Valuing Differences: The Children We Don’t Understand

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The author of this essay shares her personal experiences as a teacher of young children, and her professional approach to facilitating growth in unique children. The author suggests that as educators, our responsibility lies not in explaining differences in young children or labeling and diagnosing differences, but in responding to those unique differences in the classroom by supporting students and utilizing their strengths. The author suggests that responsive teaching requires educators to listen to children and reflect upon their practice.

Nate’s tongue was curled up on the right side of his upper lip as he moved his pencil to write. He carefully wrote, “Me and my mom went to Disneyland and it was my birthday.” Nate’s story seems typical for a first-grade child; however, I remember being confused at first, because Nate had written the entire sentence backwards, with each letter appearing in mirror image! “How did he do that?” I wondered.

After school that afternoon I sat down and tried to write like Nate had earlier in the day, but I found it to be impossible. “How did he do that?” I thought.

The following day I observed Nate during our morning-workshop time. While Nate’s peers drew pictures and wrote stories, Nate drew pictures, too. When he began to write his story, I noticed that he began writing from the right-hand side of his paper. I watched as he carefully wrote each letter. I was in awe of this unique child.

I went home that afternoon thinking about him. What should I do? How should I respond to his reversals? Should he be tested for a learning disability?

When Nate began to compose his story the following day, I asked to sit beside him. When he began to write backwards just as before, I stopped him and told him there are different ways to read and write depending on the language. I told him about Chinese characters that are read vertically. Then I told him that in English we read left to right. I’m not certain that Nate was necessarily impressed by my little speech, but afterwards he smiled.

I pointed to the left-hand side of his story paper and showed him that he could start writing there.

I wasn’t sure if I had done the best thing for Nate by intervening, but that day his writing contained only a few letter reversals. It was readable.

During the course of the next few months, Nate occasionally wrote his story completely backwards (whenever he began writing from the right-hand side of the paper). I continued to remind him when I noticed him doing this, and each time that Nate wrote from left to right, his writing showed only a few letter reversals.

I abandoned the idea of submitting referral papers for testing.

During several parent conferences with Nate’s mother, I learned that she also had had a difficult time in school. Her parents and her teachers were very worried about her and believed that she might be suffering from a learning disability. We conferred regularly to discuss Nate’s progress and review samples of his writing. Nate’s mother cried during several of our conferences and expressed guilt for possibly having passed on a dreaded learning disability. I, too, remained concerned about Nate, although his writing behavior was rather predictable and his errors systematic. For example, he reversed bs, ds, and ps regularly, and everything was reversed when he began writing from the right to the left instead of from the left to right.

I recall asking Nate’s mother during one of our afternoon conferences if she could tell me more about her own perceived learning disability. Through tears she told me that she had a terrible time in first and second grade. She wrote backwards, just like Nate, and learning to read was difficult. Then, in third grade, she told me, everything changed. The letter reversals just disappeared.

I wondered... would Nate’s reversals simply disappear with age?

Nate had not been placed in any special program. He remained in my classroom for 2 years. Like all of my students, Nate grew and developed during those years. He developed flu-
ency in reading and writing, and although he occasionally wrote backwards, from right to left, he began to monitor himself in this regard.

I felt fairly confident as Nate entered third grade. But I worried a little about how he would be perceived by the third-grade teacher.

The new school year began and I often saw Nate on the playground. What a wonderful child he was! Full of energy and enthusiasm, full of curiosity.

I ran into Nate’s mother while doing my grocery shopping one weekend. After some small talk, I inquired about Nate’s reversals. “Do you still see reversals in Nate’s writing?” I asked. “You know,” she said, “I hadn’t really thought about that. He’s doing so well. He loves his teacher and school. I don’t think I have noticed it anymore.”

I felt validated by Nate’s mother’s response. I felt as if we had done the best thing for Nate by allowing him to grow in a supportive environment. What might he have suffered had he been referred for special education? Would he have felt the same way about himself? I know that he had been spared the humiliating school experiences his mother had endured. He had not been relegated to the “bottom reading group,” nor had he been admonished for writing letters backwards. Perhaps Nate’s mother had suffered more from “dystechnia” (Armstrong, 1987) than from dyslexia!

I taught kindergarten and primary-grade children for 10 years in the California public schools. I can’t say that I ever had another student quite like Nate. And I can’t say I never had doubts about my professional decision not to refer him for special testing. It wasn’t until Nate finished third grade successfully that I felt reassured.

