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A Circle With Edges: How Story Time Privileges the Abled Learner

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A Circle With Edges: How Story Time Privileges the Abled Learner

Melissa A. Tsuei

The classroom teacher rings a bell and announces, “Okay everyone, it’s time for circle,” holding the day’s book over her head. Children are scattered around the room, in the dramatic play center, the scribbling center, the gross motor area, and the block area. Some children respond quickly, placing toys back on shelves or in bins and walking over to the reading circle. One girl concentrates on the wheels of a truck toy, spinning them round and round, seeming not to hear the prompt. Her attention focused on the wheels, she does not see the visual of the book overhead. A child in a wheelchair removes the cape from his back, as the teacher assistant whisks him towards the circle area. She places him opposite the teacher chair, but he wants to be nearer to the book. Before he can verbalize this, the assistant is across the room, squatted down beside two students fighting over a toy.

As students continue to trickle into the reading area, the teacher says, “Amelia is always one of the first sitting on her lily pad. Let’s clap for Amelia.” Jonathan, who was the first seated, but with all the waiting has become unregulated, claps very loud and very close to Amelia’s face and is redirected. As the teacher begins the story, the assistant pulls on her ear, asking students to “Listen, listen.” When Jonathan yells out “Pop-pop!” the teacher says, “Jonathan, this is quiet time.” The child who was spinning the truck wheels enters the circle, sitting right in the middle up front. The assistant takes one of the child’s hands, removes the truck from her other hand, and moves her to the perimeter of the circle. The teacher continues reading and Jonathan runs across the room. “Jonathan, please come back to circle,” says the teacher and the assistant physically redirects him back to his spot on the lily pad.

Circle time is a familiar scene in most early childhood classrooms, a time to share literature and a time for the classroom community to come together. Often, circle time touches on letter recognition, introduces the days of the week and weather, involves song, and provides opportunities for children to connect with one another about their out-of-school experiences. Although it can be a place for children to develop creatively, learn to assert themselves, and gain exposure to literature, some research indicates that it would be worthwhile to flesh out our ideas of circle time to include considerations of classroom climate and relationships, in order to prevent contributing to isolation and bullying (Cefai,

Cavioni, Carter, & Grech, 2014).

Research has also found that the demands of circle time present particular difficulty for children with Autism, such as problems with social proximity, receptive language (i.e., the ability to understand words and language), and understanding abstract concepts (Barton, Reichow, Wolery, & Chen, 2011). As a special educator, I wanted to look deeper into the dynamics at play. My research question was, “How can we challenge the traditional circle time model to provide increased access for atypical learners and improve the balance of social justice in our schools?” The research led to the development of a model that challenges the dynamics of able-ness and helps empower students who express learning differently.

The Sphere Model

The Sphere Model was developed to address the privilege of the able learner, in an effort to nurture a truly inclusive literacy-learning environment. The tenets of the model are:

Social- Learning happens in a social context within a supportive community.

Participatory - Participation in all forms is active engagement, evidence of a brain at work, not a challenge to authority.

Helpers - There are opportunities for all learners (including teachers) to be the helpers and the helped.

Evolving - Story time is fluid and evolving, open to student expressions of power and collaboration.

Round - By design, the learning environment is without walls or edges. It embraces rather than excludes.

Energizing- Teachers respond to student energy, aiming for balance, so children can learn in the best possible way.

I believe that circle time experiences adhering to this set of values can help promote inclusion of diverse learners in the typical classroom. In creating a more fluid and adaptive approach to telling stories, we can consider and overturn power structures, and engage more authentically with our students as they learn. The aim of the Sphere model is to grant opportunities for play, active engagement and dialogue,

with educator and student creating the story of the classroom. As teachers, we can open up the space more to imagine the ways diverse learners contribute positively and uniquely to our classrooms, pushing the boundaries of able-ness to include all students.

The sphere is an image of a circle with more dimensions, valuing a broader spectrum of responses and participation. It is my hope that shared reading time grounded in this model would embrace a fuller expression of early learning, foregrounding responsive practices and aiming for a co-construction of the narrative. But first, what does research say about students with learning styles outside the norm and about current approaches to inclusion?

