



Challenging teachers' intrinsic biases against disability

The Nora Project creates year-long curriculum and summer trainings for teachers to promote disability awareness, justice, and meaningful inclusion



by Mike Putnam, M.Ed., Ph.D.

“There’s a gaping hole in our education regarding disability,” said Lauren Schrero, Executive Director of The Nora Project. “Teachers are my generation and we were taught about disability by inference.” When disabled kids are physically excluded and ignored, kids without disabilities infer that disabled kids don’t belong.

And the problem hasn’t gone away. “Diversified classrooms are still extremely uncommon,” said Ms. Schrero.

The Nora Project (TNP), a nonprofit organization based in Highland Park, IL, aims to demystify disability and promote meaningful connections between students and their peers with disabilities. TNP offers three, year-long SEL programs for students of all abilities, pre-K to high school. After watching teachers engage with their curriculum, however, TNP staff soon realized that students weren’t the only ones that needed to learn about disability—teachers did too.

Dr. Jen Newton, professor of special education teacher candidates at Ohio University and Nora Project collaborator, confirmed the rising concern at TNP about teachers: “Even special education teachers are ableist,” she said. “They often talk about ‘their babies.’ They’re over-protective and sometimes think of themselves as saviors. Who does that serve?” Dr. Newton asked.

THE NORA PROJECT AT A GLANCE

- > **The only year-long curriculum in disability awareness for students of all abilities**
- > **SEL programs for elementary, middle, and high school**
- > **Written by teachers, for teachers**
- > **50 schools, 200 classrooms, 225 educators, and 4,000 students using The Nora Project curriculum in 2020-2021**
- > **Rigorous summer training plus a dedicated Nora Project coach all year long for all participating teachers**

And this is the problem. Nora Project staff could create the best disability awareness curriculum ever, but if teachers bring biases into the classroom, kids will learn them.

Just like the rest of us, teachers don't know what they don't know. Unconscious and implicit biases pervade our society. "Ableism is just like every other kind of bias: race, class, gender, whatever," Ms. Schrero said. "And we saw those biases in our teachers, even as they taught our curriculum." So TNP designed a rigorous summer training "to try to address those problems."

"We make sure we have eyes and ears on our participating schools to make sure that the kids are getting out of this what we put into it," said Katy Fattaleh, Senior Program Director and veteran curriculum designer at TNP. "It's very important to us that the integrity of the curriculum is maintained."

"It allows you to be real and raw"

Getting teachers to see their own biases, admit their own mistakes, and commit to doing better is not easy. To meet this challenge the staff creates community. "This training is like a family," said Ms. Fattaleh, "and we want the teachers to be part of it. And throughout the year they say that back to us, 'This is a family.' Teachers don't get to feel like that very often, it's a great bonding experience."

This safe atmosphere helps teachers take a harder look at themselves than they might otherwise. One of the first steps is to provide some vocabulary — "ableism" and "allyship," for example—to get everyone on the same page.

"My biggest takeaway was learning how to be an actual ally," said Heather Pearl, who, as Director of St. James Preschool in Verona, WI, attended the Summer 2020 virtual training. "We assume we're being an ally, but are we really? The training made me think about how often I was being ableist and making decisions without talking to the kids or their families about what really is best for them. That was eye opening for me."



Any time you have to reflect, admit your mistakes, and be willing to learn, it's heavy material.

— Heather Pearl, Director of St. James Preschool, Verona, WI.



Danya Sundh, 4th grade GenEd teacher at Rockland Elementary school in Libertyville, IL, who also attended the training, shared this: "I'm used to this theme like 'It's okay! We're all different, but we're still alike.' That's fine, but there really are big differences! Those frank conversations really got my wheels turning—I know now that I have implicit biases and I have to work really hard to undo and to relearn."

The key here is to challenge teachers to confront their unconscious biases before they walk into the classroom. TNP's Ability Inclusion Mindset (AIM, see inset 1) lays the foundation for how teachers teach and help students rethink disability. Just like confronting implicit race biases—this is not easy work. "We try to put things in the training that will challenge people's experiences," said Ms. Fattaleh, "and some things might make them uncomfortable."

"It was a hopeful, yet raw experience," said Ms. Sundh. "You take a hard look at yourself, and realize there's a lot of work to be done. That can be a little scary. But it's hopeful because the training is giving us lots of tools and resources to help us make change."

