

Standards for Diverse Learners

Standards-based lessons create rich and challenging learning experiences for all students.

Paula Kluth and Diana Straut

Education standards receive much attention these days from political leaders, parents, and educators. Many of these stakeholders are concerned about what the standards movement means for the pluralistic classroom.

What kind of diversity exists in U.S. classrooms? Every kind.



■ Students are no longer either Catholic, Jew, or Protestant; in fact, the fastest growing religion in the United States is Islam (Hodgkinson, 1998).

■ Most of the 5.3 million U.S. students with disabilities spend some part of their day in classes with nondisabled students (Kaye, 1997).

■ By 1995, bilingual programs were operating in nearly 200 U.S. schools (Rethinking Schools, 1998).

■ At least one-third of the school-aged population in the United States is nonwhite (Marlowe & Page, 1999).

■ 43 million people in the United States move every year (Hodgkinson, 1998), creating an increasingly mobile student population.

In addition, trends such as multicultural education, antitracking pedagogy, inclusive education, dual bilingual programs, magnet schools, and multi-age classrooms are contributing to the rich diversity of U.S. schools.

The standards movement will have little meaning if it cannot respond to the needs of all these students. Can we develop standards *and* make curriculum, instruction, and assessment responsive to learning differences?

Five Conditions

Doing so is not only possible, but vitally important; every student must be able to participate in standards-based education. To make standards inclusive, however, educators must support and cultivate five conditions.

■ *Standards are developmental and flexible.* Standards should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to education. A student cannot and should not be expected to know and do exactly the same things as his or her peers. Developmental and flexible standards provide different students in the same classroom with opportunities to work on a range

of concepts and skills according to individual abilities, needs, and interests (Reigeluth, 1997).

By adopting a personalized approach, teachers can use standards to "allow a range of acceptable performance" so that

all students may continue to work toward student-outcome goals such as graduation or literacy, but within each goal area knowledge and skill standards may vary based on student-ability levels. (Geenen & Ysseldyke, 1997, p. 222)

For example, students can share how to solve an arithmetic problem in many ways. Some students may use sign language or communication boards to show understanding, others may write a paragraph explaining the process, and still others may express their knowledge through drawings. In addition, students in the same classroom can focus on problems that range in complexity, with some students describing the process for reducing fractions and others designing and explaining binomial equations.

To teach standards effectively in a diverse classroom, educators need to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of learners and make alternatives available for instructional materials, teaching strategies, curricular goals, learning environments, instructional arrangements, and lesson formats (Udvari-Solner, 1996). For example, some students might use protractors and a compass to study obtuse and acute angles, whereas others may need to use a geometry software program. Experiential projects that encourage vocalizing and moving can meet the needs of active students who like to get out of their seats, investigate problems,

and manipulate materials.

Some teachers believe that implementing adaptations in a standards-based classroom will diminish curriculum and instruction. The opposite is true. Creative adaptations can make curriculum more relevant, make abstract concepts more concrete, and connect the instructor's teaching style more effectively to students' different



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learning styles (Udvari-Solner, 1996). The following lesson illustrates how rich and challenging standards-based lessons can be for students with various learning profiles.

Mr. Lee drafted daily lessons based on the standards he was teaching. For example, Mr. Lee decided to read every other chapter of [a historical novel] aloud to the students. They would read the opposite chapters in partners. He also decided to use learning centers with cooperative

groups. Each center focused on an aspect of World War II and engaged students via one of the multiple learning styles. For example, one of the centers involved journal writing, based on actual diaries from the Holocaust. Another center focused on geography and involved mapping the progress of war based on listening to actual radio broadcasts recorded during World War II. (Fisher & Roach, 1999, p. 18)

Mr. Lee's careful planning and conscientious design of the curriculum and instruction invites all learners to participate in an engaging and age-appropriate curriculum and also responds to a variety of learning styles. Mr. Lee's classroom does not expect one size to fit all students.

