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Lunch Detention: Learning from Students in Our Little Barred Room

Lisa A. Johnson

We do not often think of detention in a positive light. Typically it is associated with punishment; some might even call it prison-like, a barred room which students dread. This piece will challenge this traditional notion of detention by exploring how one group of students used the power of their stories within the space of detention for self-discovery and meaning-making. In this space, the door was not used to keep students in, but rather, to keep violence out.

In order to set the stage for this narrative, I will first describe my personal connection to this topic and the need for work like this before providing background information on the school in which this research study took place. Before describing the detention space, I will then provide information on the questionable practices employed by staff within the school. I feel it is important for the readers to understand the culture of the school to more fully appreciate the significance of the safe detention space.

When I first began this yearlong ethnographic research study at Cinder City Middle School (CCMS), I was interested in finding out how middle school students with disabilities were supported not only academically, but also socially. I grew up blind in a rural school district, and for most of my life, I was the only disabled person I knew. As a student I felt that the most difficult part of school for me was feeling like I belonged. I never felt as though I had a voice in my education. I wanted to believe my life had value, but I didn't know that it did because I was isolated from others "like me." I didn't see myself represented in anyone I knew or anything I read.

Until recently, even within the social sciences, the experiences of the disabled as a cultural group have been largely unexamined (Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1996). What little has been written does not explore the experiences of children and teens with disabilities (Taylor, 2006), and of the work that has been done, what is often privileged is the knowledge of educators and researchers who are distanced from the "real life experiences" of children and families who live the disability experience every day. There has been a tendency, even in disability studies, for researchers to position themselves above teachers and for teachers to position themselves above children and families in relation to knowledge

ownership. This type of hierarchical research continues to practice deficit thinking and fails to privilege the knowledge that children and families possess (Kliewer, 2006; Solis & Connor, 2006).

When I embarked on this study, I wanted my time with students to be one of empowerment. I was a disabled researcher coming into their spaces to listen to and learn from them; I wasn't doing research "on" them. My students weren't my subjects; we were participating together in theorizing life experiences. I was doing research "with" them (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

The setting

CCMS is part of a rural midwestern school district. In 2012, the school served 400 young adolescents in grades 5–8, and approximately 17% of those students received services in special education. The school district had a reputation for providing exceptional inclusive school experiences for students with disabilities. As a result, families would move to the district or seek to open enroll their children there instead of sending them to two nearby, larger districts. The district's reputation for inclusion is initially what drew me to conduct my research there. I had heard teacher educators from a nearby university speak with praise about the district's special education program at the elementary level.

The district's installation of a state-of-the-art accessible playground with equipment that students in wheelchairs could use was featured on the local news. One of the district's elementary special education teachers was recognized at the state level as a "teacher of the year." Through interviews with parents I learned that one mother's perception of the school as an inclusive space was shaped by this media coverage. One parent also shared that she had friends who had children in the elementary special education program and were very happy. Without exception, every parent interviewed spoke highly of the services offered to students at the elementary school, but said that once students reached middle school, everything changed.

During my year at CCMS, I spent an extensive amount of time with all four of the middle school's special educators as well as with their five aides. which I was therefore able to observe their work within self-contained classrooms and mainstream classrooms as well as during informal gatherings where students were not present. The teachers managed their caseloads by placing multiple students with disabilities into the same classes during the same periods. This typically created what the school called "inclusion" periods, classes in which several of the students in a class were disabled. Through observation I came to understand that during the "inclusion" periods, teachers typically provided less

content or had lower expectations, particularly at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels. Students with disabilities were often seated separately from nondisabled peers and expected to complete less work.

This exemplifies what has been described as “facades of inclusion,” or soft inclusion, by scholars of disability studies in education. In those situations, students are put in general education settings but either not expected to succeed or held to very low standards (Benson, Wolford, & Hyland, 2011). Even worse, on numerous occasions, special educators at CCMS would publicly shame students instead of quietly providing supports for them. In this case, the dominant group (special educators) were in control of when, how, and for whom inclusion was appropriate. Even when they were “included,” students continued to be excluded because, as Ferri (2006) wrote, “students can be physically included but not conceptually included in the eyes of the teacher” (p. 292).

