to stories in which a child struggled with discrimination, loss, or other emotional stress. No formal testing had been done; however, T. had attended many small-group intervention programs, all with little success.

Behavioural goals around anger management began to appear in his IEP, and by grade 5, could be summarized by the idea that as long as he didn’t hurt anyone, he could choose to go, and do, where and what he wanted. He had spent his time with an educational assistant playing educational games on a computer, shooting hoops in the gym, and drawing cartoons. He had neither participated in, nor received a mark for math in two years.

Cole

T.’s file reminded me of Cole, another student I had been puzzling over that year. Cole’s test results showed him to be in the 92nd percentile of performance IQ and in the 34th percentile for verbal ability. Although he was unable to retell a story in sequence, he could easily state the main idea of the passage and was able to give sophisticated abstract and inferential answers to comprehension questions. He could tell you that the theme of a book was about discrimination, but could not describe the main events.
Cole struggled with the concept of sequencing — of the beginning, middle, and end of events or of stories. For instance, in one of his stories, he ended each page with “and they lived happily ever after,” confusing the end of the page with the end of the story. He could tell you that the character was suffering from depression, but could not use ordinary details to describe the character.

Cole’s spatial skills were phenomenal. He could solve every manner of visual puzzle (e.g., Rubik’s cube, the 3-D game of pentominoes), but his drawings looked like those of a 3-year-old. He built amazing replicas of buildings and ancient wonders out of scraps, but could not write a factual report. Cole could spout poetry off the top of his head, only shrugging when asked where the ideas came from, but when he wrote a poem down, it was illegible even to him. He knew enormous amounts of trivia, especially about spiders and sorcerers, but he could not remember how to spell basic sight words.

Emotionally, Cole had great difficulty controlling his moods: sometimes, he could be excited and overly silly; at other times, when he was frustrated or upset, he referred to his evil twin, Ole, as “taking him over.” Cole said, “Ole lives in a mental institution; you know, that place where crazy people go.” When asked whether he felt that he was crazy, he said, “Oh, yes. Crazy just means different from normal.” On bad days, he would descend into crying and sometimes escalate into withdrawal and depressive or suicidal statements like “I wish I was dead” or “God is mean. He made school.” He would mumble under his breath about hating school, hating “my life,” and wishing God never invented him or school. Cole showed high anxiety when presented with social or written tasks. He would often begin crying and pull his shirt over his head, telling familiar adults that he was “just nervous.”

Author’s Note

The stories of T. and Cole were the reason for beginning my journey into universal design for learning (UDL). Soon, my interactions with diverse students became the impetus behind the development of my Three-Block Model of UDL. As my readers explore the chapters of this book that set out the rationale and criteria for the model, they will encounter more student/teacher vignettes, bearing the pseudonyms of students whose stories illustrate the value of developing compassionate learning communities and incorporating the principles of UDL in their classrooms, schools, and education systems.
Chapter 1

Diversity in Education

T. and Cole faced severe challenges in literacy skills, but had unusual strengths in areas not emphasized in school curricula. Like many students in our schools today, they had talents that are valued in the real world but, in school, they were made to feel like failures. Their families had been told their children had severe learning disabilities, were not at grade level, and had behaviour problems. Both had tried to fit in, but failed. One had externalized and become a behaviour problem. The other had internalized and become withdrawn. The oldest was 11 years old, the other 8, yet they were already casualties of the system.

When I taught in a Jewish private school, my class was about as homogeneous as it is possible to find: the children all came from one ethnic group, were all Caucasian, all middle-class or above, and they all had English as their first language. Nevertheless, some students learned best when they could see the teacher model a process first, while others had to work out the process for themselves in order to understand. Some students could remember the words to a song, but not to a poem. A few students needed quiet time in order to learn; some had to talk aloud with other students in order to clarify their thinking. The students’ background knowledge about any topic introduced also varied—some had travelled there, seen that, had a parent who worked in the field; others hadn’t a clue. There were children whose families were in distress, children who weren’t getting enough sleep, children who were depressed. No matter where you teach, no matter what age group you teach, diversity will exist in the classroom.

