

To Be at Home: Including Each Human in the Classroom

Cara Furman

University of Maine, Farmington

INTRODUCTION

This article is premised on the belief that classrooms ought to honor the different ways of knowing of all the children who enter them. As eloquently articulated by long-term educator Patricia Carini:¹

*Sameness is antipathetic to humanness. . . . Reflecting with others, I am reminded that conformity, uniformity, standardization—everything that marches stiff-legged in narrow lines—endangers the species.*²

Protecting both humanity and individual humans, we must recognize each person’s approach. In addressing this claim, I first argue that contemporary education tends to require children to assimilate to a pre-determined norm.³ In exploring alternatives to this model, I put forth Claudia Ruitenberg’s work on hospitality as a robust vision of education that honors each human.⁴ I then offer an illustration of how student teachers might be supported in cultivating a stance of hospitality.

ASSIMILATION AND HOSPITALITY

William Ayers captures the moment that Ashley, a child labeled with a disability enters the classroom for the first time.⁵ The language is less than welcoming. Ayers refers to Ashley as “a particular challenge” for the teacher, Michele.⁶ Michele describes bringing Ashley into the classroom as “an experiment” and she confides: “Sometimes I think it’s not going to work because the demands of the classroom are too great. Other times I think it will work, and everyone will benefit.”⁷ Although Michele is compassionate and affectionate, Ashley is presented to her classmates as “slower,” and much of her behavior is characterized as disruptive.⁸ Ashley is positioned as both other and lesser.

Michele reflects: “It may work out with Ashley . . . Sometimes I see her using an area of the room the way I’d planned for it to be used, or I see her respond to something simple and direct, and I get goose bumps. We’ll see.”⁹ Ashley’s right to the classroom appears to depend on her ability to “us[e]” it “the way” that Michele “planned for it to be used.” In not conforming to plans set by others, Ashley is a source of frequent frustration for Michele, her classmates, and even her father. When Michele refers to the ways in which “everyone will benefit,” it appears that Ashley will “benefit” from being more like others. The others will “benefit” by developing a compassionate approach to Ashley.

Published in 1989, Ayers documents a classroom at the forefront of the movement for inclusive education. Yet despite policy changes that mandate inclusion, and programs of study devoted to a model that honors difference, the pressure for children to assimilate to a narrow classroom norm still dominates the approach to learning differences.¹⁰

One compelling response against assimilation is for a space apart, an “asylum,” from the society and typical classroom in which difference becomes the norm.¹¹ I recognize the need for such spaces in which difference is normalized and protected and appreciate this call. Yet I am skeptical of the metaphor of the asylum. Attempts to reclaim the word “asylum” do not just carry the baggage of othering, but a dehumanizing othering at that.¹²

Instead, a space that not only provides for but also honors difference ought to be the educational and societal norm.¹³ A better name for this space might be “home.”¹⁴ Using this metaphor, Ruitenbergh advocates for hospitality in which the teacher acts as host for those who enter the classroom. Invoking the Jewish Passover tradition of leaving an empty chair for Elijah, Ruitenbergh calls on the teacher to keep open space in the classroom for whoever may enter. Drawing on a framework of decentered subjectivity, Ruitenbergh argues that identities are not fixed but instead grow in response to each other. With hospitality, one is not only physically allowed in the classroom, but also allowed the right to influence the educational space.

Ruitenbergh distinguishes hospitality from inclusive education, arguing

that inclusion demands that the student conform to the space already there.¹⁵ I hold onto the term inclusion but use it to refer to a commitment to hospitality. Within this model, I call for a conception of difference that assumes there is no normal and, in doing so, does not label certain people as exceptional.¹⁶

Incomprehensibility, I argue, is far more individualized than labels of “diagnosed” disability imply. Elementary school teacher-researcher, Karen Gallas, for example, provides a compelling look into her initial resistance and anger towards students who tend to be empowered in our society: academically strong, white, middle-class boys. In her powerful and raw text, Gallas shares how she allows her community and herself to grow through these boys.¹⁷

Moving away from labels not only sidesteps the preconceived assumptions that come with them but also affords each child the right to differences. In a poignant poem titled, “For My Niece Sidney, Age Six,” Amy Gerstler writes of:

the tyranny of the word
 “normal”—its merciless sway over those
 of us bedeviled and obsessed,
 hopeless at school dances, repelled by
 mothers’ suffocating hugs, yet entranced
 by foul smelling chemistry experiments,
 eager to pass sleepless nights seeking
 rhymes for “misspent” and “grimace.”¹⁸

Although Gerstler speaks of her niece’s widely adored brother who “fits into the happy category of souls mostly at home/in the world,”¹⁹ “mostly” suggests that even for those in this rare group, the sense of “at home” is partial. Even those who superficially conform are also oppressed by the narrow view of normal.

