A Mainstreaming Story: What the Labels Leave Out

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Cover Page Footnote
The author has taught children with various disabilities for over 15 years and works with Bank Street as a cooperating teacher. She is the Resource Room teacher at Central Park East II, East Harlem, a magnet public school where some children with special needs are included in every classroom.
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Twenty-five children sat on the rug in the meeting area of a kindergarten-first grade classroom. The room was quiet, all faces turned expectantly toward Esther Rosenfeld, the school director. She began the meeting with a question.

“What things are the same about all of us?”

Hand after hand was raised, as children volunteered eyes, ears, coming to school, liking to play, to learn, etc. . . . . After a while, the director asked, “And how is each of you different from all the rest?”

Again, answers abounded, as each child talked about hair color, skin color, clothing, friends, family, neighborhoods, names, and pets. Esther then raised the fact that Damien, an eight-year old kindergarten child, had been teased for being different, for “talking funny” and “eating funny.”

“Can each of you think of a time when you’ve been laughed at, and didn’t want to be?”

Stories poured from their mouths. “Once I fell off my bike and my brother laughed at me.” “Once I tripped in the yard and my friend laughed.” “Once I dropped my books and my father laughed.” “Once...Once...” On they went.

When the stories were finished, there was a moment of quiet. Then Esther leaned into the group and asked, “When that person laughed at you, what would you have liked them to do instead?”

“I wish he would have helped me get up.”

“I wish she would have said, ‘are you okay.’”

“I wish he would have picked them up with me...”

Again, there was a silence. Then Esther said, “Yes, Damien is
different. Yes, he speaks differently from you. Yes, he eats differently from you. That’s true. But remember how you felt when you were laughed at. What do you think he feels when you laugh at him?”

“Sad.”

“Mad.”

“Lonely?”

At this point, Damien, who had been sitting confidently beside Esther, asked to speak to the class.

“I wish you would all try not to tease me any more.”

“I’m benched!”

Damien was breathless as he burst in the Resource Room door, grinning with pride as he made his announcement. Puzzled, I questioned his second-grade teacher.

Damien had been playing with a small group of boys in the recess yard. When the whistle blew, the group did not return with their class. Fifteen minutes later, the boys showed up at the classroom door, and were greeted by an angry teacher.

“You’re all benched at recess tomorrow!” she snapped.

“Even Damien?” asked a child from inside the classroom.

“Even Damien!”

Damien glowed, and came to tell me what had happened. At the end of the day he ran to greet his mother and boast about his new status.

The next day, the group remained on the bench while their classmates played. When recess was over, Damien took me aside and pronounced, “Benched is boring.”

It’s 9:15 in the morning. Members of the junior chorus are returning, in groups of two or three, to their classrooms. Damien emerges from the music room with his friend Joanna. As they pass the auditorium door,
they each put an arm around the other and begin to sing the song they’ve just practiced:

“For good times, for bad times,
I’ll be on your side forevermore.
That’s what friends are for....”

Unconscious of observing eyes, the two friends sing all the way back to class.

Chris, a third-grader, is sorting the group’s work to be placed in individual folders. He calls out the owner’s name as he puts the paper in piles. “Kenny, Alicia, Carlos...” He picks up a paper with no name, but with the large, clumsy scrawl and ragged edges that identify much of Damien’s work. Without hesitation, he continues, “Damien,” as he makes a new pile, “Kevin, Maria, Damien...”

Damien is a puzzle. There is no good reason to think that he could manage in a mainstream classroom, except that he does. There are textbooks that can explain why he should be unhappy in such a placement, yet he exudes pride in his achievements and pleasure in his friends. There are experts who could tell you why “normal” classmates would reject him, but he has a valued place in the class and in the school.

He came to Central Park East II as a kindergartener, bearing an evaluation report that described him as multiply handicapped, mentally retarded, untestable. Everyone who spent even a short time with him, however, noticed a spark of something in him that didn’t fit in the reports. Because of his small size, and his background in a mainstream nursery school, we decided to try him in the kindergarten. Damien spent a day in the class, and agreed eagerly to the plan. No one knew what would happen. We just agreed to wait and see, taking it year by year.

He proved to be a keen observer of children and adults, commenting on regularities he found around him. He kept track of which children took the school bus or were picked up. He noticed people’s moods, and
how teachers and children were likely to deal with frustration or fatigue. He modelled his language and actions on the children around him. School was a rich, exciting place for him.

Damien surprised us continually. We thought he might not learn to read. He did. We thought he would not learn to write. He did, in his own distinctive fashion. We thought he wouldn’t be able to work independently. He can and does.

It’s not all simple. Sometimes Damien has trouble with children on the bus lines, or in class. He usually comes in to talk to me about it.

“Anita says I talk funny,” he told me one day, “but she’s new and doesn’t know. I ignore her.”

In second grade: “Ben says my drawing is messy. He thinks you have to be perfect or something. Well, nobody’s perfect!”

In his new third grade class: “There’s no clock. I need a clock so I can keep track. When the kids go to recorder, to violin. That’s how I know what I’m supposed to be doing. My mother thinks I can’t tell time, but I can tell when the big hand’s on the eight. I can see that!”

Routines are essential to Damien, and their disruption unsettling. One day when his teacher was absent, I came to pick him up for reading work. Before leaving the classroom, he walked up to the substitute teacher and put a supportive arm around her shoulders.

“Are you all right, Miss ____?”

“I’m fine, Damien” she smiled.

Satisfied, he came with me. As we closed the door behind us, he confided, “She’s very nice, but she doesn’t know anything.”

Damien, however, knows quite a lot of things. He knows you can’t whistle at meetings. He knows what time quiet reading is supposed to be, and how long it takes to clean up after art. He knows the quality of work expected of him in each academic area, and he knows which classmates to go to for schedule information, help with math, or a needed hug. Most important, Damien knows his own inner resources.

At the beginning of this year, Damien was reflecting on the changes
he was experiencing in his new grade. One of these changes was travelling to a new floor.

“I almost quit junior chorus. I thought I wouldn’t find my way back. But then I thought, I like junior chorus. I’m not going to quit.”

Neither are we, Damien.
Neither are we.

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