A demeaning culture

At CCMS there was a pervasive culture of emotional violence directed at students with disabilities that was evident in both what the staff said and in the opportunities they provided for students or withheld from them. During an eighth-grade career unit in which students could shadow an adult to learn more about their work, Sophie, a student with cerebral palsy, wanted to observe a teacher but was told by her aide that she would not be allowed to participate because, “she’d be lucky to get a job as a Wal-Mart greeter when she grew up.” In another instance, Addy, an academically accomplished student with Turner Syndrome, argued with an aide who caught her reading in a life skills class when she had been told to sweep the floor, a task Addy found degrading because she wanted more out of “life skills” than just learning to clean and to cook. The aide said to Addy, “Just remember who is in charge here. You better learn to cook and clean because it is the only thing you’ll ever hope to do with your life.” It was not uncommon for students at CCMS to spend entire class periods coloring pages from elementary school workbooks. Special educators at the school advocated for curricular adaptations for students based on their perceived abilities and disabilities. Unfortunately, this often translated into watered-down educational experiences that did not provide opportunities for students to excel (Brantlinger, 2006).

About two months into my time at CCMS, I met an eighth-grade student named Matt. I found him sitting alone in the school’s time-out room, a windowless cinder block closet that measured seven feet by seven feet. Matt explained that he spent nearly every day there. He’d received this punishment for being disrespectful to some of his teachers. He explained, “I don’t feel like I say things that are any

worse than things that some of the other kids say, but they aren't special ed so they seem to get away with more." Later that day, I found the teacher that managed Matt's case, and she explained that Matt had to "earn" his way into his classes by proving he could be respectful to teachers. If he was "good" each day, he'd earn another class period back. If he wasn't, he would be sent back to the time-out room, and the process would start over. In Matt's case, inclusion was a reward. I asked how long this had been going on and learned that Matt had been trying to earn his way into classes for nearly six weeks. He was otherwise a good student but, as the special educator claimed, "just needed to learn the rules of school."

The berating of students in the hallways; a technology education teacher referring to the special education students as "retards"; an eighth-grade wetting herself because her aide told her it wasn't yet time for a bathroom break; two special educators mocking one of their seventh-grade students who had invited 20 people to his birthday party only to have no one show up ("because he's such a crybaby") and joking that at least his imaginary friend probably came—all of this stood in stark comparison to the school's stated mission of "Dignity and Respect within these walls." To me, it did not represent anything close to exemplary inclusive schooling.

In early February, the principal approached me and asked if I would consider taking on the role of lunch detention supervisor. He explained that Matt was misbehaving at lunchtime: "He is loud and is having trouble listening to the lunchroom monitors." The principal went on, "We've decided to take away Matt's lunch and recess privileges for the rest of the year and assign him to a one-on-one lunch detention." I must have looked shocked. "I know it sounds extreme," the principal said, "but the special educators think it would be best. But none of the teachers want the job of supervising him every day, so we were hoping you would do it."

Supervising lunch detention

I was flabbergasted. Three and a half months of lunch detention for being loud in the lunchroom? After nearly 10 years as a middle school teacher, I considered a noisy, chaotic lunchroom fairly typical of middle school since it was one of the few times during the school day that students enjoyed less structure and some time to socialize. Nevertheless, I agreed to take the job.

It would be misleading to say that our early days together in detention were smooth, because they were not. I had been instructed to escort Matt from his fifth-hour class to the lunch line, wait for him

to get his food, and then walk him back to the classroom where he had been assigned to spend lunch detention. I found this practice punitive and possibly embarrassing for Matt. Nevertheless, on the first day of our time together, I walked Matt to lunch and told him I'd wait for him at the door so he could have a few minutes with his friends. Somehow, however, he snuck away. It took three teachers and 10 minutes to find him hiding in a bathroom.

Our second day together went better. I walked several feet behind Matt to the cafeteria and waited at the door while he got his food before we returned to our classroom. Matt ate quietly and didn't speak much to me. On the third day, however, he began talking right away.

"Listen," he said. "I'm sorry about running away the other day. I wasn't trying to get away from you. I was just mad at the teachers for doing this." I nodded to show I understood. "I mean, I don't feel like what I was doing was any worse than what other kids were doing but that's how it is here. It is like they expect me to be bad, so they are always watching, and as soon as I do some little thing, they are all over me."

"I get it," I said.

"So you're not mad?" he asked.

"No hard feelings. And I don't want to make this any worse for you than it already is."