Hospitality does not demand that the host forsake self-preservation to accept all elements of another. Ruitenbergh is firm that the host cannot be hospitable if she or her home has been fully “surrender[ed]” to another.²⁰ Illus-

trating this, Gallas neither pushes her students towards conformity nor simply cultivates free expression. Instead, in her class everyone must find ways to work well together.²¹ It is important to note that while the teacher sets the tone, the children often lead the way with clues as to how to access particular students.²²

Examples of hospitality in education are rare but certainly exist. *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* serves as a book-length illustration in which early childhood educator and author, Vivian Paley helps build a home in her classroom for one child who initially struggled to engage with others.²³ The child's different way of knowing is portrayed as a gift that expands the community and the teacher's way of thinking.

Yet, in advocating that teachers see difference as an opportunity, I am sympathetic that hospitality poses challenges.²⁴ Calling for an educational climate that allows for all to be counted is especially ambitious given current narrow standards for development and restricted curricula.²⁵ Further, as Gallas experienced with her successful, white, middle-class boys sometimes a student or students may feel threatening to a particular teacher, making opening the door challenging.²⁶ In writing of Michele, Ayers depicts a teacher who seeks to honor each student. Assessing her work with Ashley, Michele humbly confesses, "I don't know. I'm just learning."²⁷ Michele needs help, not sanctions. In this article I look into what this help could be.

HOSPITALITY WITH STUDENT TEACHERS

Methodology

Carini intentionally pairs generalized arguments with stories. Reflecting on this approach, she writes:

I now insert another story. A particularized story. A story of a particular child. I do this to animate story and memory, to give weight to being. I tell this one story to call into your minds your particularized world, your particularized stories. I do this purposefully to spill the vivid colors of the

particular life, the particular world over the deathly grays of generalization and classification, those neutralized hues that paint humanness impersonally, and the human world flat.²⁸

The particular story combats the tendency to look at the world through generalities. Providing a story is a call to the reader to honor the uniqueness of each human.

In focusing on the individual, I too turn my investigation to the happenings in one classroom. As with Gallas and Paley, I include myself in the drama. Drawing on educational thinkers, philosophers, and poets for analysis represents an intersection of texts and practice.

Specifically, this article will explore my supervision of two student teachers, Mia and Natasha,²⁹ who were placed in the same public school classroom during different semesters. I focus on our work as we expanded our understanding to include seven-year old Thomas. In zooming in on the particular child, Thomas, we cultivated an outlook that could be applied to all children.

I observed Mia and Natasha five times each. In addition to oral and written feedback on lessons, they wrote and then received detailed comments on weekly logs and journal entries. This article draws on my written responses to their work. To stay close to the original pedagogy, I've left my responses un-edited.

I have chosen my work with Mia and Natasha because of their commitment to inclusion and the challenges Thomas posed to this commitment. Thomas had my attention from the first observation, and I grappled throughout the year with how I would support him if he were my student. My role was therefore not as expert but as a fellow inquirer. Bright, hard-working, kind, and open-minded, Mia and Natasha's difficulties speak to the challenge of hospitality.

Drawing on Difference

Paley notes how particular children draw the eye, commenting:

I began my experience in Annie Olsen's kindergarten watching

Eli and Marianne, confident children who are at ease in the practice of being a child. But my thoughts now revolve around Stanley, whose practice in the matter is far less understood.³⁰

Throughout this text and her opus more broadly, Paley documents her work with children who grabbed her attention.³¹ In her commitment to all children, her eyes land both on children who “are at ease” and those whose “practice in the matter is far less understood.”

Thomas “dr[e]w the eye[s]” of Mia and Natasha from the first days of their placements. Mia immediately warmed to Thomas and was committed to improving his experience. In her first journal, Natasha was baffled and frightened by Thomas. He had hit her on the first day they worked together. She also worried that the cooperating teachers were too permissive with him. In my first observation, when Thomas started speaking to Natasha, she redirected him to do his work. In response, he stopped speaking, got out of his chair, and wandered.

