

Extending the "Comfort Zone" to Include Every Child

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In this issue's feature article, the study conducted by Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey (1996), presents some results that I suspect few people will find surprising, namely that the general early childhood teachers they studied tended to be less comfortable serving children who had the most severe or profound disabilities. On one hand, I concur with the authors that there is potential value in identifying the various levels of comfort teachers have with their students and understanding the self-reported sources of teacher discomfort (e.g., leg functioning, muscle tone, appropriate behavior). I was encouraged by the study participants' suggestions that comfort-level data, based on child characteristics, be used by teachers as a "self-evaluation tool . . . to examine their own attitudes and feelings regarding children with disabilities" and "to evaluate training and technical assistance to support early childhood inclusion." These suggestions are valuable because in both cases the comfort-level data would be used to assist teachers to reflect on their own practice in an effort to advance it.

On the other hand, the use of comfort-level data, based on child characteristics, has potential drawbacks, particularly pertaining to educational placement issues. First, focus on child characteristics seems to assume that the source of teachers' comfort or discomfort is embodied within the child, rather than

within ourselves. This allows us to externalize our discomfort, rather than encouraging us to take personal responsibility for our own feelings and the decisions that flow from them. Alternatively, as teachers, we might attempt to advance our practices by shifting the prompts for personal reflection from characteristics of the child to our own teacher characteristics and those of the school and our community.

Another danger of focusing on child characteristics as the source of discomfort is that children may be denied access to certain educational placements because of their disability characteristics. More accurately stated, children may be denied access to certain educational placements because the adults asked to serve them are unaccustomed to their disability characteristics. Using child characteristics as the basis for determining comfort level makes it far too easy to justify denial of access to educational opportunities. As one study participant said, "If the teacher isn't comfortable, don't place the child there; if she's already serving the child, provide support." This statement seems to suggest that teachers should not be asked to serve children they are unaccustomed to teaching. Often this view is presented as being in the best interest of child, by not subjecting a youngster to an environment or person who would be less than enthusiastic about his or her presence. If

we restrict educational access of young children with disabilities only to those settings where people are already comfortable serving students with the full range of characteristics, it would severely and artificially limit opportunities available to these students and their families. Additionally, it would perpetuate a double standard for people with disabilities that would likely not be tolerated based on a teacher's comfort with any other individual characteristic of a child (e.g., race, culture, religion, socioeconomic level). What if the child care center or preschool in the family's neighborhood says "No" to enrollment because they are uncomfortable with the child's characteristics? What if everyone says "No"? It was not too many years ago when this scenario was pervasive for children who had severe or profound disabilities. Even today, the option to restrict access of students with disabilities to typical schools, often because of people's discomfort with their characteristics, is far too common.

In a recent study regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education classes, many of the teachers found that their initial discomfort subsided when they spent time getting to know their student with a disability (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993). This simple but powerful step of engaging in person-to-person interaction helped the teachers see their student as a child, rather than as a set of disability characteristics. Although it is encouraging that the comfort zone is expanding so that children once routinely excluded are now included with supports when needed, this work will not be complete until children with disabilities have opportunities to attend the same schools as their brothers, sisters, and neighbors.

The movement to include all children, regardless of their characteristics, is inherently good for us as teachers and for our entire educational system. Several years ago, Don-

ald Baer (1981) wrote, "Too often in my opinion, we teach children who are not only capable of teaching themselves but eager to do so; in their wisdom, they cheat us of learning completely how the trick is done because they do it for us and do it privately. It is when they cannot do much if any of it for us that we get to find out how to do it all ourselves, as teachers" (p.94). By accepting the challenge of including students with severe disabilities we can advance our own teaching abilities and benefit all the children for whom we provide learning opportunities. By doing so, we can aspire to an ethic of teaching that encourages us to welcome all students and examine our own teacher characteristics to ensure that they are well served.

As we continue to extend the boundaries of our own comfort zones, what was unheard of yesterday becomes possible today and the norm tomorrow. This was well illustrated in a comment recently made by a young girl in my neighborhood to her mother. Her family had moved to Vermont from another state where children with disabilities were rarely seen in the mainstream of school life; the girl was unaware that children with disabilities were still quite segregated in that state. Noticing children with disabilities in her Vermont classrooms she asked her mother, "Don't they have any kids with disabilities where we came from?" Our children's opportunities to experience the diversity presented by people with disabilities should not be limited by our own collective past, much of which was marked by the segregation of people who had disabilities. Inclusion of children with disabilities, beginning in child care centers and preschools, is an early step in developing a new generation that experiences the diversity presented by disability as a routine part of everyday life. By the time my own two children, Dan and Melanie, complete their public school education, I believe that they will be part of that new generation

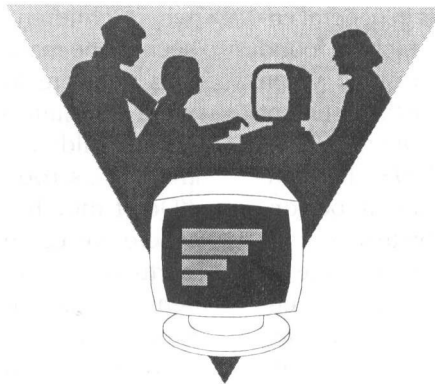
of adults in our community. Giving them a questionnaire about their comfort level interacting with people who have disabilities would be unnecessary, because to them it will be even more ordinary than it is already – that's extraordinary!

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