

Why Everyone Benefits From Including Students With Autism in Literacy Classrooms

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In addition to the unique gifts and interests that autistic students bring to the classroom as people, their responses can serve as an early warning system for pedagogical problems that are happening in the classroom as a whole.

Belle Gardner (not her real name) is the principal of a Maine elementary school enrolling about 240 students. During 2007–2008, 8 of those students had autism spectrum labels—nearly four times as many as would be predicted by figures on the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the general population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Although some will do so with testing modifications such as extended time or teacher scribing of their written responses, all 8 are or will be required to take the state language arts assessment for third through eighth graders.

Staff members at Ms. Gardner's school aren't the only ones thinking more about autism lately. The past year has seen autism frequently in the U.S. media, from newspaper coverage of an autism-focused Congressional bill to an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featuring celebrity moms of children with that label. Although some of this coverage is balanced and nuanced, an autism diagnosis is still more likely to be characterized as tragic than it is to be presented neutrally or positively. Given these popular discourses, combined with increasing national pressure on schools to raise achievement, it might seem that Ms. Gardner would view the increase in autism spectrum labels among her students as cause for alarm. Not so. Although she does ask questions such as “Are our

numbers higher because diagnosis is getting better?” or “Are more parents of kids with autism moving here because they've heard we serve those kids well?” she doesn't frame the students themselves as a burden or a problem to be solved. Instead, Ms. Gardner has shared with us her belief that their presence has improved literacy instruction for *all* learners:

Having to meet the needs of students with autism has forced teachers in my building to be more reflective about their teaching, and more explicit with their literacy instruction. It's really made all of us look at how kids learn differently. It has also forced us to take another look at assessment because so often formal assessments like standardized tests or unit tests from the reading series don't measure what those students know. Teachers are keeping better notes while kid-watching, and they're doing a better job of analyzing those notes because they often reflect student learning much better than the testing data.

As teacher educators in literacy (Kelly, first author) and special education (Paula, second author) with a longtime interest in improving literacy instruction for all learners, we find Ms. Gardner's argument compelling. It reframes some conventional wisdom around literacy and inclusion, and we use it here as a touchstone for the rest of this article. Before we share what we see as the specific benefits for all learners associated with inclusion for students with autism, however, we discuss how we see the term *autism* and provide an overview of trends in literacy instruction for students with that label.

Literacy Instruction for Students With Autism

In our work, we use *autism* as a cover term for various syndromes and disorders on the autism spectrum,

including Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and Rett syndrome, among others, that involve movement, sensory, communication, and learning differences (Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2008). We acknowledge that people with these various labels don't have identical experiences, but it's also true that people with the same label—for instance, two children with Asperger syndrome—may be very dissimilar on any number of fronts. Because there are no biological markers associated with any of these disabilities, the categories and descriptions people use have been socially constructed and culturally reproduced (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kluth, 2003). Our use of a short general term is meant to be less stylistically cumbersome as well as to avoid the negative connotations (e.g., the very word *disorder*) built into many of those labels. We do not deny that people on the autism spectrum often experience the world differently than people without disabilities, and that some of those differences can be extremely challenging for individuals, but our personal relationships and our reading of first-person narratives by people with autism have made it clear that autism is not always experienced negatively, and individuals can be positioned as more and less disabled in various settings, depending on the available supports and the rigidity of the social norms governing behavior in those settings (Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2008).

Regardless of the terminology, considerable evidence suggests that students with autism are increasingly visible in public schools. Five times as many children and youth with that label were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2006–2007 than had been 10 years before (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008), and efforts by parents, educators, and disability rights advocates have led to increases in the number of these students placed in regular education classes with their peers. Between 2002 and 2005, the number of students with autism placed in a regular classroom for 80% or more of the school day increased by 5% (NCES, 2007).