In response to Natasha’s first journal, I wrote:

There is a lot going on in your placement. You are asking questions and observing behaviors that are challenging to all teachers, not just new teachers, and figuring out how to meet some children’s needs can be challenging. I have never had a class where there wasn’t one child who took me a very long time to figure out.³² Each year this child (and sometimes there was more than one) challenged me to redefine what I believed about teaching and classrooms and to change the structure and community in my class in serious ways. Just as Alexander pushed me to reevaluate how I taught writing,³³ I had two other children that year who made me completely change how I was thinking about community. I think the challenge is to stay open, to not blame yourself when a child is struggling in your classroom, but, at the same time, to think about what might be setting them off.

Using the word “challenge” four times, I acknowledged the difficulty of hos-

pitality. I first affirmed Natasha and her cooperating teachers' frustration, and closed with the assurance that the teacher ought not to "blame [her]self." I emphasized that "all teachers" including me have students they struggle with.

As it frames my approach to hospitality, I share another lengthy response, this time to Mia:

I can't speak to methods that will work or won't without knowing the child but here are some attitudes that have helped me with similar children:

1. He may not make sense to us but there's a good chance he makes sense to himself. There is a logic to his actions, quite likely, but we don't know the logic and it doesn't fit with ours. For whatever reason, he has having trouble fitting his world into our world.

2. So, one of my primary guiding practices is that if a child isn't fitting into my world then something about my community isn't quite working ... It took me two years with one child to change my classroom world so that he could be a part of it and this change went two ways - we worked towards each other.

3. So how is this achieved - studying the child and the community? Where are the breakdowns? What isn't working? Where does the child connect? Where is he trying to connect?

In summation, one must first take a stance of openness. Second, look for clues into the child's way of knowing, and, third, reshape one's thinking and practice to include the child's approach. The remainder of this article will explore how Mia, Natasha, and I took these three steps over the course of the semester.

A Stance of Openness

Thomas' cries, comments, and movement were unpredictable, often out of touch with those around him, and appeared random. This, as much as

his yelling and kicking, seemed to make people nervous.

Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: “Not that I could describe the system of these convictions. Yet, my convictions do form a system, a structure.”³⁴ Assuming that Thomas had a “system,” I had written to Mia: “there’s a good chance he makes sense to himself. There is a logic to his actions, quite likely, but we don’t know the logic and it doesn’t fit with ours.” The articulate adult philosopher Wittgenstein could not “describe” the system. This suggests that the child would likely be unable to render his structure intelligible.

Trouble arises when someone cannot describe her system and it is so drastically different as to be almost unrecognizable to the community. Again, Wittgenstein is eloquent on this point:

We all believe that it isn’t possible to get to the moon; but there might be some people who believe that that is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief—they are wrong and we know it.³⁵

Within a system of logic, a given outcome can completely contradict another’s thinking. Because our way of thinking is invested in certain understandings, one response to these differences is to dismiss another for “not know[ing] a lot that we know.” Even with the best intentions, a belief can be so contrary to expectations, as walking on the moon was for Wittgenstein, that it is completely inaccessible.

Carini writes that observing requires “trust that what I am attending to makes sense; that it isn’t a merely accidental or chance event. To discover the subject’s coherence and how it persists in the world, I have deliberately to shift my own perspective in relation to it.”³⁶ One must suspend one’s own understanding to assume that there is coherence to each person’s perceptions and perspective. In the next section, I share a way of suspending assumptions.

Making Visible: Description and Story

Wittgenstein writes: “Pretensions are a mortgage which burdens a philosopher’s capacity to think.”³⁷ Substituting “teacher” for “philosopher,” these pretensions interfere with the ability to think about and therefore act in a child’s best interest. Specifically, labeling children with a diagnosed disability or with comments like “good student” limits the way that the child is perceived and perceives himself.³⁸

For Carini, description within a community provides the means of unburdening oneself of pretensions. She writes:

describing, I pause, pausing, attend ... Describing requires that I not rush to judgment or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present ... I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying or generalizing.³⁹

For something to be “fully present,” it must emerge beyond the labels. Through the slow-moving process of description one gives “the subject time to speak, to show itself.”⁴⁰

To this end, I spent time observing and then describing Thomas for my student teachers. Sometimes I would watch for a few minutes and jot down everything he did. I tried to present Thomas without evaluation. As I wrote to Mia:

I see a child who desperately wants to be a part of things (he calls out constantly, he tries to engage other students), but who is also angry at the thing he wants to be a part of (he disrupts lessons, is aggressive towards teachers, sat with his ears covered while other children shared yesterday, makes a point of saying what he already knows ...). So, I would study him to see, where is he smiling? Where is he falling apart? Just watch even without helping. I would be very intrigued to see what happened between him trying to comfort another frustrated child yesterday during the drawing assignment and when he scribbled all over his paper and erased his work. What was the breaking point?

