

# Disability Studies in Education Tenets in the Classroom

Diana Pastora Carson, M.Ed.

In the context of a busy, vibrant classroom environment, with the cultural, linguistic, social-emotional, and behavioral dynamics in play simultaneously with the academic rigor requirements of the content standards and individual learning communities, teachers can directly or indirectly address the Disability Studies in Education Tenets. The tenets can be creatively connected directly to content. There is also ample opportunity to indirectly address them on a daily basis. In order to be aware of any opportunities, teachers must first know and understand the tenets and their importance.

## Disability Studies in Education Tenets:

- Contextualize disability within political and social
- Privilege the interest, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people
- Promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people
- Assume competence and reject deficit models of disability

Although teachers will not necessarily address the DSE Tenets directly within each academic lesson as they may not be directly tied to the content, we model the tenets by how we respond to disability and diversity in general within our classroom environments. How do we accommodate the needs of individual students who learn differently or who have movement differences or who need work modified? How do we handle situations when the mental health of our students precludes academic learning? Do we become overly-concerned about strict adherence to lesson plans? Or do we, as teachers who have built a foundation of trust and understanding with our students, recognize and graciously address situations when students need us to take a time out and support them through any difficulties? Do we focus on building relationships with all of our students? Or only those who are model students? Do we roll our eyes and make sarcastic remarks when confronted by students who make our jobs more challenging? Or do we embrace the challenge and the diversity of students within our classes? Do we demonstrate flexibility in terms of classroom management so that some students can be treated with dignity as they pace or flap or take breaks? Or do we visibly become irritated by their movement or perceived disruptions? The Disability Studies in Education Tenets can be addressed indirectly within lessons and beyond - through our priorities, our attitudes, our behavior, and our words.

The Disability Studies Tenets adherence is not limited to classroom instruction time. It is equally important to focus on opportunities outside of the classroom, when social interaction dynamics are fervently at play. This can be done during recess, snack and lunch breaks, in PE and after-school clubs, during student performances, parent meetings, and so on. We must remain conscious of how we embrace and include all students within all school-related activities. Do we tolerate bullying behavior or do we set a high standard for students respecting one another?

How do we ensure that equitable opportunities are provided for our diverse array of students? How do we ensure that access is truly available for all students? Do we accept architectural and attitudinal barriers on the playground? Do students who use wheelchairs have access to the play equipment? Do students who have difficulty with social engagement have access to play and friendship? Do we facilitate social engagement at the lunch tables? Do we have hard conversations with our students about the impact of their inclusive vs. ableist actions at the lunch tables and during break or recess times? Do we teach compassion? Do we merely “allow” students with intellectual disabilities to join clubs and sports teams? Or do we model celebrating and inviting everyone to be a part of our community events and activities? Do we model and facilitate respectful use of language whether it be person-first or identity-first language? Do we make the effort to include everyone in school dances and performances and sporting events? Is the venue, auditorium, stage, or field accessible to all students and their families? Is American Sign Language (ASL) valued as a language? And is ASL interpretation (as well as other language interpretation) a priority for school-related events when it is known that without it, people will be excluded. How we embrace and include everyone serves as a powerful model to all students about social justice issues.

### **Pre-Lesson Reflection**

Here are some questions to reflect on when planning lessons and planning supports for your diverse classes:

#### **Content**

- Does the content I am teaching have a direct connection to the DSE Tenets? Consider not only social studies, but also reading, writing, the sciences, research assignments, math, visual and performing arts, and so on? If there is a connection, then make the connection within the lesson and/or activities assigned to students. If not, then model the DSE Tenets indirectly through attitudes and actions.
- Can the content I am teaching be somehow creatively connected to the DSE Tenets? If yes, then make the connection within the lesson and/or activities assigned to students. For example, you might present the DSE tenets to your students and then have them (depending on age or grade level) develop and apply their own understanding once they have been provided with examples and collaborative discussions. If the content cannot be creatively connected to the DSE Tenets, then model the DSE Tenets indirectly through attitudes and actions.

#### **Class**

- Does the diversity within my class lend itself to connecting my lesson or student activities to the DSE Tenets? Do my class norms connect? Can expert groups and group norms and/or assignments connect? Can individual and group projects be connected? Do the accommodations I facilitate for students or the modifications I make to assignments connect? Am I connecting the tenets to all aspects of my teaching practice? Are there areas for improvement? Where might there be gaps in applying the DSE Tenets? Am I consistent in my awareness and applications or do I feel pressed for time, unsupported etc. . . and disregard or short cut?

- If the diversity of my class does not readily lend itself to making a connection to the DSE tenets through my lessons or student activities, then how can I proactively and creatively connect my lesson or student activities to the DSE tenets? Again, how can I connect my class norms? How can expert groups and group norms, and/or assignments connect? How can individual and group projects be connected? How do the accommodations I facilitate for students or the modifications I make to assignments connect?

### **Evidence of Adherence to Disability Studies in Education Tenets**

Here are some ways that teachers can indirectly demonstrate the DSE Tenets as part of your classroom and school culture and instruction.

- Demonstrate commitment to inclusion. Students with disabilities are embraced and included for the entire day as a rule no matter their level of ability (Exceptions: only when it is clearly in the interest of the student for the sake of their dignity and/or out of respect for their choices; only when it is a last resort, not the first and only thing considered).
- Utilize creative supports & accommodations with or without an IEP.
- Students with significant communication differences are included and supported in a variety of communication methods (picture symbols, sign language, supported typing, assistive technology, etc.) and their voices are heard and honored throughout the day, within lessons, and within social interactions, not only by their teachers and support personnel, but also by their peers, where their communication is more meaningful and potentially more motivating.
- Students with mental health disabilities and their families are provided with support as a priority.
- Students with learning disabilities are provided with accommodations and intensive supports toward academic success.
- Students with any differences (disabilities, unique personalities, cultures, languages, sexual orientations, gender identities, etc.) are valued and embraced.

These are just a few ways that we, as educators, can demonstrate our commitment to the Disability Studies in Education Tenets and have a long-term impact in the lives of ALL students. The students we honor today will be educators, law enforcement officers, medical professionals, entrepreneurs, writers, musicians, and community members of tomorrow. What we do in our schools now will be perpetuated in all walks of life tomorrow. Let's get it right.