These demographic trends have coincided with the federal government's codification of higher expectations for achievement by students with disabilities, including autism, in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005). Although some learners with significant disabilities continue to be exempt from standardized tests (the U.S. Department of Education permits up to 1% of a state's

students to be assessed as proficient using alternative methods), more students with autism spectrum labels are sitting for mandated assessments than ever before. Regardless of current debates about whether this aspect of the law benefits students with disabilities or not (cf., Karp, 2004), teachers of grades 3–8, where annual reading tests are mandated, must prepare nonexempt students for these tests.

Our view—like Ms. Gardner's—is that the best place for most students with autism to prepare for such tests and, more important, to develop literacy skills and strategies for life, is in the inclusive classroom with same-age peers. A small but growing body of research reveals the power of this premise (Biklen & Burke, 2006; Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001; Diehl, Ford, & Federico, 2005; Farmer, 1996; Gurry & Larkin, 2005; Kasa-Hendrickson & Kluth, 2005; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer et al., 2004; Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003; Sonnenmeier, McSheehan, & Jorgensen, 2005). Kliewer and his colleagues (2004), for example, researched nine inclusive classrooms enrolling preschoolers and kindergartners with significant disabilities, including autism, and found that when these young children were positioned as sense-makers who could draw on multiple modes of representation, including role-playing, storytelling, and art, they constructed narratives as full participants in the classroom community. Broderick and Kasa-Hendrickson's (2001) case study of a 13-year-old boy with autism who had been placed in general education classes since preschool revealed that interaction with others in these print- and language-rich environments helped him to integrate written literacy such as his own typed comments with his previously frustrating and unreliable speech. Although much is still not known about facilitating literacy development for students with autism and other significant disabilities (Gurry & Larkin, 2005), these results are promising.

Benefits for Everyone of Including Students With Autism in Literacy Classrooms

We hope that the previous section makes clear that students with autism gain a great deal as learners from participating in inclusive literacy classrooms. This, however, has not been Ms. Gardner's main point in conversation with us, nor is it our main purpose in writing this article. Here, we argue a related but

different point: that the inclusion of students with autism labels has the potential to benefit their peers as well as their teachers. From our perspective, when students with autism are meaningfully included in literacy instruction, the following positive results can be realized for *everyone*, not just for them:

- Conceptions of literacy expand
- Multiple ways of participating in classroom life are valued
- Instructional planning focuses on outcomes, not activities
- Teachers are positioned as inquirers

Before we turn to these benefits, however, we want to acknowledge that only limited empirical research has been done around this premise to date. A few studies have examined the general impact of inclusion of students with special needs on peers without disabilities—Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999), for instance, found that placement in inclusion programs did not interfere with academic performance and offered several social benefits for nonlabeled students—but this work has not typically focused on literacy. Consequently, the benefits we share here draw on our extensive experience in classrooms where learners with autism spectrum labels have been placed, conversations we have had with teachers and administrators in schools committed to inclusion, and our familiarity with the overall body of literature on literacy and autism, including narratives authored by people with that label (Kluth & Chandler-Olcott, 2008). The convergence of ideas from these sources leads us to offer these four potential benefits with accompanying classroom examples.

Conceptions of Literacy Expand

A key theme of literacy scholarship in the past 20 years has been the need to expand conceptions of literacy beyond the reading of print to account for diversity in literacy learners' strengths and backgrounds, exploit the power of other sign systems, and account for the impact of changing technologies (New London Group, 1996; Reinking, 1995). We embrace these theoretical perspectives and see them as critical to developing pedagogy to address well-documented and persistent achievement gaps in literacy for various student populations (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Nonetheless, most classrooms

we visit as researchers, consultants, and student-teaching supervisors still operate with print literacy enshrined.

When students with autism—particularly those who lack reliable speech—enter the classroom, however, their teachers and peers have an opportunity to question the primacy of print and to use other ways of communicating. Teachers' pedagogical problems shift from abstract ones (how to apply insights from an article or workshop into everyday practice) to localized and deeply personal ones (how to facilitate participation and learning in a particular class for a particular student who may find traditional modes of expression difficult).

