

Reflections

INCLUSIVITY AND ETHNIC STUDIES

Liz Berger is a scholar and UNESCO research consultant on international projects. Her research focuses on inclusion-building and strengthening when advocating for multiple marginalized people. Her work within neurodivergence spans more than two decades in public and independent schools, medical institutions, and child and adult populations as a social worker, therapist, trauma specialist, and now a PhD student and researcher. Her work reaches educators and policymakers globally.



Capitol Crawl | In 1990 about 60 disability rights advocates staged a protest, known as the Capitol Crawl, to advocate for the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Tom Malone, from Owensboro, Kentucky (left) and Shaila Jackson, from Atlanta, Georgia, (right) were two of the sixty protesters who crawled up the steps of the U.S. Capitol. Source: The Tom Olin Collection, Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, William S. Carlson Library, University of Toledo.

Have we invited everyone in the room?

Decades ago, I started my career after college working with autistic children in schools. For thirty hours a week, I spent school days with an amazing child who offered daily weather reports at the start of every day and relished repeating certain words in the middle of class (which I then repeated constantly in my own mind). We studied together, took his tests together, and when he needed a break from the classroom, we spent time on the swing set on the playground outside together (one of my favorite activities well into adulthood). It was the beginning of my therapy career and my dream job, with one exception: the padded room in the basement of the school.

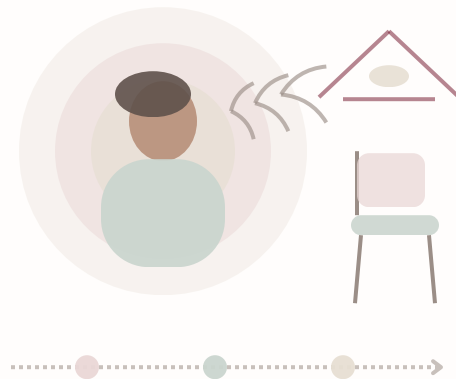
When my client would become dysregulated in class, he would respond robustly, and sometimes violently. The expectation was that I and a few of the teachers would physically remove him from the class to the padded room for everyone's safety (and to minimize school disruption). After the first time that he became physically violent, and our attempt to safely take him down there, we agreed that despite school policy, we would devise a plan in the classroom that capitalized on our collective presence to better prevent these incidents and then to respond to them within the classroom. We never visited the padded room again.

Every student enters the classroom with an invisible (or obscured) receptacle that holds the weight of their experiences in the world. Family, friends, community, sports, nutrition and health, and individual processing differences mediate how students express these differences in the school social environment.

Access friction (Silverman 2024) refers to the idea that providing circumstances that ease access for one student can create circumstances that negatively impact access for another student simultaneously. Important attention has been offered to the role of trauma in classroom dynamics, learning and accessibility. Understanding how to navigate difficult topics with students who have diverse learning styles is complex. So too is the potential for difficult topics to elicit thoughts and feelings for students that may not just be uncomfortable, but may activate trauma responses.



What happens when one student learns best with near total quiet, but another learns best with background noise?



When challenging or potentially controversial topics are brought into the classroom, the often herculean efforts of teachers to accommodate students' emotional and learning needs can lead to an understandable amount of conflict.

Empathy, validation, kindness, voice and patience are infinite in their potential in the school and classroom, and educators offer these to learners of all backgrounds with grace and generosity. As we consider the importance of appreciating the unique collective that a classroom makes, we also remind ourselves that the individual experience of students can be hard to recognize. Disabled and neurodiverse learners are not just observers of Ethnic Studies work – we share an important lineage in the struggle to be visible and valued alongside all marginalized groups.

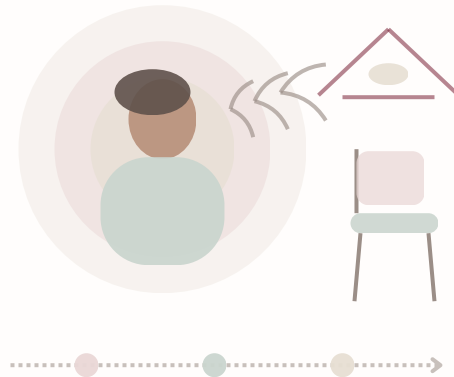
When teachers are designing or adapting Ethnic Studies curriculum where the varied needs of complex learners have not been built into the foundational design, this can leave teachers contemplating the enormity of responsibility that they have to introduce important material and navigate conflicting needs of students at the same time.

