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From Access To Interaction: Prioritizing Opportunities For Interpersonal And Intrapersonal Development For Children With Physical Disabilities In Inclusive Classrooms

Daniel Atkins

I am the father of a seven-year-old second grader, and the other day when my wife, Kim, and I dropped our son off at school I noticed something wonderful. It might not have seemed that way to others, but that's how it felt to me.

Owen was seated at a small table for morning work, a period of time before morning meeting when parents are allowed to remain in the class. I was lingering, as I often do, standing nearby and observing his activity. He was using the time to work on his painting of a neighborhood scene. The project was part of the class's exploration of their school's neighborhood. It occurred within a curriculum unit on communities. Some children had completed their sketches and were starting to fill them in with paint. Others had finished entirely; the teachers who were circulating around the class were tacking those students' paintings to the walls.

Owen was still in the drawing phase. But he was making good progress. With a black marker, he diligently traced the pencil lines that composed a row of stores on a city block. It seemed he wanted to, or was supposed to, finish this tracing process before starting to paint. While Owen was capable of making such a drawing by himself if given a significant amount of time, the detailed nature of the penciled renderings suggested to me that these outlines had probably been done with the help of one of his two head teachers, his one-on-one paraprofessional aid (para), or perhaps one of the school's occupational therapists.

Owen uses a wheelchair to move. The most visible aspects of his disability relate to his legs. But as those who work closely with him know, reduced core and arm strength and endurance as well as difficulty in motor planning are his greatest challenges to writing or drawing with the speed or duration of his typically developing peers.

His is a collaborative team-teaching second-grade class with two head teachers, one certified in special education and the other in general education. Six of the 20 students in the class have physical disabilities of some kind. As far as I can tell, most—though not all—of the children in his class with motor disabilities have them as a result of neurological disorders such as cerebral palsy. Their physical differences from their typically developing peers run a large spectrum. One child appears to have orthopedic issues related to one leg. A number of children have motor issues that clearly affect the way they move and produce speech in significant ways. All of the children in the class work within the same curriculum and have the same academic goals.

That Owen was supposed to trace over the pencil lines with a marker appeared to me to be a helpful modification of the activity by whoever set up its process. The row of stores in his picture looked familiar. When I asked, Owen confirmed that it was a drawing of a street where we often shop. Due to the time constraints of his fast-paced, general education curriculum, he would never have had the time to complete this sketch entirely by himself. But it seemed clear he had conceived and planned it and had played a significant role in its creation.

A girl came over and sat beside Owen. I recognized her as someone with whom he was developing a school friendship, Maria[1]. She had recently asked him for a playdate, something I hoped to plan in the near future. They had played together in the yard after school a few times. Maria asked Owen about his drawing. When he placed his marker on the table, she picked it up and continued the process of tracing the many pencil lines that still needed ink.

I glanced around to see if anyone noticed. Owen clearly did not mind. He watched Maria trace and they discussed his picture. She asked him questions about it and mentioned that hers was done. Maria must have been bored, I thought.

“He can do it,” I said, smiling at her.

Maria kept drawing. Owen watched her and they talked. Then Kim came over. She saw what was happening and asked if she could look at Maria’s painting. Maria got up from the table and took Kim over to where it hung on the wall.

Owen picked up the marker and resumed tracing. Soon, Jason[2] arrived in the classroom and came over to our table. Jason is Owen’s para, his one-on-one aide who helps him physically negotiate his school day. Then Maria returned and asked Owen if she could help trace some more. He said yes.

I directed an awkward smile toward Jason. I think I was hoping he would intervene. He did not.

“I think Owen should do it,” I said, as gently as I could, this time reaching out for Maria to hand me the marker. She did, and I handed it back to Owen. I stepped away from the table and looked again toward Jason. Now I wondered if I should have just stayed out of it.

“She likes to be helpful,” Jason said, complimenting Maria. “She is not shy.”