Diversity Defined

It is important that we all recognize that diversity does not refer only to children with exceptional needs, nor does it refer only to ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity. Diversity encompasses all children—their diverse personalities, ethnicities, languages, family structures, and learning styles all contribute to the makeup of a diverse classroom. Even a group of so-called typical learners from Caucasian, middle-class families are diverse in how they learn best.

Diversity is neurological. Diversity is societal. Diversity is human. Teaching to diversity requires that teachers create a learning climate in the classroom and devise activities that allow all children to feel safe, respected, and valued for what they have to contribute. Poet Carl Sandburg, when asked what he thought was the ugliest word in the English language, answered exclude, adding “Everyone wants to belong.”
Diversity and Social and Emotional Learning

In recent years, education systems in both Canada and the United States have undergone significant reforms, one of which is the movement toward inclusive education which places children of diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and learning abilities together in regular classrooms. To teach such a range of individual students in one classroom, we must build a compassionate learning community that recognizes the deeper needs of all people, including a sense of safety, a sense of belonging, and the feeling of being part of something meaningful. Such a learning community leads participants to lifelong understanding of who they are, why they are here, and what they have to contribute (Palmer 2007).

Learning cannot be separated from living. The human mind cannot learn when overcome with a sense of anxiety, alienation, and stress (Grover, Ginsburg, and Ialongo 2007). To build a less violent and more compassionate world, we need to nurture a deeper sense of self in our children while expanding their ability to empathize with and value diverse others (Miller 1998/99). Parker Palmer describes a “system of education so fearful of things spiritual that it fails to address the real issues of our lives—dispensing facts at the expense of meaning, information at the expense of wisdom. The price is a school system that alienates and dulls us” (1998/99, 6).

At the same time, the demand to prepare students to be “knowledge workers in a globalized world” apparently means expanded curricula, technological knowledge and skills, and higher literacy rates than ever before. Teachers struggle to balance the demands on time and energy, both their own and that of their students. To combat alienation and the increasing rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Modrcin-McCarthy and Dalton 1996) and at the same time meet academic and curricular demands, schools must explore instructional frameworks that integrate a spiritual paradigm within academic learning.

By spiritual, I do not mean religious. Rather, I use it to mean teaching to the heart as well as to the mind, exploring the deeper meanings of what we learn, connecting with the community we learn and live with, and coming to know ourselves. In his book *The Courage to Teach* (2007), Parker Palmer describes such spiritual questions as “Does my life have meaning and purpose?” “Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs?” and contrasts them with such discipline-specific questions as: “Why does a historian care about the dead past?” and “Why does a biologist care about mute nature?” The answers always lie within our relationships to ourselves, our community, and our world. It is within this wide-ranging form of inquiry learning that compassionate classrooms evolve.

Education Defined

In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, *education* is described as deriving from the Latin root *educare* which means *to rear or to lead forth*. To *teach*, however, is
defined as to cause to know, to know how; to show how; to guide; to make to know the consequences of. It appears that education includes more than instruction in academic subjects; and teaching includes more than just content delivery. Education must develop the whole child and cultivate all the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for a person’s successful integration into society. Inclusive practices that aim to educate students in the full sense of that word must promote their social, emotional, and physical development in addition to their academic achievement.

In recent years we have witnessed a growing proportion of school-age children demonstrating social-emotional behavioural problems that interfere with their relationships, their academic achievement, and their potential to be contributing members of their community (Greenberg, Domitrovich, and Bumbarger 2000). This and other recent findings indicate that schools are among the most effective socialization institutions in our culture, and among the most influential in guiding the social and emotional learning of elementary school children (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, and Hertzman 2011).

Schools provide a unique opportunity for encouraging the development of social competence because many of the students’ interpersonal interactions occur in a setting in which adults can intervene and, thus, foster positive growth and development. A growing number of studies suggest that children’s social and emotional learning can be fostered by intervention efforts in classrooms and schools (Graczyk et al. 2000; Greenberg et al. 2001). Given the data indicating the rising rate of children at risk (Greenberg et al. 2001), school-based programs and instructional paradigms that develop all children’s social and emotional learning must be a priority for educational researchers and teachers.