■ *Standards require a wide range of assessment tools.* Professional literature and the popular media have linked standards with high-stakes testing. Standards and testing, however, are not the same. Educators must separate testing from the standards in conversations, in the design of curriculum, and in classroom instruction.

We believe that high-stakes assessment models are harmful and exclusive. Under the guise of accountability, several U.S. states and some individual school districts have implemented standardized testing programs that

sort, eliminate, or stratify students from kindergarten through 12th grade. When students struggle with standardized tests, we only find out that they cannot perform effectively with such an assessment tool. When students do achieve high test scores, we do not necessarily know that they have learned more, learned better, or become more skilled or knowledgeable. These tests provide plenty of information about how skilled students are at taking standardized tests

on a given day, but the tests do not provide much information about whether students have actually met the standards.

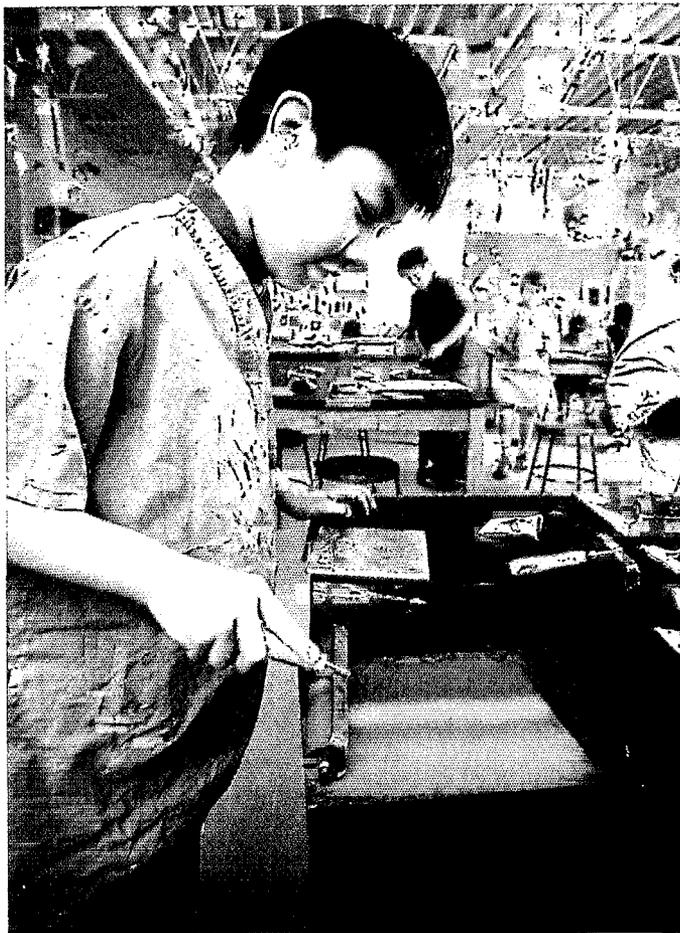
Standards do need some type of consistent and comprehensive assessment system, however. The most effective way to gather information about what students know and are able to do is to use a range of data collection strategies, including portfolios, interviews, observations, anecdotal records, self-evaluation questionnaires, journals, and learning logs (Lopez-Reyna & Bay, 1997; Pike & Salend, 1995). Students charged with explaining the ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence, for example, could demonstrate their understanding by interviewing a peer, participating in a group skit, or writing an essay on the topic.

Kentucky has resisted high-stakes testing and has found a way to include all students in the formal assessment process (Kearns, Kleinert, & Kennedy, 1999). Most students in Kentucky undergo both traditional and alternative assessments. Students with significant disabilities participate in the statewide assessment by working on alternative portfolios that are tailored to their needs and strengths. Kentucky designed this range of assessments because many students struggle with traditional assessments and, more important, because a reliance on one kind of assessment does not provide a meaningful analysis of any student's abilities or progress.