“Yes,” I responded.

After using the marker for a few more minutes, Owen handed it back to Maria. I stayed back. I had given my input. It was time for me to leave. But part of me was curious: I wanted to know what would happen when a teacher noticed. I also wondered about my own thoughts.

Over the years, I had grown accustomed to paying close attention to issues around Owen’s physical integration into the schools and classrooms he had attended. In the past, a scenario like this might have

concerned me, made me question the manner in which his teachers were facilitating Owen's participation. But I was not worried now, and this felt good. Yet, I wondered why.

I gathered my coat and bag and walked to the door. As I did, I saw one of the teachers moving toward Owen's table. She asked Owen if it was ok if Maria helped him finish with his ink lines. He said yes. The teacher commented on the many lines in his picture and the fact that Maria had finished her project. She explained that when it came time for painting Owen would complete that process by himself.

Jackpot, I thought. What a skilled and experienced teacher Owen and his classmates have. I practically floated down the school stairs and out of the building into the brisk, late fall morning.

Still, I wondered: why had I not been anxious even before I had witnessed the teacher's "solution"? As I realized later, the simple fact that this "problem" had occurred in the first place had excited me. It was an example of what I have come to think of as a core moment of inclusive education. As Owen's father, I defined these core moments as those that were, at their essence, made significant not by the fact Owen had or had not gained access to an interaction or activity in the first place, but rather by what occurred within the interaction or activity itself once it started and as it unfolded.

Priorities

Owen's disability is always part of who he is as an individual. But it was not the primary determining factor in this moment. It hadn't prevented his full participation. Furthermore, the teacher's awareness of Owen's disability had not overdetermined her response to the way the interaction played out. The teacher had not reacted by feeling the need to affirm Owen's physical independence the way I had when I said, "he can do it." Can or can't were not really the issues of priority in this situation. The issue was how.

The different way in which Owen physically interacted with the activity and the different way in which Owen and Maria socially interacted within the activity had not distracted the teacher from the priorities of the moment's educational core. To me, it was an excellent example of a teacher holding on to priorities and supporting Owen and Maria's methods of pursuit of those priorities that had emerged in the moment.

What was the educational goal of the neighborhood painting project? Was it to independently draw and paint a picture in a limited amount of time? Probably not. The children had recently gone on trips to various sites in the school's vicinity. Was the goal to learn a list of facts about the neighborhood? If so, the children might have been seated at desks listening to a teacher make a presentation. I imagine one goal was to introduce the children to the components that make up a physical neighborhood in order to start them thinking about the more abstract concept of communities.

By focusing on whether or not Owen was tracing all of the lines in his picture by himself, I had, in the moment, missed the point. But the teacher had not. Owen and Maria were discussing his picture as they

shared the marker. That discussion was consistent with a central goal of the larger strategy for learning. I did not consciously realize it at the time, but I sensed it. This was the real reason I was not anxious. Something felt right to me. Owen was inside one of those moments that are the essence of child-centered, experiential learning.

What children will think about, experience, say, hear, learn, or do when these moments occur cannot really be predicted. And it is not realistic to expect all teachers to be immediately experienced at scaffolding these interactions to support the social, emotional, cognitive, and academic growth of each of the children involved. But educators and parents can and do plan for these moments.

Teachers craft curriculums and activities to create rich opportunities for their students and then observe and guide and take it from there. As teachers' experience grows, I would imagine they begin to develop ideas about what might happen and what they hope will happen during those moments.

What was, I wonder, Owen's teacher's initial reaction when she observed he was not working independently on his drawing? She did not appear to hesitate in her assessment that this difference was consistent with the educational goals of the activity. Had she planned for this moment? Probably not for this exact one. But she did not appear surprised by Owen's behavior or, just as significantly, by the behavior of his classmate.