Over the next few days, the hour that Matt and I spent together seemed to fly by. Some days we would talk for the entire time. On other days, Matt would do homework while he ate. As he opened up to me more, I felt privileged to learn more about him. His mother had abandoned him when he was an infant. He lived with his dad. His older sister lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and he loved to visit her because she'd recently given birth; Matt spoke fondly of his little niece. He was surprisingly candid about his past experiences in schools. He'd been kicked out of one middle school because he and some other students had climbed up on the roof and thrown water balloons at students and teachers. "That was pretty stupid," he admitted. He shared that when he came to CCMS, he really wanted to have a new start and to make better choices. "Unfortunately," he said, "it seemed like the teachers had decided right away that I was bad before I even had a chance to show them that I could be good." Matt's intentions were confirmed in a letter he wrote to his future self as part of an English assignment that he completed in October. He wrote:

Dear Future Eighth Grade Self,

Things so far have been going well for me. I did get a lot of referrals but I am planning to step it up and get good grades. The things that are really going well are Science which I first thought was going to be hard but it turned out to be easy. English class is also going well because the career unit is giving me a chance to find out what I want to do for the rest of my life. At home things are getting better because my dad isn't getting on me as much about homework.

One thing that is bad so far is that I still have to earn my classes back for my bad behavior. I now have earned about 4 classes and I am hoping to get them all back. As the year progresses I hope that I will stay caught up and not have to worry about late assignments.

Overall, I am looking forward to developing better note-taking skills so I have more information to study with. I am also looking forward to making good grades because it would help for high school and my whole life in general. I have high expectations for myself. I hope I can meet them.

Before being assigned to lunch detention with Matt, I had been having lunch in the cafeteria at what everyone in the school knew as the “disabled table.” At CCMS, all of the students with disabilities seemed to eat together, sometimes by choice and sometimes because aides made that choice for them. Tatum (2003) wrote that “the aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and subsequently of our own, is often what sets us apart as exceptional or ‘other’” (p. 21). Other aspects of the identities of the students with disabilities at CCMS didn’t seem to matter. If they were disabled, they all ate lunch at the same table.

The lunch detention community grows

After I’d been gone from the table for just over a week, two eighth-grade girls, Sophie and Tara, approached me and asked if I was ever going to come back. They knew that I’d been assigned to lunch detention with Matt because news traveled fast in this small school.

“If you can’t come to lunch with us anymore, can we come to you?” Tara asked.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought. Sophie and Tara were asking to join detention! I told them I’d have to check with their lunch aide. I also wanted to check with Matt to see how he felt about it because I didn’t want to disrupt the relationship that we had begun to develop. Matt shrugged and said he didn’t care, and when I asked the aide for permission, she grumbled at first—commenting on how ridiculous

it was that students didn't appreciate the "freedom" they had at lunch time—but quickly agreed, saying, "Go ahead, less work for me."

And so began the lunch detention that students were asking to be part of. Shortly after Sophie and Tara joined, Addy asked to come as well. It seemed that every day or two, our group would add a member. Soon, nine students came to detention every day: six from the special ed program, an immigrant from the Philippines, a student whose father was incarcerated, and another who lived with her homosexual father. Each student who joined us experienced marginalization for one reason or another, but they all seemed to consider detention a safe space. I watched with amazement as the students came in, pushed desks together to form a circle, and talked. Some days the conversations revolved around the terrible cafeteria food or upcoming tests, but on other days the discussions took a more serious tone.

Sarah, a student with cerebral palsy, seemed quieter than usual one afternoon. Sophie noticed and asked, "What's the matter?"

Sarah sighed, "I was just thinking. How do you know that someone is a real friend?"

"That's a tough question," I responded. "Is something going on that makes you wonder about this?"

"Kind of ... yeah ... I guess. It's just that sometimes I wonder who I can really trust. Like, my friend Emma always hangs around me but sometimes I wonder if she's really my friend or if she hangs out with me because she has to."

"Why would she have to hang out with you?" asked Matt.

"Well, the teachers make our schedules the same so that she can help me in class, because, you know," she nodded toward her walker. "So, when she sits by me I never know if it is because she actually wants to or if she does it because she feels sorry for me."

"I'm sure she likes you," Matt said. He seemed to want to reassure her.

"Yeah, maybe," Sarah said, "but then like, when we were on the field trip last week, when I was going so slow, she ditched me and went off with some other girls from our class. That makes me think I'm just a burden to her and that she'll be my friend when it is easy but when I get in the way, it is just easier

to walk away.”