Another Look at Inclusion

Inclusive practices are becoming more and more a focus of early childhood education, as diagnosticians attach labels earlier and the demand for appropriate services grows. The dominant stance towards diverse learners continues to be a special education perspective, which works from an individual deficit model (Cosier & Pearson, 2016). In contrast, Disability Studies in Education (DSE) conceptualizes disability as a social, cultural, and political construct (Graue, 2005; Graue, White, & Delaney, 2014). This shift does not indicate a denial of learning impairments, but rather a philosophy challenging the idea that outcomes must be determined by the individual's diagnosis. Thus, the DSE lens compels educators to examine theory and practice for barriers to learning for those outside of the mainstream.

Research into what works in inclusive classrooms also embraces flexible, improvisational, and play-based teaching techniques that are responsive to the complexity of the early childhood classroom (Graue, 2005; Wohlwend, 2008; Graue, White, & Delaney, 2014). In *Playing Their Way into Literacies* (2011), Wohlwend suggests redefining literacy as one means to this end:

The notion of literacies reflects the diverse ways we make meaning, in cooperation with others, often coordinating multifunctional tools, across networks and global sites. Moreover, the move from literacy to literacies expands the ways we think about familiar non-digital events such as play enactments, drawings, commercial toys, classroom layouts, and so on. These changes present an opportunity to rethink play as a new literacy and, at the same time, revive it as a staple of early childhood curricula. We can now recognize play as a literacy for creating and coordinating a live-action text among multiple players that invests materials with pretended meanings and slips the constraints of here-and-now realities. (p. 3)

Widening the lens on literacies may allow us to capture meaningful interactions we would otherwise miss. Developmental perspectives also suggest that a shift from practical skills to curricula more inclusive of literacy experiences would be beneficial to young children with diverse learning styles.

Developmental research recommends that early childhood curriculum focus on literacy for future school readiness. One major recommendation is to provide a literacy-rich environment, partly to support emergent skills for children with disabilities (Johnston, McDonnell, & Hawken, 2008). Because many children with disabilities are shown to be at risk of developing reading problems, the research has focused on adaptations that can serve their needs. However, research also acknowledges evidence of barriers that prevent full access for children with certain learning differences (Ezell & Justice, 2005).

Children with cognitive disabilities are traditionally educated on basic life skills, under the assumption that literacy is not as useful (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-DeLzell, & Algozzine, 2006; Cooper-Duffy, Szedia, & Hyer, 2010), and some research has called for a paradigm shift from life skills to a balance of practical skills and literacy exposure (Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999). Ogletree (2007) also wonders if the “best, developmentally-appropriate” communication interventions (modeling, shaping, time-delay, reinforcement) actually produce meaningful results in the lives of students with Autism.

Others have noted the need for a paradigm shift from the concept of literacy “readiness,” as it bars access for students with Autism, who do not typically demonstrate readiness skills (Mirenda, 2003; Vacca, 2007). Despite the common adherence to a readiness model, students with Autism have demonstrated gains when allowed exposure to literacy skills. This focus on readiness skills has also been noted in instruction for students with Down Syndrome (van Bysterveldt, Gillon, & Moran, 2006).

Graue (2005) claims that child-centered practice is often characterized by reactivity to and sanctioning of inappropriate behavior, a model in which “eligibility for participation is limited to those who already have the desired attributes” (47). Graue also suggests that at-risk children then become “invisible” within classrooms that operate primarily under the developmental model. Green, Terry, and Gallagher (2014) demonstrated gains in literacy for children labeled with disabilities, but not at the same rate as their typical peers. In a study of children with and without developmental delays, Benjamin, Lucas-Thompson, Little, Davie, & Khetani (2016) found discrepancies in participation, with children labeled with delays or disabilities significantly less involved than their peers. Barton, et al. (2011) found that children with Autism are less engaged in circle time than in any other aspect of the preschool day.

Teacher Attitude and Assumptions

Although there are no data to support the claim that behavioral readiness is a prerequisite for inclusion, early childhood settings continue to hold to this belief in programming (Stahmer & Ingersoll, 2004). This may partially explain why, despite the fact that children with Autism benefit from early childhood programming, inclusion is rare at early ages. Even when students with disabilities are included, many circle time interventions focus on behavioral control, including self-regulation and “not calling out” (McClelland, Schmitt, & Tominey, 2014; McClelland & Tominey, 2015). Furthermore, Alston and Kilham (2004) point to missed opportunities for social inclusion due to a privileging of the typical learner’s experience within the inclusive classroom.