"Any time you have to reflect, admit your mistakes, and be willing to learn, it's heavy material," said Ms. Pearl. "They did a great job of creating a community that allows you to be real and raw, you just don't get that a lot."



Centering Disabled Voices

One of the most novel elements of the training and one of the most popular with the teachers was the “Panel Discussions.” These four presentations centered disabled people’s voices and wisdom enabling them to tell their own stories in their own words.

“It’s commendable,” said Dr. Newton, “that The Nora Project has created a space where disabled people can talk about their experience and teach teachers about what they’re missing. As an able-bodied, white, cisgender person, you have to make space for other voices. Lauren [Ms. Schrero] has done that—and that’s where she’s done something that’s really different.”

In the 2020 training, one of the presenters, 17 year old Mitchell Robins, is autistic, nonverbal, and uses a letter board and iPad to communicate. “Teachers assumed I was developmentally delayed and treated me like a baby,” he said. “They didn’t give me age appropriate work or challenge me to do my best. They told me terrible things about how stupid I was and that I couldn’t learn anything. If you couldn’t speak, would you like to be talked to like a toddler?”

Such presentations disrupt our stereotypes about disabled people and the variety of challenges they face. For example, most people believe mobility problems and wheelchair use is the most common form of disability. While this is technically true, it is nevertheless a small fraction of a wide spectrum. According to the CDC, only about 14% of people with disabilities have mobility problems. [1]

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, Sep. 16) Disability affects all of us. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>

Inset 1: TNP’s Ability Inclusive Mindset (AIM) helps teachers rethink disability for themselves and their students.

- Talk to a grade school kids about disability just like you would about any other form of diversity. It doesn’t have to be complicated. Disability is not positive or negative—it exists, always has, always will, and most people will experience disability at some point in their lives. It’s part of the human experience.
- Understand the medical model our society uses to interpret disability (disabled people are ‘broken’ and need to be fixed) as opposed to the social model (what disables a person is a society that excludes them, that is not built for them).
- Learn to pay attention to the disabled child, not the diagnosis. Always “presume competence” rather than inability.
- Accept that all classrooms have kids with disabilities whether they’re diagnosed or not, whether they’re visible or not: ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. These exist everywhere.
- Normalize and destigmatize disability as a neutral and natural part of human diversity. Disability isn’t unfortunate or negative; disabled people don’t wish they were “better.”

Thus, representing that spectrum with presentations like Mr. Robins' and others adds a critical component to the TNP training.

Reflecting on this presentation, Ms. Pearl said: "One thing I learned was that no one person with disabilities is the same, so you have to be reflective and intentional because the students are never going to be the same year to year."

The Training Never Ends

"Most curriculums available give you a three hour training session with a program consultant," said Ms. Fattaleh, Senior Program Director at TNP. "But really they're just a sales rep—definitely not a former teacher."

Ms. Pearl agrees: "A lot of times teachers are handed a curriculum and told to go teach it." For TNP, the summer training is "a kickoff," said Ms. Fattaleh. Each school has a program leader who is required to check in with TNP program directors throughout the entire school year. "It's one of the things that we're very dedicated to," she said. "If they have questions they can pick up the phone anytime and they know who they're talking to because they've already met over the summer. We talk to some teachers every week."

"We definitely have what we need to get started," Ms. Sundh said, "but the thing about TNP is that we're never done. We check in with them; we continue to communicate. I think they actually want us to be asking more questions after we finish [the training] than when we started."

"We know how change happens," said Dr. Newton. "It requires sustained engagement and sustained reflection, and TNP has committed to providing space for that." That impact extends to students: Executive Director Schrero states, "We offer clear, rigorous curriculum with ongoing training that's easy to implement and it actually shifts the way that students engage with one another. We have impact data to prove it."

And that impact extends to teachers as well: "The training has really reshaped my thinking," says Ms. Sundh, "not only in the classroom, not only around The Nora Project, but as a person."

Yet the resources required to mount and sustain this kind of change are significant. "Our dedication makes growth complicated," said Ms. Fattaleh.

"We will never see a program like TNP that's publicly-funded," Dr. Newton argues. "We won't pay teachers to think and talk and reflect and engage in learning. TNP is providing all the things that teachers need and don't get—and it benefits our students, it benefits their community, and it benefits kids with and without disabilities."

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— Danya Sundh, GenEd teacher at Rockland Elementary, Libertyville, IL

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