Social Inclusion and Social Exclusion

Social inclusion or exclusion has become a rising concern around the world. Organizations like Ontario’s Laidlaw Foundation advocate for and conduct research on marginalized populations in Canada, in particular recently, on children and youth at risk. Research studies they have conducted note the rising number of Canadian children living in poverty, suffering from hunger, and excluded from opportunities to fully realize their potential.

Social inclusion recognizes the need that all people have for belonging, for acceptance, and for opportunities to participate fully and equally in economic, social, cultural, and political institutions. Inclusion also means recognizing and valuing diversity, engendering feelings of belonging that lead to social equality through the participation of diverse populations, including the disadvantaged. In education, at all levels, the terms inclusion and inclusive are used increasingly to mean that all students have the opportunity to learn and grow in learning communities alongside their peers.
The United Nations, through the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and Canada, through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, make *equality* a constitutional right—yet, in practice, schools on Aboriginal reserves are terribly underfunded (Wotherspoon 2002), which makes it difficult to hire qualified teachers, to purchase resources such as computers and multi-levelled books, and to provide specialized services to children with exceptional needs. Despite the policies of inclusiveness in every province and territory, more than half of the children with disabilities spend more than half of their learning time outside of the regular classroom (Canadian Council on Learning 2007).

Schools have a key role to play in ensuring that all students receive the education that will enable them to become thoughtful, caring, and productive citizens, where they have the opportunity to explore the gifts of diversity and learn to relate with diverse others while reflecting on the gifts they have been given. Inclusive schools offer students the experience and enrichment of learning first-hand about other cultures, races, and languages. It is a powerful experience to see how a student with disabilities perseveres through challenges to overcome them and contribute to the world. In human history, segregation has never been a positive—for anyone. So how do we create truly inclusive schools? According to the Laidlaw Foundation, there are five criteria for successful social inclusion (Wotherspoon 2002).

1. **Valued Recognition**: Conferring recognition and respect on individuals and groups.

2. **Human Development**: Nurturing the talents, skills, capacities, and choices of children and adults to live a life they value and to make a contribution that both they and others find worthwhile.

3. **Involvement and Engagement**: Having the right and the necessary support to make, or be involved in, the decisions affecting oneself, one’s family and one’s community, and to be engaged in community life.

4. **Proximity**: Sharing physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interactions, if desired, and to reduce social distances between people.

5. **Material Well-Being**: Having the material resources to allow children and their parents to participate fully in community life.

Let’s briefly explore each of these from a teacher’s point of view. When we consider the first criterion, we must ask ourselves how we can help students to value themselves as well as others; that entails having roles that are valued—socially and academically. In chapter 3, we discuss the “respecting diversity” (RD) program for ways of addressing the issue of equality in roles.

When we examine the second criterion, human development, in a school setting, we need to recognize that all students are diverse in the ways in which and the rates at which they learn—emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

In my opinion, the third category, involvement and engagement, is the key to identifying the ways in which teachers can support student learning in school.
settings. All students must become involved and engaged in both the social and the academic life of the classroom. Being included in the classroom, but being asked to sit at the back of the room with an educational assistant is not real inclusion, neither is being enrolled in a separate classroom or learning assistance centre and just visiting a regular classroom, or working on a modified program in a regular classroom.

The fourth criterion is proximity. When some students are in a separate room down the hall or in the basement, they cannot learn and grow together—and here we are making the most progress. Many schools have begun to place students with disabilities, students who are learning English, and other marginalized populations in classrooms together, if only physically—however, it’s a beginning.

The fifth and final criterion, material resources, is the most difficult one for teachers to resolve because the lack of resources is grounded in issues of poverty and marginalization. Students who come to school having not slept or eaten struggle to learn. Students who are witness to or victims of violence have levels of stress and trauma that affect their brains and their capacity to learn. Students who don’t have school supplies or access to books or computers at home are at a disadvantage relative to students who may come from literary and intellectual environments. Such disadvantages affect their literacy, background knowledge, and general cognitive development. Even amid funding cuts, many schools do what they can to address such needs: hot breakfast and lunch programs, head-start and early literacy programs, adult literacy programs, and homework clubs are just a few of the community-based services that schools try to provide.