From Access to Interaction

I would not have predicted the specifics of what happened. And, through later reflection, I came to question my own initial reaction to the way Owen, his classmate, and his para behaved within this activity. But even at the time, I too was not surprised when Owen continued to interact with his environment in ways that were different than most of his peers, even after he had reached the table and achieved physical access to the activity.

In fact, my experience observing Owen—as well as other young children with significant physical disabilities—for seven years now, in schools, classrooms, playgrounds, and recess yards, as well as on playdates, has convinced me of one thing: differences manifested by physical disabilities experienced from infancy do not disappear in the moments the child achieves access. Rather, it is precisely in these moments when access has been achieved that their differences are allowed to fully express themselves. Access is the entrance to interaction. Interaction is a process through which difference discovers itself and others discover difference.

Access happens when Owen enters the recess yard. Interaction initiates its ever-forming impact when a ball kicked from across the yard flies into his face. Access has been achieved when Owen waits at the starting line of a relay race. Interaction asserts its demands when he and another boy crash into each other and the boy bruises his leg on the aluminum of Owen's wheelchair. Access is momentary relief for Owen from rushing; when you move slowly you are eternally in a rush. For once he has arrived at school

on time. Interaction is immediately rushing once again, with the help of a classmate, to complete a drawing assignment before morning meeting.

When the ball in the recess yard hit Owen in the face, I couldn't help smiling to myself. When he crashed into the other boy and this time it was the other child who got bruised I couldn't help feeling a twinge of significance in the moment. Not because Owen has to "face these issues at some point" and "learn how to deal with them." Certainly not because anyone got bruised. I experienced positive impressions of even these far from subtle moments because I recognized what was happening in school mirrored what I knew to happen in our lives all the time. We had reached one of those once uncomfortable now routine moments when we had fewer models on which to draw in order to know how to best support integration of physical difference into the often physically and spatially determined narratives of our days.

What happens now? I can almost guarantee that question was on the minds of the children who were standing around during recess on these occasions. But I would also venture that the paraprofessionals, other parents, and recess supervisors were wondering the same thing. As far as I was concerned, any reaction was fine, as long as it did not have to do with the boring and repetitive question of why Owen was here in the middle of the yard, in the middle of all this commotion. Or with the flip side of that question, uttered to myself on many other occasions: why is he off to the side over there? As a matter of fact, why are all the kids in wheelchairs and walkers off to the side over there? I was used to asking myself those questions. I had learned that if I wanted them to stop, I'd better also be prepared for what happened when I got what I wanted.

When teachers recognize that a new expression of difference or need will probably emerge out of a structured access, they take the first step toward being better prepared for sorting through the moment's priorities. This seems a crucial shift from conceptualizing access as an equalizing force or a physical place that has been reached.

When confronted with the daily realities of the busy school day, theoretical formations of accessibility often find themselves hopelessly lost in that giant gulf between common sense and intricate logistics. When planned for in detail, however, access seems to me to embody potential in the way that curriculum does. Interaction is like experiential learning. Both are necessary, both integral. But one leads to the other. Access is not a goal in and of itself. It is a means to an end. It is the starting point for learning.

Choreographing Interaction

Identification of such social, emotional, and interactive priorities within the goals of child-centered, inclusive education may seem somewhat straightforward, especially for experienced teachers. But in practice, consistent pursuit of these priorities for children with physical disabilities is hard and may require a greater sense of urgency.

The busy day is even busier for children with physical disabilities. Their focused attention and energy is demanded by its multitude of transitional as well as, ideally, many immersive moments. A subtle yet critical shift can creep into this cumulative experience. The process of scaffolding the child's inclusion in the activities or interactions of the day can too often become conflated or confused with the process of scaffolding the child's physical ability to gain access to those activities or interactions.

Lead teachers who successfully integrate children with physical disabilities into meaningful learning interactions (especially in classrooms where there are multiple adults) carefully plan the choreography for access in advance. This planning and implementation requires constant involvement of paraprofessional aides, as well as intermittent consultation with, and assistance from, physical and occupational therapists. But the teacher needs to lead the process. And for one simple reason: they know where and when the core interactive moments will occur.

