Inclusivity in Education: Building Understanding from the Outside In

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Although she does not recognize it, my daughter, Lily, has always been my teacher. (Cole, 2016; 2017; 2020) Her high school experience taught me that the world of education is not the positive and inclusive space I experienced. I have always easily processed information, built rapport with people of all ages, and participated in school life, resulting in a career in education where I have been rewarded financially and socially for my love of reading, ability to take in information, ease with technology, and work ethic, with the offer of roles such as Teacher-Librarian as well as an administrative position.

Lily's experience differs from mine, in large part because she processes the world differently due to her invisible medical diagnoses. Auditory processing disorder (APD) limits her ability to take in oral information and makes literacy difficult. She has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, combined type, which compounds her ADP and undermines her executive functioning, impacting her ability to organize and complete academic tasks within an appropriate time frame. She also has an anxiety diagnosis, heightening her emotional responses and causing her to flee uncomfortable situations. These aspects blur her strengths and make physically attending school difficult.

Having worked within various K to 8 elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area, I recognize how the societal focus on strengths in academics, such as reading, writing, and math, excludes many students. I once had a discussion with a parent who wanted me to remove the mark related to the building aspect of a science project. The mother argued that because her child was not good at construction, assessing him on that skill was unfair. I explained that many students had strengths in design and construction but not in the reading and writing aspects evident within the project, yet I had to evaluate them on those skills daily. This scenario reinforces the argument that learning disabilities are a societal construct based on prioritizing certain skills, like reading, writing, and mathematics, over other skills, such as design and construction, within the framework of schools (Dudley-Marling, 2004). I reminded her that she should be thankful her son's strengths aligned with those of the education system upon which he was judged daily. She had no response, and, in retrospect, I was, in a way, predicting the future marginalization of my child within the education system.

I was an acting Vice Principal when Lily entered a mainstream high school for Grade 9. I had just left a Teacher-Librarian position, where I knew the clean copy beginnings, middles and endings of all the books and, now, was working with the complicated, in-process lives of students. One of my first eye-opening situations was during an initial Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting with a parent and a young and new-to-the-role Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT). Upon signing the paperwork to recognize the student's diagnosis and classroom placement within the school, the SERT told the parent that school would be easier with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place. I was shocked. Lily had taught me that was wrong. She had received an official identification four years previous, and school remained difficult. Some teachers didn't read her IEP or implement the recommended accommodations. Some insinuated she was lazy when she received a 1/50 on a history test which as she explained, was about Lois Reilly and the Mets' rather than Louis Riel and the Metis. Although a belief is that IEPs will make all the difference, her IEP did not guarantee accountability. As her parent, both before and after her initial IPRC, I implemented her

accommodations at home if they were absent in the classroom. I ensured she understood new vocabulary, hired multiple tutors to review and consolidate concepts and fought for the use of audiobooks when teachers assigned her novels well beyond her capacity to complete by the due date. As a mother of a child with multiple exceptionalities, I was an advocate, and even from my privileged position within education, the role was complex. I recognized that being an advocate would be more challenging for families without the same educational connections, understanding of the system, and pedagogical knowledge I held.

I was the parent in the annual IPRC meeting when Lily was placed in a small-class Grade 9 Mathematics program designated to fill learning gaps and provide her with a supported space upon her entrance to high school. At first, I was thrilled. Then, about six weeks into the semester, Lily's teacher called me to recommend her placement in the essential stream, the lowest of the three streams in Ontario's secondary schools, following academic and applied, for Mathematics next semester. I asked what opportunities were available to girls who graduated from the lowest learning tier, not even providing the educational requirements for college entrance. The teacher stated she didn't know, and I told her that would not be Lily's placement.