It was quiet for awhile, and then Sophie shared, “I feel like I don’t even get to pick my own friends. Gina (the aide) decides where I sit at lunch. When my older sister doesn’t like who I am hanging out with, she tells my mom and then my mom tells me I can’t be friends with people. And sometimes I don’t want to be friends with people because it seems like they think they own me. I hate it when they think they can adjust me in my chair when I’m slouching without even asking if I want them to.”

“Gosh, I never thought about these things before,” said Danielle, one of the students without a disability. “I mean, I thought when I saw you all sitting at the same table in the lunchroom, maybe you wanted it that way.”

“Not really,” Sarah said, and Sophie agreed. “Our aides have been putting us at that table ever since we started middle school. The only time I have sat somewhere else was during that stupid mix-it-up week that we did in sixth grade, when the teachers made us sit with other people during the disability unit.”

“That sucked,” Addy groaned. “It was so stupid because it is not like it actually made people be friends with people like us. It is like, the teachers think you can force friendships. But once that week is over, everyone goes back to their usual places and nothing changes.”

Matt, who had been pretty quiet throughout the exchange added, “I guess it is a little different for me because sometimes I act tough even when it is not how I want to be because I think that will help me fit in with the other guys in our class, but it never seems to work. It just gets me in trouble with the teachers.”

“What about you, Mrs. Johnson?” Danielle asked. “Did stuff like this happen to you in school?”

“Definitely,” I admitted. “I moved to a new school in eighth grade and it was awful. Kids didn’t want to sit by me because they thought they would catch blindness. They beat me up and ran away, and I wouldn’t be able to tell who they were because I couldn’t see. I had one true friend. She was picked on because she had really bad acne, but that didn’t matter to me. I think we could relate to each other because we knew what it was like to feel like an outsider. And what’s funny is, now that we’re adults, we’re still good friends. She does research on girls and self-esteem and body image, and I do research about disability ... probably because of our own experiences in school.”

“So does it get easier when you grow up, you know, to make friends and know the friendships are real?” asked Sarah.

I was about to answer, when a booming voice interrupted. “What IS this?!?” one of the seventh- and eighth-grade special educators shouted. “Who is in charge here?”

“I am,” I stood up timidly, though I didn’t feel like I had to be “in charge” in the way that I thought she meant.

“I thought this was detention for Matt, not some social hour. You guys don’t belong in here!” she continued to shout, pushing into the center of our circle and getting in the face of every student there.

“I’m sorry,” I stammered, “I gave them permission to be here. They aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“Well, we’ll see what the administration has to say about this. This is supposed to be a punishment!” She turned to me. “Clearly you can’t be trusted to control this situation.” With her fists clenched, she stormed out of the room. But just before leaving, she turned around and said to me, “You obviously don’t understand your place here.”

The students sat in shocked silence. Finally I stood up, trying to demonstrate more confidence than I actually felt, and said, “No one else needs to leave. You are not doing anything wrong by being here. From now on, I think we’ll just close the door.”

Our little barred room: Lunch detention as a safe space

In that moment, when I chose to close the door on that teacher, and on others like her who threatened our lunch detention space, I was living out something that Collins (1990) referenced in her work. She quoted the notable Black civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon and her thoughts on the “barred room.” She imagined such a space as:

That space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are . . . in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world. (Reagon, as cited in Collins, 1990, p. 145)

The dialogue that happened in our own little barred room that day and in the weeks to come allowed students to explore things that they wondered about with others who perhaps were wondering about them too. The conversations we had were powerful and sometimes painful. We could be serious or silly. And thankfully, the principal, after learning what was happening in that room, agreed that our gathering was too important to disband and should be allowed to continue.

One afternoon in late April, the students were just settling in and beginning to eat when Matt asked, “So, did you all get the classes you wanted for next year in high school?”

Natalie answered, “I’m going back to the Philippines, so I don’t really know what next year will be like.”

“Why are you leaving?” Matt asked.

“My parents are getting a divorce.”

“That sucks. My parents are divorced, too,” added Danielle.

“I wish ours would get a divorce,” said Sarah. “They fight all the time.”

“Well, at least your dad isn’t dead,” Tara barely whispered. The group knew that Tara’s father had been killed in a car accident two years earlier.

“You’re right, we should feel lucky to have a dad.”

