

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL: SUSTAINING EQUITY AND STANDARDS

JUDY W. KUGELMASS
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What does an inclusive school actually look like? *The Inclusive School: Sustaining Equity and Standards* (Kugelmass, 2004) follows the transformation of Betsy Miller Elementary School from a culture of chaos, to a collaborative, value-based school of inclusion. Kugelmass spent 8 years observing the changes at Betsy Miller Elementary and interviewing faculty and administrators. The result is a provocative, readable account of one school, through which Kugelmass extracts fundamental practices in establishing and maintaining an inclusive environment in any school.

Kugelmass begins by defining inclusion as it is used throughout the book, which is broader than the typically accepted definition. "Inclusive schools are designed to secure children's basic human right to an individually, culturally, and developmentally appropriate education and to eliminate social exclusion" (UNESCO as cited in Kugelmass, p. 3). Betsy Miller Elementary School succeeded in creating this environment, even with the challenges of merging two differing ethnic and socioeconomic populations into one school amid the stifling mandates of a bureaucratic school system.

Based on Hall's (1983) model of culture, the author distinguishes three dimensions of a culture of inclusion: the visible component of collaboration, the private aspect of collegiality, and the important and implicit element of compassionate caring. The author traces the development of these dimensions in the experiences of the teachers and administrators at Betsy Miller Elementary.

Kugelmass focuses on the leadership role of Joe Stefano, the newly assigned principal promoting inclusive education in the recently merged school. He immediately addressed the discipline problems in the school by developing programs to model conflict resolution. When this safe environment was established, he then was able to initiate instructional change. Specialists were integrated into the classroom rather than removing students

from the classroom to address their diverse needs. “We propose a more flexible staffing model that would remove labels from classrooms, ESL, special education (speech and resource room), and Title I, creating teams of professionals that would deliver instructional services in a collaborative, integrated fashion” (Kugelmass, 2004, p. 94).

The author asserts that the process of creating an inclusive school begins with intense staff development, which also requires teachers to encounter their own educational experiences and possible racism in order to be authentic models of inclusion. Through collegiality among staff, dialogue, and shared commitments, Betsy Miller Elementary School became renowned for its acceptance and celebration of diversity.

Several challenges faced the Betsy Miller community, one of which was a district-wide requirement of integrating uniform assessment tied to standards. This system would replace Betsy Miller’s narrative reporting, which focused on individual strengths, weaknesses, and goals for each child. In this example, Kugelmass did imply that it is sometimes necessary and even beneficial to make modifications to structure and practices, such as including standards and objectives in assessments.

An added challenge was the change in leadership and emotional struggle when the principal passed away suddenly. Through the trials, Kugelmass (2004) stresses the need for continual change within a school community, while remaining committed to common values and concern for one another, in order to maintain the relationships integral to an inclusive environment. “Whether developing curriculum, working with children and families, negotiating school systems, or interacting with colleagues, they saw themselves as always ‘in process’” (p. 122).

Kugelmass invites the reader to relate the challenges and successes of Betsy Miller Elementary School to one’s own school situation. The author emphasizes the need to prepare new teachers and provide ongoing support for existing teachers. There is a stress on teaching future educators not only instructional methods, but also how to foster personal and relational development.

Considering the book mentions standards only briefly, it is surprising to note that “sustaining standards” is a part of the title. The author seems to express that the hierarchical standards-based public school policy is overly demanding and unsuccessful compared with the contrasting inclusive model, and focuses little on integrating the two. Perhaps the author used the word “standards” in the title to attract the many educators and administrators whose primary concern is upholding district standards and expectations, with the hopes of indoctrinating them on this philosophy.

Another surprising element, considering that this book is written about public education, is Kugelmass' opinion of the essentiality of spiritual connectedness. "Teachers need to be equipped with both an internalized belief system that supports the tools they bring with them, and the emotional and spiritual resources necessary for survival in what will sometimes be a hostile land" (2004, p. 122). The author reminds readers continuously that compassion and caring are at the heart of education and inclusion.

In the last chapter, Kugelmass brings to light the contrast between the model of education presented and the current focus in public education on accountability and high-stakes testing. Why bother trying to create an inclusive school when the whole system is working against you? It is a social justice issue, according to the author. All children deserve the opportunity to succeed and enrich each other with their diversity. Achieving inclusion is a difficult and unappreciated task for educators. "It will require feisty women and men, like those at Betsy Miller, who are willing to become heroic teacher-leaders, collaborating to create inclusive school cultures built on foundations of compassionate care" (2004, p. 132).

Overall, this is an engaging book that appeals to the reader's emotions and spirit of justice and inspires educators to work toward a vision for inclusive schools. This book is not easily used as a reference guide in the creation or maintenance of inclusive schools, but rather should be read in its entirety. It would be useful for introducing the concept of inclusion because it provides a realistic description of the process, as it is ever-changing.

REFERENCES

- Hall, E. T. (1983). *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. New York: Doubleday.
Kugelmass, J. W. (2004). *The inclusive school: Sustaining equity and standards*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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