One example of how this process might unfold comes from Kliewer and Biklen's (2001) study of Rebecca, a girl with an autism label who entered an inclusive classroom at age 11, after attending segregated classes for students with significant disabilities. As part of an attempt to integrate Rebecca, who was nonverbal, in the classroom, her teacher asked her peers to brainstorm ways to include her during the day. One group devised the idea of passing notes to her, as they did to friends they already knew. Soon children were drafting notes to Rebecca with questions such as "Do you like James? Yes? No?" and relevant boxes to check. Eventually, the speech and language therapist constructed a Yes/No board that Rebecca used to indicate her responses, and still later, the therapist created a set of symbols from which Rebecca could choose for wider communication.

Kliewer and Biklen (2001) focused primarily on how these social interactions expanded Rebecca's "symbolic understanding" (p. 6). What they don't emphasize, though the idea is implicit in their description, is that Rebecca's peers also expanded their symbolic understanding as they interpreted her physical cues and developed mechanisms to interact with her. In our view, this is not just about learning to be tolerant of others' differences, although such a goal is important. Often overlooked in situations like this is the intellectual benefit for all learners of acquiring and refining a repertoire of representational tools. Rebecca's presence in the class helped her peers construct the idea that everyone communicates differently. It also helped them learn to write questions with crisp, unambiguous language when they wrote notes to Rebecca, as well as to interpret visual information carried by the symbols Rebecca selected when she responded. Both are highly valued

literacy skills; both were required in this context by Rebecca's lack of reliable oral communication related to her autism.

The use by many students with autism of various technologies to support their communication is another way that their presence in inclusive classrooms can help expand everyone's conception of literacy. An example of this comes from Sonnenmeier et al.'s (2005) case study of the use of augmentative and alternative communication by Jay, a fourth grader with an autism label, to access the general education curriculum. One of Jay's communication systems featured overlays, or menus, of key vocabulary words paired with pictures on a VOCA (a voice output communication device). Jay's classmates had a copy of the core vocabulary overlay and were encouraged to use it during discussions, writing activities, and teacher-directed lessons. The classroom teacher also had an enlarged copy of the same overlay to use as a visual support during lessons. Other members of Jay's team, including the teaching assistant, the special educator, and the occupational therapist, used his device and his overlays to provide modeling and restatements of things that Jay communicated. This approach of not only valuing Jay's alternative form of communication but also having all members of the class use the system gave everyone new opportunities to learn language and experiment with technology while giving Jay a variety of opportunities for social interaction. See Figure 1 for a list of other suggestions for promoting expanded conceptions of literacy in the inclusive classroom.

Multiple Ways of Participating in Classroom Life Are Valued

Ethnographic research suggests that in addition to being embedded in a larger culture of schooling, individual classrooms develop cultures of their own that are characterized by particular ways of being, using language, and interacting (Dixon, Frank, & Green, 1999). This can be positive: for instance, class members often acquire new literacy practices more easily through everyday participation and socialization than they do from formal, explicit instruction. On the other hand, if teachers do not regularly reflect on and adjust classroom norms and structures, these norms can become reified, assumed to be the only way to participate appropriately in a context.

Figure 1
Suggestions for Promoting Expanded Conceptions of Literacy in the Inclusive Classroom

- Include both text labels and pictures in posted classroom schedules and directions
- Ask all students to hold up communication cards to answer teacher questions, instead of shouting out their responses
- Infuse words or phrases in American Sign Language into your vocabulary, especially around instructional routines (e.g., "Good morning," "Let's begin")
- Teach students to create simple PowerPoint presentations that integrate graphics, photographs, and audio with print text
- Invite students to create icons to represent kid-friendly words or phrases that might be helpful for classmates who use a communication board (Cynthia Lord's [2006] novel *Rules* provides a lovely fictional example of how this process might work)

One example of a structure that can be taken for granted is the whole-class read-aloud, an approach advocated in most literacy methods textbooks. But the read-aloud as it is most commonly practiced—the teacher reading a text to a group of students who sit and listen quietly until she invites them to comment, one at a time—privileges certain kinds of participation while it discourages, even silences, others. For students with autism, whole-class read-alouds can be powerful because they model fluent oral reading and provide access to texts that might be too difficult for individuals to manage on their own.