“So, about your schedules . . .,” Matt asked again.

“I didn’t get to choose anything,” complained Sophie. “Mrs. X picked for me. I only get to come out for one class and that is Art.”

“Seriously?!?” Matt gasped. “I’d die if I’d be stuck in the special ed room all day!”

“I know. It isn’t fair.”

“Why can’t you just say you want something else?” Danielle asked. She was an honor roll

student and hadn't had the experience of needing an individualized education plan (IEP).

"We don't get to do that," explained Tara. "The teachers have a meeting with our parents usually and just pretty much tell them what we will be allowed to take. They say we have choices, but really, we don't."

"Yeah, my mom hates those meetings," said Sarah. "She says that it's just a show because they legally have to do it, but really our opinions and our parents' opinions don't matter. Not here anyways."

"That's so sad!" Natalie exclaimed. "If you don't go to any other classes though, how do you graduate? How will you be ready for college?"

"College? That's funny. I don't think anyone here thinks I will ever go to college!" said Sophie.

"Yeah, me either," added Matt. "They all think I will end up in jail or something."

"I wish we had more power. I mean, other kids get to choose. I don't even know if I'd be ready for college though. Most of the time I'm doing this kid stuff. The other day I had to color this page of animals and write what animals they were. That's not eighth-grade work," Sophie whined.

"What?!? How is that even allowed that you get work like that?" Danielle asked.

"It is all I have ever known," Sophie replied.

"You'd be surprised what happens in special ed," Matt said. "They wouldn't put any regular kid in the time-out room, I bet, but for kids like us, it's totally normal."

"Mrs. Johnson, what about you? Did you get to choose? How did you get to college?"

"I had some pretty hard times too. I started out for the first two years in what used to be called the mentally retarded room. I mostly played with toys. My parents had to fight to get me into a regular class, but lots of times teachers wouldn't give me work because they just assumed I

couldn't do it. I had to work hard to prove I could do it.”

“Yeah, I get that,” replied Matt. “Sometimes it seems just because we're disabled, we have to work harder than people who are normal just to prove we're human.”

Beyond the little barred room

It was stories like these that filled our time together in lunch detention, where, for an hour a day, we locked the door to the world outside our little barred room. Marginalizing experiences had so often made these students feel alone. In this situation, however, that feeling of alienation seemed to have brought them together and helped them articulate important concepts related to consciousness and identity in a deeply personal way. The psychological underpinnings of disability identity development focus on the concepts of consciousness and alienation (Garland-Thomson, 1996). Consciousness, or how one comes to know oneself, is directly influenced by the world in which one lives. The act of “being” in a social world in turn impacts consciousness, and consciousness in turn influences the act of being (Garland-Thomson, 2009).

As powerful as our time in lunch detention was, I worried. I knew this space was temporary. Together we were resisting the norms of the school by creating a space in which the students could speak freely, in which the adults with power who repeatedly had oppressed these students were literally locked outside and the students struggled together to find meaning in their experiences. But this experience would soon end.

Reagon (as cited in Collins, 1990) captured my concerns that this space would not be sufficient for larger social change because the problem with the experiment [the barred room] is that there ain't nobody in there but folk like you . . . That's nationalism. . . it's nurturing, but it is also nationalism. At a certain stage nationalism is crucial to people if you are going to ever impact as a group in your own interest. Nationalism at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples. (p.145)

In many ways, our little barred room was indeed a “sphere of influence” in the “struggle for group survival” (Collins, 1990, p. 141). In private, we engaged in work regarding the students' understanding of issues of inclusion, expectations, and friendship. Through the sharing of stories, knowledge was created. As time passed, I saw the students grow more willing to question the low expectations of

those in authority and share their own stories in very public ways with their teachers and peers. Three students even went on to share stories at their eighth-grade graduation about their experiences in lunch detention. They seemed to be making the movement from survival to transformation. As they began to open up to peers, they demonstrated—to students and adults alike—their resilience.

I was profoundly changed by the students from our little barred detention room and I believe they were changed as well. On the second to last school day, students celebrated what they called “Farewell,” which included a graduation ceremony and dance. As I watched them move across the stage to receive their middle school diplomas, I couldn’t help but marvel at what an unlikely group of friends these eighth graders made. And while the students and I will never forget the violent ways in which this school marginalized them, we will also never forget the real lasting friendships that developed in the unlikeliest of places, lunch detention.

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