Westwood (2013/2016) looked at the commonality of social, emotional, and behavioral problems that affect students with learning difficulties. Although some learning differences result in social problems, most of the difficulties stem from a lack of “school success.” From a DSE perspective, we can view this as a failure of the system to fully reconstruct the classroom to allow these students true inclusion and empowerment. This presents an alternative to a traditional special education point of view, which has tended to assume that behavioral and social difficulties are an inevitable result of learning differences. Adopting this orientation allows us to turn a critical eye on our classrooms and push the transformation that is necessary for successful integration.

Despite studies that support inclusion for a developing child with disabilities and positive attitudes towards disability for typical learners, opportunities for inclusion remain limited in the United States (Onaga & Martoccio, 2008). Carrington et al (2016) found that although teachers believe generally that inclusion is a just cause, they acknowledge that inclusion increases the demand on them as educators. These additional demands included challenges to the system (such as time and environmental concerns), child-centered challenges (social-emotional wellness of the child, communication concerns), and the effects of disruptive behaviors on the classroom. Agreement on goals, an attitude of cooperation, and teacher collaboration or engagement in the planning process are all important factors in determining a positive inclusion process (Sood & Agnihotri, 2015; Carrington, et al., 2016). Collaboration with the parents of the diverse learner was also found to be a supportive strategy.

Most educators would probably agree that people with disabilities deserve the right to self-determination. I wonder how we can apply this philosophy in our work with very young children, and become more responsive to individual needs. How can we design our classrooms and instruction to be more open to

this dialogue, and push our minds beyond the prevailing definitions of “able”?

One way educators can begin to do this is to challenge the theory and methods based on a binary of abled and disabled learners. In the tradition of defining “readiness” as being located in the school rather than in the student, we can examine circle time for clues as to how we can better serve all students.

Approaches to Inclusion in the Literary Experience and Circle Time

Many strategies recommended for children with communication, motor, hearing, or visual delay involve embedding learning into the classroom routine; use of gestures, movements, and facial expression to convey meaning; use of visual aids, positioning choices, alternative methods of communication, and tactile cues. For children with significant cognitive disabilities, shared stories have been shown to promote comprehensive vocabulary and fluency (Browder, et. al., 2006).

Studies indicate that a social communication component may be necessary to take full advantage of reading interventions with this population. There is also evidence that these children can learn literacy symbols through picture identification. Children with Autism have demonstrated play skills and pro-social skills development when teachers use 1:1 techniques (Stahmer & Ingersoll, 2004).

Adaptations to instruction can include changes in our expectations, allowing greater child choice and preference, and stretching the ways we understand support from teachers and from peers. Bartorowicz and McDougall (2006) found that the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) produced positive results that extended beyond the children to teachers, staff, and caregivers.

Cefai, et al. (2014) found that the use of circle time in the classroom contributed to social-emotional learning and to a reduction in social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Challenges to circle time included behavior problems and lack of time, lack of space, and the challenge of large class sizes.

The authors suggest that two essential ingredients in creating an effective circle time are adequate training and assessment of strategies. Because the demands of circle time particularly target impairment areas for children with Autism, circle time should have built-in structure and support, and be individualized and adaptable (Barton, et al. 2011). Cefai et al. (2014) suggest that successful inclusion of children with Autism in circle time may require adaptations in time, materials, physical space, activities, and

teacher expectations.

Other voices highlight how centering play within the curriculum can create more meaningful experiences, provide reversals of power relations, and encourage reflection on experiences, and interpretation and connection to texts (Graue, 2009; Barton, et al., 2011; Wohlwend, 2012). This research is supported by the 2015 study by Underwood, Chan, Koller and Valero which found that interviewing children with disabilities during play provides unique information about their true capabilities.

A New Kind of Story

The teacher rings a bell, waits a minute, rings it again, waits a minute, and rings it a third time. She says, “It’s time for our story. You can stay where you are or come closer to me while we read together.” Students leave their toys and come running to the front of the class, where the teacher holds the book high above her head. She shows them the front cover and the back cover, approaching a child focused on the wheels of a truck.