At the same time, the communication and movement differences often associated with autism—for example, echoed speech or difficulty in remaining seated quietly in a group for an extended period of time—can make it difficult for these students to conform to the stated or unstated norms around read-aloud participation. If teachers don't make modifications to this instructional approach, many students with autism can be excluded, either figuratively (because they become disengaged from the text or can't participate in the discussion) or literally (because behavior perceived by the teacher as distracting causes them to be removed from the setting). For this reason, we developed the suggestions for adapting the read-aloud in Figure 2.

What became clear to us as we discussed these suggestions with teachers, however, is that many

Figure 2
Suggested Adaptations for Teacher Read-Alouds
in the Inclusive Classroom

- Give the student a copy of the text or an adapted version (one with extra pictures, large type, or laminated pages) with which to follow along as the teacher reads
- Give the student a copy of the text to highlight words or phrases of interest as the teacher reads
- Give the student a copy of the text to doodle on or code with symbols (e.g., a for “I agree,” u for “I don’t understand”) as the teacher reads
- Give the student something text-related to hold as the teacher reads (e.g., a train car related to a newspaper article about transportation)
- Give the student cards to hold up during key passages (e.g., every time the bad wolf is mentioned, the child holds up a picture of the wolf)
- Give the student a job during the read-aloud (e.g., to turn the pages of a big book, to click a PowerPoint slide with a page of the text displayed on it)
- Have the student participate by reading (verbally or via a communication device) the first sentence, the last sentence, or repeating or important passages
- Have the student ask key questions printed on cards or programmed into a communication device throughout the read-aloud (e.g., “What do you think will happen next?”)
- Give the student a notebook to write key ideas or draw images that come to mind as he or she listens to the text
- Give the student a notebook to write down questions that he or she might ask the teacher later
- Give the student a special listening space to use during the read-aloud (e.g., a special chair, a lectern)

other students, both with and without labels, also benefit from these tweaks on the traditional structure of read-alouds. The presence of a student with autism may trigger a teacher’s consideration of adjustments that will enhance that individual learner’s participation, but the benefits of those adjustments extend to everyone. Students of varied profiles will be better served by teachers who design multiple ways of participating in classroom structures than by teachers who expend similar time and energy on developing strategies to manage student behavior within rigidly conceived routines.

Another example of how participation patterns in literacy classroom can change for everyone when

students with autism enter them comes from Kluth and Schwarz’s (2008) book on how to integrate fascinations—the passions and deep areas of expertise that many individuals with autism possess—with classroom instruction. Cole, a student with autism profiled in the book, had an abiding love for OnStar, the security and communications system featured in General Motors vehicles, and his teacher used this interest to help him get comfortable in his inclusive classroom. Her incorporation of his fascination created new reading and communication opportunities for his peers, too, as this excerpt shows:

Because Cole often pretended to phone OnStar when he needed help during class, his teacher decided to build him a booth that any student could use during choice time. Students who worked in the booth used the Internet and reference books to answer questions posed by their classmates. Cole, a map expert and a wiz at orienteering, delighted in working the OnStar booth and, more than any other task, loved giving students directions to one another’s homes. (p. 32)

The project involved the entire class in using print (books), spatial texts (maps), and technology (websites) to address genuine student-generated questions and communicate their findings. Sparked by a sensitive teacher’s desire to welcome and support one community member who might have been marginalized, it ended up offering everyone rich possibilities for collaborative, inquiry-based literacy learning.