Although, at that time, I did not have the education or theoretical knowledge to recognize the neoliberal and consumeristic nature of our educational system (Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Fine, 2016; Mac, 2022), where schools "prepare students to be productive workers, as well as consumers, in the global economy" (Mac, 2022, p. 2), I did realize how streaming students "into differentiated groups based on their perceived academic ability and/or prior achievement" (Folwell & Andry, 2021, para.1), creates "a process of separating out a small layer of youth who can move into white-collar, 'knowledge economy' jobs from the rest of the students" (Mac, 2022, p. 13–14). I knew that being assigned to the essential stream would exclude her from attending college and that the ability to move between streams was rarely successful (Folwell & Andry, 2021). I had been excited by the prospect of a supportive learning environment, but the teacher seemed more interested in Lily's placement than her education. For example, weekly operational quizzes, which are a supportive gap-closing practice and an excellent example of "Assessment for Learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 31) as the information gathered supports the planning for the development of needed skills and makes progress visible, were implemented into the classroom routine, but Lily achieved the same low results each week. When I asked if the quiz results were the basis for small-group instruction, the teacher stated there wasn't time for that. Hehir (2002) pointed out that "without special education teachers with disability-specific skills, children with disabilities will continue to lack the skills they need to most efficiently and effectively deal with the demands of school and life" (p. 25). I used those quizzes to teach Lily the necessary skills. Her results improved, demonstrating that students require teachers who support access to the curriculum in a way that meets student needs (Jordan, 2018; Obiakor et al., 2012).

At this point, I recognized the rigidity of the high school panel. I was horrified to learn that secondary teachers did not write IEPs and may not even read them. Students with executive functioning difficulties are expected to self-advocate and book times in resource rooms for extended time for tests, and to access learning support before school, at lunch, or after school, when being in class was already hard. These requirements propagate the mythology of the "self-sufficient, 'rugged individual,' who overcomes life's adversities on her or his own through sheer determination, reinforcing the fact that "educational success (and failure) can usually be traced to individual effort and ability" (Dudley-Marley, 2004, p. 483). With her pattern of flight under stressful situations, Lily was not a poster child for resilience and was not achieving success. In

one course, there were many references to global warming, which is one of Lily's many fears. She was supposed to be informed when the topic would be discussed so she could work elsewhere. Yet, that never happened, and she always left the room when the subject arose, her anxiety high, unable to focus and feeling not seen.

Motivation and mindset were not working for Lily, and the inequality gaps were becoming more apparent. Michelle Fine (2016) pointed out that "social psychology … has made a science out of neoliberal ideologies that systemically white-out the *structural and historic causes of injustice and inequity" (p. 329)* and although "study of motivation or mindset … may be quite productive … far less inquiry focuses on the social psychological consequences" (p. 349). Simply attending school was becoming increasingly difficult, with the onus being put on Lily to change, versus the implementation of teaching methodologies and frameworks to support her.

Eventually, the Principal recommended an alternative school within the district that provided flexible and innovative programming to support students who needed more to be successful than was provided within mainstream schools. Lily entered within the month. The school opened my eyes to what education could be. The in-house social worker explained that if Lily could only bring herself to attend school four days a week, that was fine. They ensured she had connections with many caring adults. Within this community, educators provided her with individualized workspaces and support. Alternatives, like paid work co-ops, were available to help her graduate with her Ontario Secondary School Diploma, but this opportunity was only available due to privilege. Not only did we have money to pay for the bus transportation, but my parents lived close by, were retired, and had a vehicle paired with the ability and desire to pick Lily up almost daily from a school that was 40 minutes away.

Lily's experience helped me understand the stress and isolation many of our students and families face when their ways of being do not fit society's ideal educational model. I fully recognize the need to openly welcome students who are late because getting up and going to a place that does not see your strengths is hard. When parents apologize for needing to advocate for their child, I reinforce that they will need to continue with their efforts to ensure their child has access to the best education possible. Another essential aspect of the work is connecting parents and students with social workers, mental health nurses, alternative classes, programs or accommodations so students can psychologically access academic programming.

I also reinforce pedagogies in the context of "Assessment *for* Learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 28), where students' completed work and assessments provide the basis for planning to develop needed skills as a necessary practice for all. We, as educators, must ensure that our assessments provide us with a deeper understanding of what our students know, and need to know, to support their continued growth, versus the practice of using evaluations to label students and limit their futures.

Upon reflection, I realize I have always seen the bias within our education system toward those, like myself, whose strengths lie in academic subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Although I respect these abilities, I know that the richness found within humanity and society exists beyond those narrow confines.

Lily's experiences deepened my understanding of how our schools are traumatic for many. The expectations and demands placed upon students with exceptionalities in Ontario highlight that the implementation of an IEP is not a fix as differing learning needs are not necessarily accommodated as they should be, assessment should not be used to stream students, and placement is not a panacea. Lily showed me how we must oppose these beliefs, which

ultimately push out our students who exist at the margins, and instead, draw them into safer, supportive spaces where they can achieve and learn.

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