If you want to keep engaging this question, feel free to send me some more observations and questions about him and I will be happy to think about it some more ...

In suggesting that Mia “just watch without helping” and maintain an inquiry stance, I put forth observing and questioning as crucial habits of teaching.

Another way of seeing is through refraction. Paley writes: “The anecdotal history of one group of children suddenly brings to mind other extraordinary characters who changed my perceptions of life in a classroom.”⁴¹ In addition to describing Thomas, I used stories to try to help the students consider his perceptions. In one instance, I told Natasha about an older student who was attracted to the Victorians because of their reputation for stoicism. This student found it hard to read people’s emotions and liked the idea of a culture where emotions were avoided.

Acknowledging the challenges of hospitality, I opened this response by affirming Natasha’s “interesting work” and “serious thinking.” I then shared the story to expand upon this thinking. Beyond repeating the word “interesting” after sharing the story, I resisted adding my thinking, hoping the story would launch Natasha’s own thoughts.

Re-visioning

A helpful commonality across the literature on the “asylum”⁴² and Ruitenberg’s work⁴³ is that one can neither fully know another nor even oneself. Curriculum cannot be fixed because we cannot foresee who students will be.⁴⁴ In maintaining this openness, I wrote to Mia: “I can’t speak to methods that will work or won’t without knowing⁴⁵ the child.”

Even when one does have a relationship with the child, flexibility is necessary as the child continues to develop beyond expectations. As I wrote to Mia: “All good questions. Try stuff. See if it works. Then try again. Trust your instinct. The fact that he trusts you shows how well you are handling the situation.” The constant is the relationship. Within this safe relationship, there

is room to experiment.

BENEFITS OF HOSPITALITY

Foremost, with inclusion, the health and happiness of the individual student is at stake. Thomas was often screaming and thrashing in the hallway. In this way, he literally stood outside the community and his vocalizations were reduced to incomprehensible noise. The inability to master something others did easily often precipitated his screams. Thomas' teachers, classmates, and student teachers worked to understand Thomas and to draw on his many strengths. When this happened, Thomas appeared markedly happier and was able to join in the learning.

In her last journal, Natasha rejoiced in Thomas' increased comfort with her and said she would miss him most of all. In responding to Natasha's final journal I wrote:

Certainly the kids in my teaching who made me the most upset also pushed me the most to grow and ultimately I think of them with the most affection. I also want to note that your journals started and ended with him – the initial journal expressing anxiety and frustration and this one compassion and affection. ☺ What a great opportunity to get to know a child in this way.

Linking my growth as a classroom teacher to her current situation, I hoped to encourage Natasha to embrace a stance of open learning in response to students. In hosting a student with an unfamiliar perspective, the teacher must grow to incorporate that perspective.⁴⁶

Carini writes, “in ways subtle and bold they [babies] announce themselves as active players in the worlds making and remaking.”⁴⁷ We are dependent on each individual being able to express himself to keep the world revitalized. Whereas not all children resist the norms passionately, all children benefit when norms are resisted and the common world is broadened. Hospitality has the

potential to enrich and protect everyone's experience.⁴⁸

1 Through a practice called Descriptive Inquiry, Carini and her co-collaborators identify a series of processes that draw on description to better meet the needs of children. This informed the work I did with student teachers.

2 Patricia F. Carini, *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 196.

3 Gail Boldt and Joseph Thomas Valente, "Bring Back the Asylum: Reimagining Inclusion in the Presence of Others," in *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Care & Education: Critical Questions, New Imaginaries and Social Activism*, eds., Marianne N. Bloch, Beth Blue Swadener, and Gaile S. Canello (Washington, DC: Peter Lang, 2014), 202-213; Linda Graham and Roger Slee, "An Illusory Interiority: Interrogating the Discourse/S of Inclusion," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2008): 277-293; Claudia Ruitenberg, "The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality," in *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed., Robert Kunzman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 28-36.