Instructional Planning Focuses on Learning Outcomes, Not Activities

Literature on school reform (e.g., Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998) has emphasized the need for teachers to identify in advance of instruction the content and skills they want their students to acquire. In fact, Wormeli (2006) argued that successful differentiation depends on teachers and students having a shared understanding of what needs to be learned, not merely what methods will be used. That said, it’s apparent to us as teacher educators who have seen hundreds of lesson plans and observed in dozens of classrooms that most literacy teachers are still clearer about what they want students to *do* (a focus on completing an instructional activity) than they are about what they want students to *learn* (a focus on meeting an outcome).

When a student on the autism spectrum enters the classroom, however, teachers are often confronted

with the reality that their tried-and-true activities will simply not work for that learner. Sometimes this is because the student's needs are too great for completion of the activity as it has been traditionally conceived; for example, a nonverbal student would struggle to participate in a whole-class discussion of literature without significant modifications to the typical interaction pattern. Other times, it's because the learner has unusual gifts in a curricular area, such as the spelling prowess that Gunilla Gerland (1996), a woman with autism, reported:

[I] was very good at spelling; in fact, I simply couldn't make spelling mistakes. I was almost a dictionary. Having once seen a word in writing, the spelling was stored inside me and I plucked it out whenever I needed it. (p. 93)

The inclusion of students like these would likely prompt a professional committed to addressing individual needs to rethink and revise her practice—adjusting expectations, providing different kinds of support, offering more challenge where needed. This reflection has the potential to improve teaching and learning for all students because, as Belle Gardner put it, “In saying that it's OK for kids with autism not to do the same things that everyone else is doing, it opens the door a crack to say that other kids might not need to, either.”

Jorgensen (1998) presented numerous examples of how heterogeneous groups of students, including those identified with significant disabilities, engage in units of study that are organized around a central question or problem and that focus on the achievement of learning goals rather than the completion of a standard set of tasks. For instance, she describes a unit on epic heroes and adventures in an inclusive ninth-grade English class that featured Homer's *The Odyssey*, selected Greek myths, and the film *Superman*. Because the teacher's unit goals centered on skills such as being able to identify heroic characteristics, compare ancient and contemporary heroes, and create their own original hero, students' paths to accomplishing them could vary tremendously. David, a nonverbal student with autism, participated in the unit in ways appropriate for him, including the sequencing of symbols to recall the characters and events from the film.

More important for our purposes here, though, is the range of options that *everyone* had because the unit—to accommodate a wide range of needs,

including David's—had to be designed permeably, in ways that would, in Jorgensen's (1998) words, “maximize learning opportunities” for everyone (p. 101). Some students chose to draw parts of their final projects, others designed them with computer programs, and still others constructed collages from magazine cutouts. (See Figure 3 for suggestions on how to support writing and other forms of representation in inclusive classrooms.) With the acquisition of knowledge and skills foregrounded, rather than the completion of uniform tasks, everyone could pursue particular interests under the common “hero” umbrella, as well as use a wider range of representational tools. Some of these tools might have been valued in more homogeneous classrooms, of course, but research by Jorgensen and her colleagues (Jorgensen, McSheehan, Sonnenmeier, & Cicolini, 2004) suggested that they are central to school restructuring meant to support access to the general education

Figure 3
Suggestions for Supporting Writing and Other Forms of Representation in the Inclusive Classroom

- Offer a wide range of writing implements (e.g., markers, pencil grips, label maker, letter or word magnets) and surfaces (e.g., paper, computer screen, dry-erase board) to attract learners with various sensory needs
- Help students “write” without a pencil; give them word stickers to string together, offer picture stamps, and provide pocket charts for impromptu creations
- Encourage students to write across genres; reluctant writers may be motivated to write a comic strip, a haiku, or a joke book, for instance
- Allow teacher or peer scribing of ideas for learners who struggle with the physical act of writing
- Whenever possible, allow students to compose on the computer and show them how to use simple multimedia composing packages such as KidPix
- Use photographs or other images to prompt writing for all students
- Promote writing in a social context to support idea generation (e.g., a silent discussion on paper between two students or a student and the teacher)
- Listen in as students are joking, engaging in conversations, and interacting in the classroom and, with their permission, record snippets to use as story starters or poetry hooks

curriculum for students with the most significant disabilities. By extension, their classmates have access to cutting-edge approaches in the best practice literature.

