

Is this inclusion?

Questioning Removal, Rejection and Exclusion

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I was visiting an elementary school when I passed a little boy sitting on the floor in the hallway crying and sucking on his wrist. When I asked another teacher about the child she told me, "Oh that's Peter. He's out there more than he's in the classroom. He can't handle it."

I fear there are a lot of Peters out there waiting for opportunities to re-enter the inclusive classroom. Many students who are included in general education environments are only allowed in for a portion of the school day. Others are allowed in on a contingency plan; they can stay as long as they can behave.

Removal, Rejection, & Exclusion: At What Cost?

Too often, students with disabilities are asked to leave the classroom or are escorted out of educational environments without their permission. Faber and Mazlish (1995), ask us to put ourselves in the place of a student who is isolated: "As an adult you can imagine how resentful and humiliated you would feel if someone forced you into isolation for something you said or did" (p. 115). For a young person, however, this type of rejection can be even more serious, since he or she may come to believe "that there is something so wrong with her that she has to be removed from society" (p. 115-116). Vivian Paley (1992) reminds us that teachers send powerful messages of exclusion and rejection when they isolate learners; these messages impact both students and the classroom:

Thinking about unkindness always reminds me of the time-out chair. It made children sad and lonely to be removed from the group, which in turn made me feel inadequate and mean and – I became convinced – made everyone feel tentative and unsafe. These emotions show up in a variety of unwholesome ways depending on whether one is a teacher or child. (p. 95)

This tendency to send the student away from the group is problematic. When at all possible, it is best to address challenging situations in the environments where they occur. Removing students from places where they should feel belonging is detrimental to the building of community and, often, to the processes of teaching and learning.

One of the primary reasons students should not be removed is related to the definition of inclusion; students should feel without question that they are members of their classroom community and they should not have this membership constantly threatened. Asking or forcing students to leave an educational environment may even cause new problems both for them and for teachers; students removed from the classroom may feel rejected, hurt, or confused and, in response, may struggle academically, socially, or emotionally. Students who are removed from the classroom also lose valuable content when they are away from the curriculum and instruction of the general education classroom. They miss instruction, they lose work time, and they have fewer opportunities to interact and learn from peers.

Further, students need to learn to negotiate behaviors in the most natural ways possible. Students cannot learn social skills without opportunities to make friends, they cannot learn communication skills without interacting and working with classmates, and they cannot learn competencies related to behavior if they are not allowed to solve problems and work through difficulties with others in authentic environments.

Finally, removing students from the inclusive classroom frames the behavior as the child's problem and prevents students and teachers from understanding behaviors as complex and socially-situated. If a student is removed from the classroom the teachers and the students are unable to see how the classroom community, the environment, the behaviors of others, and the curriculum and instruction might be impacting a student's actions, feelings, movements, and moods.

Of course any student may need to leave the classroom for a variety of reasons throughout the day, and it is important for students to have this option when they feel upset or angry. Further, students may need to leave the classroom at times so that their dignity can be preserved and protected; if a student needs privacy or wants a break it should be provided. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having a safe, comfortable place where any student can go to relax, calm down, or to have a few minutes alone. In fact, all students should be given this option, and when a situation escalates, the child can be calmly reminded that he can use this space. In one classroom, the teacher checked in with a student with autism at regular intervals. When he seemed anxious or when he began to "melt down" a bit, she would calmly ask him if he needed a break. She would show him the sign language gesture for "break" and ask him to imitate the sign. She would then guide him gently to the classroom hall pass and direct him out of the room, teaching him in a very direct and supportive way, how to get the time and space he needed.

Clearly, students with unique learning, behavior, and communication needs can be supported sensitively in the inclusive classroom. Why then is behavior so often cited as a reason why students with disabilities must be removed from the general education classroom? Perhaps it is because teachers are taught to examine “problem behaviors” in students instead of thinking of student struggles as difficulties that must be interpreted, seen in context, and understood in relation to curriculum, instruction, and the school environment.

Staying Put: Todd’s Story

Consider the story of Todd, a young man with very unique learning and behavior characteristics. On Todd’s first day of third grade, he ran through the building, crawled under tables, banged his head against the cement floor of the locker room, and screamed every time he heard the fire alarm. Teachers in the building were apprehensive. Todd, who was educated in special education schools for several years, seemed scared and confused in his new inclusive school.

I was certainly nervous about working with Todd; I desperately wanted him to be successful and was unsure of where to begin in supporting him but I was fairly certain that our school was the best community for him. When my colleagues challenged Todd’s placement, suggesting that he needed a more restrictive environment, our administrators pointed out that it may have been the more restrictive environments that had facilitated the development of so many of Todd’s behaviors.

Indeed, Todd had been educated with several non-verbal students for years and was, therefore, unaccustomed to typical classroom communication behaviors. He was educated with two students who banged their heads and he, therefore, adopted head-banging behavior. He was never given instructional materials to handle on his own, so he was unaware of his new teacher’s expectations. He had been educated all day in one room so changing environments during the day and “traveling” through such a big school was quite confusing at first.

Changes came slowly but consistently for Todd. Teachers, however, were cautiously optimistic, hopeful, and open-minded. They watched and waited for success and it came. After spending a lot of time observing other students and engaging in typical school routines, Todd was able to use some speech and sign language to request a drink of water or a trip to the bathroom. Students learned his communication system and began socializing with him. Very slowly, his head-banging disappeared.

Todd also learned where to put his belongings and materials in the classroom and began using a picture schedule to learn about daily activities. After a few weeks, he learned where he was supposed to be at different points in the day and stopped running around the building. His teacher then acquired a few small rocking chairs and some floor pillows and Todd stopped crawling under desks, opting instead to sit in his desk, on the chairs, or propped up against the pillows.

Teachers and students helped Todd prepare for the annoying fire drill sounds. Two students flanked Todd the moment the alarm sounded and they modeled how he could put his hands on his ears as he walked out of the building. While he never grew accustomed to the noise, Todd's screaming ceased and he was able to tolerate the sporadic drills.

It took several months for Todd to acclimate, but after only a few weeks the staff marveled at how different this young man looked and acted. He continued to make impressive gains and by his fifth grade year, Todd was participating in all aspects of classroom life, accessing the general education curriculum, and working collaboratively with peers. He became a member of the track team and "sang" in a school musical. While he once had a paraprofessional sitting next to him at all times, Todd could now work in his classroom with regular "spot-checks" by a paraprofessional or special education teacher.

Todd's success can be directly attributed to the inclusive philosophy his teachers held and practiced. If Todd had been seen as "the problem" then teachers would not have created adaptations for him; they would not have given him time to learn about his surroundings; and they would not have adjusted their own expectations or practices. Todd's teacher did not see him as "the problem", though. Instead, they viewed the situation as challenging and collaborated with Todd to make the school a familiar and welcoming place to learn.

Conclusions

Too many students are excluded because they are thought to "own" their behaviors and because these behaviors are assumed to be unchangeable. While behavior can certainly pose a challenge to certain students, their peers, and their educators, it should not serve as a barrier to inclusive schooling. In fact, inclusive schooling may be exactly what students like Todd need most. Todd teaches that ultimately, we need to face challenges with ideology and develop ways of supporting students that resonate with the beliefs and values we want to promote in our inclusive classrooms and schools.

References

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