Teachers can also bridge the gap by relying on the concept of “cultural capital.” Cultural capital is what parents hand down to their children—experiences with literature, language, field trips, travel, and intellectual discussion of beliefs and values, languages, and relationships. We can become more inclusive by valuing what our students do bring—their languages, experiences, talents, and cultural richness. More and more children’s books are written in a variety of voices, featuring characters who come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. We have both fiction and nonfiction literature that honours a variety of cultures, celebrations, and nations. Many teachers who have a significant proportion of Aboriginal students in their class seek out such literature—all of us could do so and enrich everyone’s classroom. The more we share what the diversity in our classroom and society offers us, the more we bring people together.

We can also intervene early, consistently, and intensively with children who lack such cultural capital. Programs for the Early Years should immerse children in language, literacy, and community experiences—we cannot assume that they have ever been to a museum, to the seashore, to a play in a theatre, or even on a trip outside the place where they live. In the Early Years (ages 3, 4, and 5), direct teaching of pre-reading skills, social register, and voice is crucial. And reading many, many books to children while teaching them what a book is—that it holds a story, that the words of the story are in the black squiggly lines that we read going from left to right—can help deprived children catch up to those children who have been read to since they were babies. It is very difficult for a young child, upon
entering grade one, to be asked questions about a story when the child has never before heard the language and syntax of a story.

In the Middle Years, students still need to learn about voice and social register. We can teach them usage labels such as “school language” and “social language” without devaluing how they communicate with their friends, family, and community. Children need to learn how to switch back and forth, just as they do when they switch from talking to a buddy to talking to their mom or dad. Even in secondary school, students from disadvantaged populations do not have the networks that many other students do to help them find that first job, explore career possibilities, and so on. Schools can play a role in helping the kids who do not have similar connections by providing career fairs, work experience courses, visits, and mentorships with educators in postsecondary settings and professionals in the field.

Social inclusion involves sharing the wealth, which does not mean taking from one group to give to another. I believe all children have the right to feel good about themselves and about what they contribute, to experience a sense of belonging as well as the joy of learning and connecting with others, and to have many doors opened through which they might choose to walk. We are a wealthy country, and there is enough for everyone. It can be done.

Diversity and Academic Complexity

When I speak to teachers, I ask them what the hardest part of their job is. Inevitably they say, “Teaching to the range of students.” By that they mean “delivering a complex curriculum to a group of students with diverse academic abilities.” The education system used to offer a simple answer—we streamed kids and, gradually, we excluded them. In the early years, kids learned together but as their talents became evident, we quickly placed them into ability groups, sometimes as early as grade one (reading groups, for instance). In later decades, we kept kids in school, but sent them to streamed classes, vocational training, and learning assistance centres, based on our beliefs about intelligence and learning. We modified their programs so that they worked on math when the other kids did, but theirs was a separate math curriculum, usually practice activities on worksheets under the supervision of an educational assistant. This meant that the neediest learners were being taught by the least trained people and involved in the most rote pencil-and-paper styles of learning.

The learners who were advanced in some way were also streamed or excluded, that is, sent to advanced placement and international baccalaureate programs, or gifted classes and other enriched opportunities. Such classes might be intellectually stimulating, but they are also socially isolating and frequently less culturally diverse. As a result, recently, the move toward inclusive education has grown beyond its roots in social justice into an awareness of the need for inclusion at all academic levels.
Academic Inclusion and Academic Exclusion

Academic inclusion in education is an approach to educating all students together. Under the inclusion model, all students are placed in their home schools, and services are delivered in the classrooms and in the school. The classroom teacher takes primary responsibility for all students enrolled in the class. Inclusive education differs from previous models of integration or mainstreaming, which were concerned principally with disability and the needs of special education students. But inclusion is not just about children with special needs; it is concerned with all students accessing their right to the very best education regardless of race, religion, language, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability.

Earlier models presumed that students “earned” an education, when they were “ready” to be given the privilege of entering the school and their classroom. We kept them in separate settings, ostensibly to get them ready, which few ever did. In contrast, inclusion is based on the assumption that all children have the right to be a part of the life of the classroom—socially and academically, and that schools need to create programs that accommodate and celebrate this diversity. In other words, we fit the program to the kids, not the kids to the program.