Teachers Are Positioned as Inquirers

Dating as far back as John Dewey in the early 1900s, progressive educators have argued that teachers need to be inquirers in their classrooms to achieve context-specific and equitable results. More recently, Lawrence Stenhouse's call for inquiry as the key element in efficacious models of curriculum and research (as cited in Ruddock & Hopkins, 1985) has been heeded by literacy teacher-researchers such as Gallas (1994) and Fecho (2003). This stance stands in clear opposition to some discourses (think here about phrases like "fidelity to core materials") circulating in education today about teachers' autonomy and status as decision makers. In many schools across the country, teachers' literacy-related instructional moves are constrained by narrow interpretations of such terms as *scientifically based reading research* (Allington, 2002).

However, most of the sources cited authoritatively in these conversations—for example, the report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) or the various commercial reading series—make few or no references to students with autism. Although these students' invisibility can be seen as problematic (it can suggest that literacy should be less of a priority for these students than for their nonlabeled peers), it can be a boon in at least one important way: Because they can't rely on prescriptions from other people, teachers must determine and evaluate their own methods. From this perspective, the presence of students with autism in an inclusive literacy classroom can be the catalyst for teachers to embrace or, in some cases, regain their professional authority. Because students with autism often have quirky, idiosyncratic profiles as learners (Kluth, 2003), teachers who work with them have to learn to trust themselves and, as Ms. Gardner mentioned in the comments we shared earlier, gather data for themselves about individual students' strengths, needs, and growth.

One example of how such curriculum-making might start with the needs of a student with autism and then ripple across the community comes from an inclusive classroom where Marn, a young woman

fascinated by trains, was a member (Kluth, 2003). With her teacher's help, she created a set of cards with words and phrases related to trains and corresponding definitions. When her classmates used the cards, Marn was seen as an expert for the first time. Not only did her peers learn a good deal about trains, but they also gained access to a new way to explore technical vocabulary. They found the activity so engaging that they vied to design their own sets of cards on topics of interest that could then be shared with the entire class. Their teacher encouraged them to incorporate visual images and graphics as well as print to make the cards more interesting and accessible for everyone, thus adjusting her practice for everyone based on insights sparked by a need to include Marn.

Another example of how the presence of a student with autism can promote reflection by teachers comes from Farmer (1996), who wrote about how the inclusion of Amy, a student with autism, in her middle school language arts classroom prompted her and the special educator with whom she taught to collaborate on teacher research. The texts Amy generated during daily writer's workshops gave these teachers much more insight into her emerging understandings about literacy than her talk did, so they used those texts to guide their conferences with her. At the same time, both teachers recognized that they learned as much from working with Amy as she did from them:

Mary Jo and I have learned many things from Amy's inclusion in language arts. We have learned to be more flexible and patient with learners who have special needs. We have learned to modify or let go some of the curriculum in order to allow more time. We ask ourselves about what Amy has accomplished instead of what she didn't get done. More important, we have learned not to underestimate her learning or any student's learning. (p. 30)

In addition to using classroom-based data to reflect on and improve day-to-day instruction, teachers who are positioned as inquirers by the presence of students with autism improve their ability to advocate for students in settings such as annual discussions of a student's individual education plan or meetings with administrators. A teacher who has found the confidence to speak on behalf of a student with autism—often in opposition to the limiting results reported by standardized assessments—isn't likely to

abdicate that authority later when advocating for the needs of a child with a more typical profile. Everyone learns more from a teacher who sees herself or himself—and is seen by others—as an informed, empowered professional able to make data-driven decisions to support students' growth and development (see Figure 4 for a list of suggestions of how teachers might gather various kinds of data about students in inclusive classrooms). We have both known numerous teachers, including some late in their careers, who reported being rejuvenated professionally by the inclusion of students with autism in their classes. These experiences recommitted them to their calling and repaid their efforts in ways that spilled over into their work with all learners.