“Look, Mira!” she prompts, holding the book between Mira and the truck so she can get a good look at the cover. The young girl pats at the glossy cover and says, “Truck.” The teacher responds, “Great thinking, I was wondering if there’s a truck in this book too! Damien, do you think we will discover a truck in the book today?”

Damien looks up and the teacher leads the story time group over to him, placing the book in his hands. Damien knows this means he can help turn the pages, which he does for a few minutes. At the end of every page, the teacher rings the bell so he knows it’s time to turn. He asks the teacher to push him towards the dramatic play area, where his friend is pretending to fly with a red cape on. When the group reaches him, Damien hands him the book and says, “It’s your turn now!” The child throws the book towards the window and the teacher picks it up, saying: “Looks like someone has offered someone else the chance to read.”

Another child asks to hold the book and continues the march around the room, turning the pages as the teacher reads. The teacher takes the book back and reads for a few minutes in the circle area, where several children have sat upon their lily pads to listen to the story. “Wow,” says the teacher, “Amelia stays on her lily pad just like a frog with a very still body.”

Jonathan stands in the middle of the space, jumping up and down repeatedly. “Jonathan is showing us how to jump like the frog does in the story. Let’s jump with our hands or our feet, your choice!” The children dissolve into frenetic movement and laughter for a few minutes. Jonathan yells “Pop-pop!” The teacher responds, “Pop-pop? Are you popping bubbles?” Jonathan shakes his head and frowns. The assistant, seated on one of the lily pads, offers, “I think Jonathan’s Pop-Pop reads him this story at home.”

Jonathan’s smile is broad and he gives a high-five to the assistant and students yell out “pop, pop, pop, pop” in different rhythms. The teacher tells them they sound just like a bog where a frog might live. Mira bursts out laughing from across the room. The teacher leads the group back to her, saying, “Mira, were you laughing at bog and frog and how they rhyme? Rhyming is very funny.” Mira grunts in approval and moves a smiley face on her communication board.

Jonathan is reaching up, grabbing at the book while the teacher finishes the last page. She hands the book to Jonathan and follows him over to the kitchen, where he puts it in the play sink. Another girl in the class yells “No Jonathan! The book doesn’t go there!” The teacher turns to her, “Let’s wait and see what he’s thinking.” The children gather around the sink as Jonathan pretends to wash it with a sponge. The girl breaks into a huge smile, “He is cleaning off the muddy frog in the book!” The children squeal and clap and help him scrub the book.

The teacher heads back towards the child in the superhero cape, who is now staring out the window. She asks him about his favorite part of the story. The child sprints across the room and jumps from lily pad to lily pad all the way around the circle. The teacher rings the bell again three times to mark the end of the book sharing and the children return to their play at their centers.

This scenario illustrates the Sphere model applied to story sharing in the classroom, a counter-narrative to the widely adopted traditional circle time. In an effort to examine and unseat the privilege of the students we view as abled, I have addressed the physical structure of how we share books. It has a decidedly more playful orientation, following the view of Wohlwend (2011) that the malleable aspects of play provide a literary exploration and mediation of power and relational structures within the classroom.

The circle can be an exclusive phenomenon, tending to underscore the power dynamics already at play in school and society. Students who can regulate their body movement and attention, raise their

hands, modulate their voices, and have expressive skills are likely to be praised and held up as examples. This construct places a great premium on typical behavior, making it more difficult for children with disabilities to demonstrate skills beyond behavior control. I believe that a behavioral orientation creates a dynamic that pulls us away from a strengths-based perspective for diverse learners.

The teacher in this scenario faces a scene identical to the one presented at the beginning of this piece, where children are engaged in activities that are meaningful to them, spread across the room. In contrast to the call into the circle, the teacher pushes out into the context of the classroom. Students are invited to place themselves wherever they feel the most comfortable, or most able to participate. Yes, there will be students who take this opportunity to ignore the story, but this happens within the story circle as well.

The teacher's movement is fluid, allowing her to easily adapt to unexpected moments and to alter her perspective. She can easily assist students with physical, motor, or verbal impairments, and can assist students with augmentative and alternative communication systems. Typical students are also acknowledged (Amelia is praised for sitting very still in circle, the girl in the class who yells that Jonathan has put the book in the sink is attended to and challenged to re-interpret the scenario). In this way, both typical and atypical learners are swept into the community and given a place at the learning table. Typical learners (like the girl at the sink) are given the opportunity to be the helped and the helper, thereby upsetting the dominant classroom paradigm. On the other hand, Jonathan (an atypical learner) is given a moment to teach his peers, an opportunity that would be lost if the teacher rushed to correct his actions.

