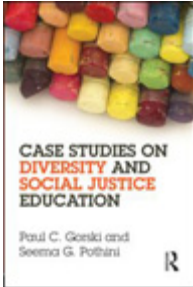


Case Study 8.2: Insufficient Accommodations



Written by Paul C. Gorski (gorski@edchange.org) and Seema Pothini (sg1515@hotmail.com) for their book, *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education* (Routledge, 2014). Check out the book for this more than 30 additional school- and classroom based case studies on issues like race, class, (dis)ability, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.

Synopsis: A sixth grade teacher takes her class to a nature reserve for a science-based hike, believing the reserve has accommodations for her new student, who uses crutches due to cerebral palsy. When the class arrives they learn that the reserve's accommodations are underwhelming.

Ms. Thurston, a sixth grade science teacher, always believed in the power of experiential learning. Students didn't learn science by studying concepts out of a book, she thought, but by being scientists, using their senses and reasoning to explore and apply scientific concepts.

One of Ms. Thurston's favorite activities, and one she arranged every year, involved taking her students to Meadow Creek Park, a nearby nature reserve, where they could walk the same trails and explore the same terrain as scientists from the university who studied local ecology. She was especially excited this year because the park had hired a new education director, Ms. Parsons, who had designed a one-mile conservation hike specifically for middle school students, basing much of its content on sixth, seventh, and eighth grade state science standards. Ms. Thurston couldn't wait to take her students on that hike!

Two weeks before the field trip to Meadow Creek Park, a new student, Justin, was added to Ms. Thurston's fourth period science class. A cheery young man who was especially enthusiastic about science, Justin had cerebral palsy, a condition that required him to use crutches. At first Ms. Thurston was concerned about whether or not Justin would be able to participate in the field trip. He could navigate the classroom and school pretty easily. But because she never had *needed* to know, Ms. Thurston was not sure whether the learning center in the park was accessible. Certainly it met basic Americans with Disabilities Act standards with ramps, accessible parking, and wheelchair accessible bathrooms, but these were minimal standards.

Ms. Thurston decided to call Ms. Parsons and inquire about the accommodations offered for students like Justin. The last thing she wanted to do was to discourage his love of science with a negative experience, especially considering his newness at the school. Ms. Parsons tried to assure her by saying, "The hike might be a bit much for Justin, but we have alternative opportunities for students with physical disabilities and learning differences. He'll be fine."

When the bus pulled up to the Meadow Creek learning center, where the students were to check in and hear a short talk about being safe and respecting nature in the reserve, Ms. Parsons was there to greet them. Ms. Thurston was thrilled to see the expanded gardens wrapping around the south side of the building and the fairly smooth paths webbing through them. Perhaps Justin would be able to do some nature exploring after all, she thought.

As the students listened to their short lesson and asked their tour guides questions, Ms. Thurston talked with Ms. Parsons about how they would accommodate Justin. "Looks like he

can spend some time in the garden,” Ms. Thurston said, “exploring some of region’s native plants and flowers.”

“Unfortunately,” Ms. Parsons responded, “park rules don’t allow for that.” She pointed to a sign hanging above the door leading through the gardens and around to the hiking trails. It was labeled “General Rules of the Reserve.” The third rule read: “For their own safety, visitors with conditions, injuries, or illnesses which may impair their mobility are not permitted on the nature paths or in the gardens. A selection of films about the park and local ecology are available for people who are unable to participate in the hikes due to these conditions.”

Shocked, Ms. Thurston replied, “I thought you said you had accommodations. A film isn’t an accommodation!”

Heading back toward the students, including Justin, who were gathered at the south side exit, Ms. Thurston felt unsure. Should she use this as a teachable moment? What should she say to Justin, and how could she still make this a meaningful learning experience for him?

“The travails of experiential learning,” she thought, wondering what to do next.

Questions

1. Ms. Thurston was frustrated to find that the learning “accommodation” for Justin consisted of sitting *inside* the center and watching a film while his classmates were on the hike. In your estimation, does this constitute an equitable accommodation? If not, what sorts of accommodations might have been more equitable?
2. Is it Ms. Thurston’s responsibility to provide the hike experience to most of her students even if one was to be excluded from any sort of parallel learning opportunity at the park? Should she look for a different learning opportunity that could include all of her students, even if she feels that opportunity may not generate the same level of enthusiasm for most of her student as hiking in Meadow Creek Park?
3. How, as she approaches her students after talking with Ms. Parsons, might Ms. Thurston use this situation as a teachable moment for *all* of her students? Can she do so without risking making Justin uncomfortable?
4. Now that the class is at the Park, prepared to begin the hike while Justin watches a film, how might Ms. Thurston make the best of what she interprets as an inequitable situation?