Academic exclusion refers to denying the opportunity for an education, in the fullest sense of the word, to some individuals or groups of students:

1. the denial of enrolment in neighbourhood schools
2. the lack of exposure to curriculum and instructional activities
3. the absence of interactions with qualified teaching personnel and services
4. the separation from peers during learning activities

For many years, some students were denied enrolment in their neighbourhood school. If a brother or sister could attend that school but the disabled child could not, that was discrimination, pure and simple. Imagine how it felt for them to see their siblings off to the neighbourhood school, while they had to be bussed to another school.

As regards lack of exposure to curriculum content, I worked in a room with eight students who each had one of the autism spectrum disorders (ASD). For their lessons, we did not include Shakespeare, or world events, or chemistry experiments; instead, we spent a lot of time on vocational training, functional math, and basic literacy. One of the students from that class, an adult now, is attending the university in which I teach—in spite of us, not because of us. When he found me and walked into my office 16 years later, he told me the day of my birthday (in that earlier class, he had memorized everybody’s birthday), and sat down to chat. Perry, as I will call him, was always capable of far more than we bothered to teach him, but we were too busy managing behaviour and focusing on life skills to see it.

Time and time again as I have worked in inclusive systems, I think back to those kids in special education and wonder “What if?” I hear teachers who work in segregated classrooms say, “Well, my kids are too low for ... that (whatever that is)” and I shudder because I would have said the same thing some years ago,
but I was wrong and so are they. In that class, we had students who entered the program at age 6; some were nonverbal and some not toilet-trained, so the belief was that they were “low functioning.” In contrast, I more recently had a student named Peter with a similar profile in my first school in a “full inclusion” district. Peter had entered kindergarten as nonverbal, not toilet-trained, and rocking and flipping his hands. By the time he was in grade 7, he was the lead in the school play. Was he cured? Of course not, but he could read and write, he had an excellent memory, he loved video games, and he could communicate with his parents and his friends—a demonstration of the power of peer modelling, which has been greatly underestimated in special education.

A downside to inclusive educational programs is that, in the transition, we have sent children into inclusive classrooms without having provided enough professional training for the classroom teachers and resource teachers, but with educational assistants for children with special needs. The lack of training meant that many teachers believed that the EAs knew their assigned child best so they handed over responsibility for their program—to staff who are not trained teachers. We must get better at building capacity in our classroom teachers, and we must make clear their job is to teach all the students in their classroom, and I do mean all. Not only are students with disabilities often being taught by untrained personnel, they are also segregated from interacting with, and learning from, their typical peers—a situation that has serious outcomes, for all involved.

In the early days of the inclusion movement, arguments for it were often made on the basis of social justice, which has led some to believe, unfortunately, that children with special needs are in school just to be socialized and that, as long as they’re happy and maybe even have a friend, we’ve done our job. All children should be happy and have friends, but they can do that at home or in the community. All kids come to school in order to learn. Recent research shows us that many children, previously deemed unable to learn, greatly exceed our expectations when given appropriate educational opportunities and peer models (Crisman 2008). Individuals and groups have often been academically excluded when they were assumed to be, and then deemed to be, incapable of learning at a chosen standard.

Philosophically, most teachers agree that inclusion is the right thing to do. However, saying so does not eliminate the challenges that inclusion poses. How do you teach reading in a classroom where some students are reading complex novels while others still can’t decode fluently and still others don’t even speak English adequately well? How do you teach math when some students have had after-school tutoring and can compute faster than the classroom desktop, and others don’t know what division is? How do you teach about ecosystems when some students have travelled around the world with their biologist parents and others have never seen snow, planted a garden, or been to the seashore? And how do you deliver an increasingly complex and varied curriculum while supporting students’ social and emotional well-being? How can we set up our classrooms in such a way that all students learn, play, and grow together—in celebration of their diversity, not in spite of it?
There is a way, although not to solve all of society’s ills. It’s not a perfect panacea, but it is do-able, it is efficient, and it won’t have you on stress leave by October. One way to educate (in the full sense of the word) diverse children is in one classroom together. It can be done, and this book pulls together, in an organized way, the key pieces of what I have learned and implemented over the past fifteen years on my journey to explore and implement a “universal design for learning” framework that includes all students in compassionate learning communities. I hope it helps you.