A central component of this approach is a challenge to the main power dynamic at play in the traditional circle time: the teacher who has sole access to the book. This is both symbolic and practical, as we hand over the literature to our students to have full interaction with the book and we assert that stories are community property. The Sphere model supports a concept of storytelling that allows us to inhabit and honor another's perspective, acknowledging that none of us exclusively own the narrative. It positions non-verbal communication in a more powerful way within the book-sharing discourse, borrowing from Wohlwend's (2009) analysis of the "meaning-making" children do without words. It also allows educators to be more responsive and inclusive of diverse learning styles.

This approach to literacy presents a challenge to the binary model, in that it gives all students the opportunity to share expertise and to learn from one another. The educator can slow down and alter

the rhythm of the story to allow processing time and an interweaving of individual student agendas. In responding openly to interactions typically viewed as interruptions, the teacher forwards this concept of students labeled with disabilities as contributors to a stronger community. She can both appreciate the behaviorally compliant child, and send the message that a diverse response (calling out) is also valuable. In this way, the teacher and students become co-constructors of the storytelling event and of their classroom perspective.

Although I acknowledge the need for classroom management, I envision story time as the most highly interactive and theatrical portion of the classroom day. In the spirit of true imaginative literacy, the Sphere model places the creative process above behavior management, except in the case of safety.

One example of a preparatory technique within this model would be to choose a soft storybook that can be thrown without major consequence, or to use hand-over-hand when allowing the student to hold the book. Another strategy could be to tape copies of book pages around the room and encourage learners to point to illustrations, slap them with fly swatters, or blow on them with their mouths. In the vein of viewing interruptions as contributions, educators can find ways to weave verbalizations into the story. For students with limited verbal ability, teachers can interview family members or related therapists to help interpret a child's non-verbal interactions and respond to these during book sharing.

The Sphere model calls on teachers to challenge their own expectations of “how a learner acts“ in order to disengage the deficit-model that continues to underlie many of our teaching philosophies. By taking the focus away from ideals of behavior and self-regulation for a contained period of time, we can create possibilities for our students that may not otherwise exist. How might this affect the way they see themselves or one another? Perhaps most importantly, how might these experiences help overturn the expectations that school and society have for diverse learners?

Conclusion

Certainly, there are educators who have already adopted a DSE perspective and aim for strengths-based practice. This model aims to add to the growing body of literature that seeks to upend the concept of readiness and offers a lens through which educators can view the circle time experience. Opening up circle time structurally calls into question the patterns of privilege and allows the teacher to become “unstuck” from the able/disabled paradigm. In creating a sphere around the entire classroom, the teacher can nurture connections between students in naturalistic ways. They can embed literacy into

already meaningful areas of play or reinforce vocabulary with objects in the environment. And they can create a true dialogue with students by releasing the need for authority over their learning.

There are several limitations to application of the Sphere lens in early childhood circle time settings. There are likely to be additional time and training requirements to employ this model of literacy engagement in programs that are already overstretched. The approach has the potential to be highly interactive and mobile and may diminish opportunities for children to practice self-regulatory and attentional skills. It will also not fit the needs of all diverse learners and typical learners with whom we wish to share the narrative. In addition, this philosophy of sharing books requires a sophisticated level of adaptability “in the moment” and may not fit everyone’s teaching style.

The Sphere model is intended as one lens through which we can challenge ableist perspectives and increase teacher responsiveness. I believe that challenging our methods helps us to confront assumptions and privileging that we may be blind to otherwise. As the story-telling center of our classrooms, circle time seems an apt place to challenge existing structures, in the hopes of increasing access to high-quality instruction. The telling of stories has long been used to give voice to the underprivileged, to highlight inequities in our society, and to push our imaginations to contain greater things. It is the perspective that there are those who can and those who cannot that is truly disabling. If we extend our concept of literacies, responsiveness, participation, and abilities, maybe we can move closer towards our shared goal of inclusion for diverse learners.

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