4 Ruitenberg, "The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality."

5 William Ayers, *The Good Preschool Teacher: Six Teachers Reflect on Their Lives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989). Although Ayers provides the label assigned, I have chosen to avoid putting Ashley into a pre-determined category. For more on labels see Graham and Slee, "An Illusory Interiority," 286.

6 Ayers, *The Good Preschool Teacher*, 87.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 88.

10 Boldt and Valente, "Bring Back the Asylum;" Alicia Broderick, Heeral Mehta-Parekh, and D. Kim Reid, "Differentiating Instruction for Disabled Students in Inclusive Classrooms," *Theory into Practice* 44, no. 3 (2005): 194-202; Graham and Slee, "An Illusory Interiority;" Ashley Taylor, "Making Disability (Matter) in Philosophy and Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2015*, ed., Eduardo Duarte (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2015): 224-232.

11 Boldt and Valente, “Bring Back the Asylum;” Glenn M. Hudak, “When Nothing Happens: Autos, Autism, and ‘Disabled’ Technology,” in *Philosophy of Education 2015*, ed., Eduardo Duarte (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2015): 96-104; Jan Masschelein and Pieter Verstraete, “Living in the Presence of Others: Towards a Reconfiguration of Space, Asylum, and Inclusion,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16, no. 11 (2012): 1-14.

12 Ashley Taylor, “On Purposes and Intentions: Doing the Work of Challenging Ableism in Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 2015*, ed., Eduardo Duarte (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2015): 105-108.

13 Taylor, “Making Disability (Matter);” Taylor, “On Purposes and Intentions.”

14 Amy Gerstler, *Dearest Creature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 4; Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair,” 33. I use this word with the understanding that despite the generally positive connotation, homes can of course be unwelcoming, cruel, places as well.

15 Graham and Slee, “An Illusory Interiority;” Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair;” Taylor, “Making Disability (Matter).”

16 Graham and Slee, “An Illusory Interiority;” Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair.”

17 Karen Gallas, “*Sometimes I Can Be Anything*”: *Power, Gender, and Identity in a Primary Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

18 Amy Gerstler, *Dearest Creature*, 4.

19 Ibid.

20 Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair,” 33.

21 Gallas, “*Sometimes I Can Be Anything*.”

22 For a powerful example of this see Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

23 Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). In addition to Paley’s other works, I’ve included a few more particularly compelling examples of hospitality enacted. See: Patricia F. Carini and Margaret Himley, *Jenny’s Story: Taking the Long View of the Child: Prospect’s Philosophy in Action* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010); Karen Gallas, *The Languages of Learning: How Children Talk, Write, Dance, Dram, and Sing Their Understanding of the World* (New York: Teach-

ers College Press, 1994); Gallas, “*Sometimes I Can Be Anything*,” Karen Hale Hankins, *Teaching through the Storm: A Journal of Hope* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

24 Claudia Eppert, “Empty Chair, Empty Boat,” in *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed., Robert Kunzman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011): 37-39.

25 Carini, *Starting Strong*.

26 Eppert, “Empty Chair, Empty Boat;” Gallas, “*Sometimes I Can Be Anything*.”

27 Ibid.

28 Carini, *Starting Strong*, 201.

29 These and other proper names are pseudonyms. A few identifying details have also been changed.

30 Paley, *The Boy on the Beach*, 69.

31 Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*; Vivian Gussin Paley, *The Girl With the Brown Crayon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Vivian Gussin Paley, *Kindness of Children*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

32 Here I misspoke. I do not believe that we can ever “figure out” someone else. Instead, insights offer entry points for relating.

33 Here I reference a previous presentation.

34 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M Anscombe, eds. G. E. M Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1972), 16e.

35 Ibid., 37e.

36 Carini, *Starting Strong*, 163.

37 Ibid., 72e.

38 Graham and Slee, “An Illusory Interiority.”

39 Carini, *Starting Strong*, 163.

40 Ibid.

41 Paley, *The Boy on the Beach*, 75.

42 Boldt and Valente, “Bring Back the Asylum;” Hudak, “When Nothing

Happens;” Masschelein and Verstraete, “Living in the Presence of Others.”

43 Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair.”

44 Ibid., 34.

45 Here I use “knowing” colloquially.

46 Masschelein and Verstraete, “Living in the Presence of Others;” Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*; Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair,” 31.

47 Carini, *Starting Strong*, 195.

48 Hudak, “When Nothing Happens;” Celia Oyler, “Democratic Classrooms and Accessible Instruction,” *Democracy and Education* 14 (2001): 28-31; Taylor, “Making Disability (Matter).”