Ethnic Studies: Disability & Accessibility

We have made great progress in recent decades in recognizing that access and inclusion at the community level offer not just visibility for those with disabilities or differences, but approaches to living in civil society that may benefit all people (who enjoys taking their bikes up and down those curb cuts?).

Schools have developed systems to accommodate students with disabilities, and those accommodations can make barriers visible while also creating more inclusive environments. In classrooms, we regularly employ IEPs, 504 Plans, ramps, elevators, and other elements of Universal Design. Visibility organically dissolves in favor of the needs of the student as a learner – ideally, once the supports are in place, the student is able to participate simply as a learner rather than being defined by the accommodation or disability. While this process is far from ideal in some circumstances and school contexts, tremendous progress has been made in creating systemic policy change that ultimately benefits the plurality of the classroom.

Ethnic studies curriculum, in addition to being formatted accessibly, should include content that acknowledges the lived experience of disabled and neurodiverse people as marginalized people who have advocated for their visibility and the right to live equitably in their communities.



There are steps educators can take to adapt Ethnic Studies coursework while easing concerns about trauma activation, access friction, and a lack of salience for diverse learners. These steps will be familiar to educators, but are sometimes not considered when it comes to curriculum and learning that falls outside of core subjects despite accessible frameworks such as Universal Design for Learners (UDL).

Educators should consider what has worked in their classroom previously for students and employ similar strategies to accommodate Ethnic Studies learning. It is easy to think that accommodation plans do not fit outside standard pedagogy, but if a student needs accommodations for science, math, and history, then they also require them for any learning that happens anywhere in the school environment.

Recommendations

Because neurodivergent students can demonstrate asynchrony in their development, demonstrating advanced verbal abilities (for example) does not necessarily mean that students have the emotional skills to process advanced or disturbing emotional content. In fact, their ability to do that may be delayed or affected by particularly attuned empathy pathways, justice-oriented lenses, or a tendency to use systemization to process content. In these cases, welcome insight from parents and caregivers wherever possible. Doing so may help predict where an adjustment is needed. Through advanced communication as lessons are designed and planned, educators can determine what is needed to provide a safe, inclusive and trauma-free classroom implementation.

Experiential learning opportunities, such as museum trips and site visits, can be deep and enriching ways to interact outside of the classroom and school. Understanding how this different context may impact diverse learners, from imposing potential physical barriers to offering different sensory stimuli, can help teachers ensure it is a meaningful experience for all. Scarcity is real when it comes to budgets and resources in education, depending on political will, systems and decisions that are often far removed from the inner workings of the classroom.

Be transparent about the limitations of the classroom to meet every student's needs ideally, and to perfectly translate difficult topics into digestible lessons. Although some Ethnic Studies curriculum may include UDL activities that offer multi-modal tools for students to engage in learning, whenever possible, teachers should ensure that there are multiple ways of learning and assessment that diverse learners can engage in. Text-based learning, video, audio, art-based and mastery-based learning are areas where diverse learners can connect with material in ways that illustrate their strengths.

Educators cannot be expected to litigate complex, global events, histories, or challenges in the classroom while also balancing the needs of diverse learners. Introducing a culture of civil discourse, where students of all learning styles can help establish guidelines for classroom discussions, is important. Neurodivergent learners may benefit from private check-ins after lessons to gauge how these lessons were processed, and what emotions may have been activated as the result.

Understanding that some diverse learners may process lesson content over a longer amount of time is key – and offering the opportunity later in the day or week to ask follow-up questions or discuss the lessons may be helpful.

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Read more about "access friction": Silverman, S. E. (2024, May 23). [Navigating "access friction" in teaching](#). *Beyond the Scope*.