Learning to See the Benefits

A typical response to the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in general education classes for the first time is concern about those students' needs detracting disproportionately from the time and attention available to other learners. We see this issue differently. Yes, we agree that the inclusion of students with autism may require new management and instructional strategies for teachers, but this is not necessarily a drawback for the community. In addition to the unique gifts and interests that these students bring to the community as *people*, their responses can serve as an early warning system around pedagogical problems to be solved for everyone's benefit. When the procedures for a reading-writing workshop are too unstructured and the noise level in the room too loud, many children will be quietly distracted; a child with an autism label might begin shrieking to calm herself and block out the chaos. Likewise, when the rationale for a comprehension-focused activity is unclear or nonexistent, many children will nonetheless try to complete it without comment; a child with an autism-spectrum label might say, bluntly, "This is pointless. I don't want to do it." Not much learning is taking place for anyone in either case, but the response of the child with autism makes the difficulties harder to miss. When students with autism are included, and teachers take responsibility for facilitating that inclusion, chances increase that the issues will be addressed.

In focusing here on autism, we do not mean to suggest that the inclusion in the regular classroom of students with other kinds of disabilities might not

Figure 4
Suggestions for Gathering Data About Students in the Inclusive Classroom

- Give students a variety of literacy materials to explore in unstructured ways, and take notes on how they interact with them.
- For learners who do not demonstrate many typical skills or abilities, document success as it happens (e.g., if the child suddenly reads a whole sentence during social studies, write it on a dated sticky note and put it in a notebook; if he or she draws a scene from a story you have just read, file the picture away).
- Survey students about their strengths, interests, and preferences related to literacy instruction (even students who struggle with oral communication can make choices using icons or gestures if the items are well structured).
- Build regular time for one-to-one conversation with each student into the classroom routine (some teachers find that indirect conversation, either through a puppet or written on paper rather than spoken, is more comfortable for students with autism and yields more detail).
- Videotape a particular student of interest for an extended period of time during a literacy lesson, then watch the tape to determine how the student may be demonstrating literacy skills and abilities in subtle ways (e.g., experimenting with a pencil and paper, paging through a picture book).
- Interview or survey family members about students' strengths, interests, and preferences related to literacy instruction. You might ask parents or caregivers of students with communication difficulties to provide feedback on the videotape we mentioned in the previous example, as their intimate knowledge of their children often makes it easier for them to interpret what we call "small cues" (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, in press).

lead to similar benefits for peers and teachers. As Kliewer and Kasa-Hendrickson (n.d.) asserted, "Every child strengthens the literate community" (n.p.), not just those with an autism label. That said, autism provides an excellent case to consider because of the historical and pervasive exclusion of students with autism from literacy instruction of any kind, much less instruction delivered in general education settings (Mirenda, 2003), and because of the way that the communication and movement differences associated with autism for many individuals interface with traditional assumptions about who is ready for literacy instruction and who is not (Kliewer, 2008). If

we can challenge those still pervasive assumptions where students with autism are concerned, then we think it will be that much easier to make a similar argument for other kinds of disabilities.

We also know, and need to acknowledge here before closing, that students with autism can be housed in regular education settings without changing the culture of those classrooms. Their physical presence alone will not lead to the benefits for all learners we describe here. If learners with autism spectrum labels are offered a seat in a classroom (or as we like to say, “the real estate”) but are not able to make choices about texts and other materials, interact with others, and receive responsive instruction, then we would not call those classrooms truly inclusive, nor would we expect to see many literacy gains in those spaces for either students with autism or their peers. But in classrooms like those in Belle Gardner’s school where the staff embraces the responsibility of meeting all students’ learning needs and where full participation for all learners is the goal, the inclusion of students with autism in the learning community can have a profound positive impact on literacy development for every member of that community.

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