

Book Review
Widening the Circle:
The Power of Inclusive Classrooms
By Mara Sapon-Shevin
Boston: Beacon Press, 2007

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In *Widening the Circle: the Power of Inclusive Classrooms*, Mara Sapon-Shevin is not shy about declaring a strong stance for inclusion. Her argument is convincing, likely because she lays a sound philosophical framework that rises above common criticisms of inclusion. Throughout the book Sapon-Shevin asks the reader a central question: *What kind of citizens do we want our schools to create?* The reader may be persuaded that our current education system is not set up to foster qualities such as compassion, responsibility, and acceptance of diversity. Rather than promoting inclusion, many schools exclude students that do not 'fit' into the system and send a message to all students that differences may lead to exclusion. This is troubling, Sapon-Shevin argues, because students learn a false sense of 'the other,' anyone who does not fit within mainstream society. Many students, even those without disabilities, may feel this sense of 'otherness' or exclusion in schools because of the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, or even personality traits. If society, as mirrored by schools, teaches exclusion when anyone perceives otherness, students likely will echo this intolerance towards each other. On the other hand, Sapon-Shevin suggests, inclusive schools give teachers, families, and students a chance to learn and practice acceptance of diverse individuals.

Fortunately, Sapon-Shevin does not insist that inclusive reform in

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schools will happen easily or without protest. She rightly points out that there are many opponents of inclusion who believe that the current system of a continuum of services in special education is important to preserve. *Widening the Circle* deals with each of these criticisms using convincing prose and strong rationales. Sapon-Shevin points out that the existence of the continuum of services often means that students have to earn their way into general education classrooms with good behavior and academic progress. Paradoxically special education classrooms tend to have lower academic and behavioral expectations of students, so that students have less chance to learn the skills they are expected to know before transitioning into a general education environment. When comparing these general and special education environments, people often cite their fears that inclusion will be harmful to both students with disabilities and those without disabilities.

On the contrary, Sapon-Shevin insists that there is an emerging research base that finds benefits of inclusive education for all students. Readers should note that the book does not present every piece of research (including those studies that do not find strong positive impacts of inclusion) on outcomes of inclusive education. Nor does Sapon-Shevin include all of the arguments against inclusion from some within the disability field (such as the benefits of small, homogenous groupings for literacy instruction in the learning disability field). But every argument presented is dealt with thoroughly. Many of these criticisms of inclusive education center on the idea that children with disabilities will be left behind in general education classes. The book makes a strong case for a re-thinking of pedagogical practices within general education classrooms so that all students can benefit from the curriculum.

Although *Widening the Circle* is not a textbook in the traditional sense, pre-service teachers may benefit from the clear explanations of teaching strategies that can be used in inclusive classrooms. Sapon-Shevin explains that the best way to address fears that teasing or bullying will occur if a child with disabilities is included, is to engage all students in community building. Creating a strong classroom community with high expectations (standards that students themselves create) will allow teachers to openly explore differences with students and take advantage of natural learning opportunities in the classroom. Students may move beyond simply having a tolerance for differences and towards taking a stance against social injustice to prevent negative behavior towards any individual. Sapon-Shevin also describes specific techniques, such as cooperative learning, multi-level learning, peer teaching, and co-teaching, which could help teachers envision what learning in a successful inclusive classroom, might look like.

Teachers working in schools that are decidedly not inclusive might read this book and comment that the vision it presents, although persuasive, does not fit with the reality of their day-to-day life. Sapon-Shevin does not give these teachers permission to only slightly change their behavior and take a baby step by increasing mainstreaming opportunities for some students. Instead, *Widening the Circle* makes the bold statement that inclusive reform needs to be both school-wide and societal. The current model of education is clearly not working because there is too big a gulf between special and general education. Schools need to re-think their curriculum and models of teaching in all classes to better serve all students, not just those with disabilities. Rather than disheartening pre-service teachers, this book may inspire them to be agents for social change. As Sapon-Shevin points out, society needs to enable schools to make these reforms if communities expect that tomorrow's citizens will be leaders in social justice.