I have taught other children that I didn’t fully understand: Jeff was a very angry child; Juan communicated in a way that made sense only to Lucio; Tanya was an extremely articulate 8-year-old but became frustrated when she couldn’t remember her friends’ names or how to spell my. I didn’t understand the cause of the children’s differences, but I believed that my role was not to understand them, but to find an appropriate way to respond to those differences that would facilitate individual, unique growth.

When I met Tanya, she was 8 years old. She was placed as a second grader in my first-and-second-grade classroom. Tanya’s mother had moved her from their neighborhood school to this model school site, where she hoped things would be better for her child. I learned that as early as preschool, Tanya had had trouble remembering such things as directions and her friends’ names. In kindergarten, she struggled with letter names and sounds. She was referred by her kindergarten teacher for special education but did not qualify for special help at that time. She was referred again in first grade, but when she did not qualify, she was retained. Near the end of her second year in first grade, Tanya began receiving special education, although neither she nor her parents really could explain what was “wrong” with her.

I was quite surprised when the resource specialist informed me that Tanya would be visiting the resource room on a daily basis. Tanya and I had spent 2 weeks together in our classroom and I had observed her to be an extremely articulate, strong leader. I had noticed that her invented spellings were more like those of a first grader, but she was functioning quite well in our multiage grouping.

Tanya did not like leaving our classroom. She usually didn’t say much, but this time she didn’t have to because her feelings were written all over her face. Some days she refused to go at all; and tears flowed down her cheeks occasionally. I tried to find out why she didn’t want to go to the resource room; once she told me, “I don’t learn anything there. I just have to say baby words.” Another day she said, “What’s wrong with me?” These times were very difficult for the two of us. I wanted to shield her from the pain she was experiencing. I wanted to tell her she didn’t have to ever leave our classroom.

Eventually the resource specialist, who was a very kind young woman, agreed to come to our classroom to work with Tanya. She worked with some of the other children, too. But the scheduled visits could not be continued due to the resource specialist’s time demands.

Tanya’s parents became concerned about Tanya’s emotional well-being, and after a conference with me and the resource specialist, it was decided that Tanya would be allowed to choose to go to the resource room or to stay in the classroom. This solution proved to be acceptable to all concerned, and Tanya did frequent the resource room throughout the year. However, as the year progressed, Tanya became more and more aware of her differences. She noticed that all of her classmates seemed to be able to communicate well through writing with invented spellings. She noticed that her drawings looked crude in comparison to her peers’. Tanya cried and was often frustrated in reading and writing, though she was a natural leader and extremely articulate in class discussions.

Tanya knew she was different, and even though I tried to provide the most supportive, caring learning environment possible, I could not protect her from her pain and suffering. Most school days were busy and productive, but some days were filled with sadness, disappointment, and frustration.

As the school year ended, I wondered how different Tanya’s life could have been if she had not been tested over and over again since kindergarten. Would Tanya have developed her own ways of compensating had she experienced an early schooling experience with teachers that held high expectations for her success, rather than questions regarding the type of her learning disability? Did Tanya sense early on that she was “different” from other children her age?
because she left the classroom to take tests?

Tanya had been told by her parents and her former teacher that her brain didn’t work the same as other children’s brains. Did she interpret this difference as positive? Did she blame herself for being different? Did she blame herself when her parents fought about her “problem”? Tanya had heard her parents fighting and she thought it was her fault. These questions haunt me. Tanya didn’t know what was “wrong” with her—but then, I’m not sure that anyone else did, either.

Is there really anything “wrong” with Tanya and Nate, or is it that we just don’t fully understand the complexities of human behavior? Perhaps the human mind, in all its complexity, is a mystery of life that still eludes us.

My experiences with Nate and Tanya suggest some important things for teachers to consider each day that we live and learn with a group of young children. First and foremost, we can expect great variability in individuals and value these differences. As Gardner (1983, 1991) and his associates at Harvard’s Project Zero have shown, each child is a genius in her or his own right, with a particular blend of multiple intelligences. Western culture has traditionally placed a higher value on linguistic and logical–mathematical intelligence, often to the detriment of other intelligences, such as spatial, musical, personal, and bodily/kinesthetic. As teachers, we must adopt a broader view of intelligence, one that goes beyond the archaic idea of IQ as a fixed biological trait (Gould, 1981). The theory of multiple intelligences assumes that all children have gifts and strengths in ways of thinking that can be cultivated. Linguistic genius is just one of many valuable gifts.