In contrast to standardized measures, authentic assessments offer a fuller picture of student learning because they relate directly to what students are learning, are continuous and cumulative, occur during actual learning experiences, are collaborative, and clearly

communicate proficiency to all stakeholders (Pike, Compain, & Mumper, 1994; Pike & Salend, 1995; Valencia, 1990). And because standards ask students to perform a range of competencies, we need a range of assessments to measure the learning of these competencies.

■ *Standards allow equitable access to meaningful content.* If there were



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some alternative to standards that could ensure that all students—regardless of learning profile, race, ethnicity, or proficiency in English—had access to challenging academic content, then perhaps we could dismiss the standards movement. The truth is that we have not done a good job of giving all students—particularly those students with unique learning characteristics—access to an appealing, thought-provoking, and stimulating curriculum.

For example, Reese, a student with significant disabilities, works in an inclusive general education 4th grade classroom. While the general education students work in small groups to investigate fossils, Reese sits in the corner of the classroom and completes a counting worksheet with a paraprofessional.

Had Reese been expected to participate in a standards-based curriculum, he could be meeting his individual goals of “interacting appropriately with peers” and “classifying objects by at least three different characteristics.” At the same time, he would have the opportunity to use interesting materials, work with peers, and learn about geography and history. Sorting fossils into categories or building a model dinosaur with a cooperative group would be both more meaningful and more content-based than filling in a worksheet that taught no science and did nothing to include Reese in the classroom community.

A set of standards, articulated across the state or district, can give parents, teachers, and administrators a common language for talking about student goals and progress. More crucial, attention to a set of common outcomes can serve as a challenge to view students as capable and to respect them with an appropriately

rigorous curriculum.

■ *It takes a community to implement standards.* Teaching to the standards is part of classroom teachers' responsibilities, but it is not their job alone. Teachers should receive assistance from all stakeholders in the school and community.

Collaboration among general and special educators can provide students with more opportunities to address the standards and to practice related skills.

All students benefit from the different teaching approaches, instructional styles, and perspectives offered by two or more educators working in the same classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995).

Teaming across classrooms can also bring students closer to mastering the standards. For example, one physical education teacher helps kindergarten students recognize shapes by asking students to name the shapes of tumbling mats, hula-hoops, and floor scooters. While students learn new

the same time, misconceptions about standards—as one-size-fits-all, inequitable monsters that subject students and teachers to high-stakes tests—are creating a backlash that could reduce educators' commitment to designing learning opportunities for all students.

Standards are not the only route to educational excellence, but they can help us address the most pressing issues that stand in the way of students having a quality educational experience. For

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skills like hopping, galloping, and following rules, they are also engaged in an impromptu, cross-curricular, standards-based lesson with almost no up-front planning from the classroom teacher.

Teachers are not the only adults who can support a standards-based curriculum. The school secretary, recess monitor, lunchroom aides, teaching assistants, and family visitors can help. In one school, a custodian practices spelling words with students as they wait in line for lunch. Imagine the benefit of this fun exchange.

Students, the most important stakeholders in the standards movement, often know the least about implementing standards. Teachers should share information about standards in ways that students can understand; students are more likely to hit targets when they can see them (Strong, Silver, & Perini, 1999). Acting as allies in their own learning, students can develop personal strategies for meeting standards, and older students can even assist in developing standards-based lessons.

■ *Standards are a catalyst for other reforms.* Some proponents of standards market them as the savior of public education, and many hope that this singular initiative will solve a wide range of educational and societal ills. At

standards to work, schools need caring learning communities; skilled and responsive teachers; adequate financial, human, and material resources; effective partnerships with families; and concerned and visionary leadership.

The standards movement should motivate political leaders to work for increased funding, smaller class sizes, better staff development opportunities, increased teacher planning time, and more social supports in schools, such as counselors and family liaisons.

The standards movement can provide teachers with a compass for crafting a rich curriculum and appropriate instruction, offering new opportunities and setting high expectations for all students in the multicultural, heterogeneous, dynamic classrooms of the 21st century. ■

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