Teachers are the choreographers of these climactic moments in the educational and social experiences of the day. They have the pedagogical training and practical experience to privilege the developmental and educational significance of these moments. Thus, teachers must take ultimate responsibility for leading all the members of the classroom community through this intricate dance.

Of course, situations often arise with unanticipated challenges. During the first few weeks of school, for example, I would imagine that teachers with children with physical disabilities in their classrooms experience periods when the process of scaffolding access overshadows the process of scaffolding interaction. Such is the learning curve of any educational environment. I would also expect this to happen at select times throughout the year, as new activities, materials, and physical arrangements are introduced into classrooms and other school spaces.

It would be unrealistic to think that constant shifting back into a reactive mode on the part of teachers—in order to respond to what may, at times, seem like a constant stream of new challenges to access—will not be an inevitable part of the process of inclusion. However, in the face of this reality, it is even more crucial that teachers avoid coming to conceptualize such a reactive mode as a long-term substitute, either by default or by misconception, for proactive strategies that promote development through inclusive interaction.

Getting Past, Getting to the Table

When Owen was younger, his educators expressed concern he was not talking enough in certain situations. They wanted him to work on verbalizing his needs, to actively ask for assistance more often, rather than waiting for help to arrive. They were trying to anticipate the challenges he would face in later years when he did not have as much support from adults. Owen expressed his needs clearly to us at home, at times quite assertively. But we saw this was not true in school and that the discrepancy was greater than typical differences between home and school behavior.

We understood the concerns of his educators and had no doubt they came from a place of deep caring for Owen and his future. We did, however, come to question some of the strategies employed to encourage his verbal expression and the way these strategies suggested priorities for how Owen spent his time in school.

We began to wonder if attention to the logistics that were necessary to accommodate Owen's physical differences had begun to distract some of his educators from the underlying goals and priorities of the child-centered, developmentally focused practices that they had, ironically, played a large part in introducing us to in the first place.

On a number of occasions I observed educators intentionally remaining in Owen's path of travel within a crowded classroom or hallway after they became aware he was behind them, trying to get around and toward a destination. The educators made it clear to Owen, and to us if we happened to be there, that they were waiting for him to verbalize his presence—to say excuse me, or something to that effect. The goal, as we understood it, was to help him build independence by encouraging responsibility for knowing when he needed help. Educators in future years would not always be able to anticipate his needs in the moment.

This frustrated Owen and resulted in less verbalization of his needs in such situations with a number of his educators. His lead teachers quickly realized this, and we had a number of productive and helpful discussions with them. These conversations with Owen's teachers were collaborative moments of shared commitment to meeting his needs. But in retrospect, I feel our joint understanding of why this strategy failed to stimulate further independence did not fully take into account the broader developmental context.

One of the things we discussed was how it was harder for Owen to produce fluid speech while focusing on a physical task such as navigating his walker or wheelchair. This was true; it was an important issue for us all to recognize. But I must admit that, at the time, part of me did not want to waste another second talking about these transitional moments—about, for example, what happened to Owen on the way to a classroom table, or the best way for him to get to that table.

I knew that I was one parent among many and that my time to speak with Owen's teachers was limited. And I was growing tired of feeling like our communications were continually taken up with details about Owen's physical access within the class. It was an unrealistic wish, but I wanted these discussions to be in the past. I wanted to have arrived at a point where we could assume agreement and understanding on the details of access so that we could move beyond them. I also wondered if Owen's teachers appreciated just how much time he spent both literally and figuratively trying to get to the table across all aspects of his daily life. I wanted Owen simply to be at the table, one way or another. If we had to have another discussion, I wanted to talk about what happened at the table.