Our job as teachers is to observe and assess what the child CAN do, and build upon his or her unique strengths in the educative process. Our focus must remain on responding to our students’ differences, rather than looking for their causes or attempting to define them. In the case of Nate, would his education have been enhanced or hindered had I searched for explanations for his differences? I believe his interests were better served by responding to his uniqueness, by exploring ways to help him accomplish his own learning in his own way.

Tanya was labeled as LD early on, and the destruction to her self-image was devastating. We know too well the danger of labeling children (Albinger, 1993; Hrcir & Eisenhart, 1991). And, again, the energy spent on searching for the causes of her differences did not affect her education positively. Tanya was perhaps a victim of her kindergarten and first-grade teachers’ expecting less of her, failing to try to understand her, and rejecting her for her differences.

Tanya’s story also sensitizes us to the value of involving the child in placement decisions. As a special education student, Tanya was expected to go to the resource room each day for remediation. Prior to her second-grade year, Tanya had not been involved in the decision-making process. No one had considered her an integral part of the child study process; rather, she was the subject of that process. She was an outsider in the process even though it was her life that was being affected the most.

As I listened to Tanya explain why she wanted to stay in the general classroom, her reasons made sense. She knew she wasn’t learning as well in the small resource room cubicle, doing tracking exercises in which she circled the appropriate letter. She knew how she felt about being singled out as different and in need of special help: She felt sad and lonely. Furthermore, she believed what she had been told—that her brain worked differently from other children’s brains and so she needed special education in order to learn. The ambiguity of her “disease” was extremely problematic for her, and she often suffered from negative feelings of self-blame. I learned much about how to respond to Tanya in the classroom by carefully listening to her; she taught me a great deal.

There are many children in our public schools that we don’t fully understand. Nate and Tanya are not isolated cases; others have been documented in great detail (Albinger, 1993; Taylor, 1991). Will we continue to search for and label their differences, or will we begin to value their differences and search for ways of responding to them?

In my own quest to respond to the children I do not fully understand, I have learned that I must listen to the children and I must listen to myself. Only by doing so can we become professional educators; as professional educators, we become child advocates, protecting our students from a system that is founded upon reductionism and reductionistic learning theory. As a teacher, I became aware of the important knowledge I possessed about the children I taught; I had lived with them day after day and had observed them in our learning environment. I had constructed detailed knowledge of their strengths and the ways in which they approached learning in all its complexity. My observations yielded portraits of individuals engaged in problem solving, each with his or her own unique patterns of behavior. Similarly, I learned that the children were my teachers and informed my quest to be responsive to their needs. Taylor (1993) stated that “our task is to insure that the voices of children become embodied in the ways in which we teach” (p. 49). Listening to ourselves and to our students is an important way by which we can be sure that the children’s voices will guide our teaching.

A student advocacy model of instructional assessment (Taylor, 1993) is a valuable alternative to the present-day methods of viewing differences among individual children. As child advocates, we adopt a broad view of human development and behavior, and we expect great variability in the ways in which children learn (Perrone, 1991; Taylor, 1993). We look for
strengths and focus on what each child CAN do. Through careful observation, portraits of individual children emerge, and this information allows us to teach to the child’s strengths (Ayers, 1993). Rather than trying to explain a child’s differences by looking for causes or disease, child advocates search for ways to help the child develop (Martin, 1988; Poplin, 1988). We vary our teaching approaches and utilize the child’s interests (Fives, 1991). Child advocates utilize the child’s parents as informants to gain understanding of him or her (Spodek & Saracho, 1994). When working with children who are receiving special education, child advocates are sensitive to the importance of involving the children themselves in decisions about their school life (Taylor, 1991, 1993). Many inspiring books have been written by creative professional teachers, relating their personal experiences about responding to unique children in the classroom (Ashton-Warner, 1986; Kohl, 1984; Paley, 1981, 1991).

The lives of many children are in jeopardy: negative school experiences are long-lasting. We can no longer afford to label and sort children on the basis of their differences—a practice that may be well-intentioned but may in fact simply be a legal way for our schools to structure inequality (Crux, 1989; Shepard, 1991). Not only are these practices harmful, but they also “might in fact aggravate prejudice and interethnic hostility” (Nieto, 1992, p. 253). We need to accept and value differences, listen to children and observe their ways of problem solving, and utilize their strengths and interests.

If such a student advocacy model were adopted, students who learn in ways that do not meet traditional school expectations would not be labeled. Students who are poor would not be penalized. Students of color would have a chance to succeed. Students whose young lives have been damaged by life’s circumstances would have the opportunity to recover. (Taylor, 1993, p. 176)

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REFERENCES