Years later, I can more clearly express how my conceptualizations of Owen's experience, and of other children's with similar challenges, have developed over time. I do not believe that young children with physical disabilities experience physical barriers in a way that internalizes these barriers psychologically. I believe that up to a certain age they experience themselves as agents of social participation in the same way that typically developing children do, focusing on the potential for interaction rather than the barriers to it. They assume access until they are socially instructed otherwise. The most significant issue they face is not physical in nature, but is instead the experiential reality of having to negotiate social, emotional, psychological, and educational challenges while potentially having a fraction of the amount of time that their typically developing peers have participating in situations that stimulate growth and development in these areas.

It is important to understand how few opportunities some children with physical disabilities have to focus primarily on interaction without having to dedicate significant levels of concentration to their physical ability to achieve that interaction. I have observed the potential for children within this experience to feel powerless, bored, confused, angry, frustrated, and passive.

Constant dwelling in transitional as opposed to immersive realms of experience puts young children at risk of coming to associate their problem-solving ability and reactions to new emotions—and, it seems to me, of associating learning in general—with their ability to perform physically and to negotiate physical barriers.

Around the Table

Acknowledgment of these risks benefits the process of inclusion primarily and precisely because they can be isolated and mitigated in ways that do not attempt to deny the fact that young children with physical disabilities will inevitably be socially instructed about the barriers all around them. That will happen, and it will be an important developmental process. But prioritizing interactive inclusion above all and with urgency allows us to help children parse out their unique developmental challenges amid the broader incremental challenges of social, emotional, and cognitive self-awareness that all children face.

Around the table, so to speak, children learn about themselves and about their disabilities as one difference among many as they explore their own social, emotional, verbal, sensory, and cognitive processes. They learn about their disabilities, including disabilities that make it difficult for them to produce speech or to move their muscles, in the same way that all children learn about the many different aspects of themselves.

Perhaps as much we strive to take for granted the classroom table as that rich place for developmental interaction and growth for all young children, those of us who produce physical output in typical ways may reach a point where our conceptions of independence—how we represent ourselves at the table—can potentially become conflated with our assumptions about physical independence—how we get to

the table or how we perform our outward communication when we are there. But if we make sufficient room for reflection on and close observation of a physically disabled child's ability to learn and adapt to her or his own unique circumstances over time, we can start to fully conceptualize that child's developmental process in the same way we do for typically developing children: by always assuming that they are the agents of their own learning and adaptation.

Teachers who assume intrapersonal adaptive competence on the part of all children know that a child's relative ability to produce physical output in typical ways does not represent that child's processes of cognitive input. Such teachers do not confuse traditional assumptions of physical independence with a child's potential for future independence because they know that the goal of education is not to produce independent children, but independent adults.

In the 21st century, the ability of an individual adult to lead a happy, productive, socially—and yes, economically—dependent life will not be determined by that adult's relative physical independence. Instead, it will be linked to social and emotional maturity, competence, and confidence in one's ability to relate to others and oneself and to set goals and achieve them. And this has everything to do with supporting the social and emotional empowerment, self-awareness, self-esteem, and cognitive development that occurs through childhood interactive experiences.

Once again, this is also true for children whose physical disabilities make it hard for them to verbalize a word with their own body or to move a muscle. When they are in environments where they can start to observe their own interpersonal and intrapersonal processes of mind and develop methods of independent thinking in the context of shared and agreed upon arenas of our society, rather than constantly being bombarded with experiences that teach them that the process of just gaining entrance to those arenas is incredibly hard work, they will have the psychological energy left for the work they do when they get there.

They may produce their physical participation in different ways. But when they sit around a table with other children, they will be receiving input and producing output while using these receptive and productive processes to observe themselves through the arcs of social experience, self-awareness, and self-esteem as they are supported through childhood. They will develop a deep and wide-ranging curiosity about the world beyond their own abilities and differences that perhaps—if they are lucky—will be valuable to others, but that will without question be invaluable to themselves.

[1] Maria is a pseudonym.

[2] Jason is also a pseudonym.