

## Disabilities and Culture: A Tale of Two Schools

When students with social and emotional difficulties exhibit significant behavioral problems, teachers often feel at a loss and believe the learner's needs are beyond their capabilities. They worry about the effect of the student's behavior on the other learners. Often, this combination of factors leads to an Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) referral or a request to change an existing placement. Fear and frustration seem to drive eligibility determination and placements. This is the old, customary way of serving learners with social and emotional challenges. Recently, I consulted in two inner-city school districts as an independent social, emotional, and behavioral coach. My role was to provide professional development and help teachers transform the professional development principles into practice. Thus, when teachers struggled with classroom management or faced behavioral problems they didn't exactly know how to handle, teachers and support staff had the option to invite me into the classroom to assess the situation and help them develop a plan of action and adjust it depending on the outcomes.

## Coaching for Collaborative Problem Solving

In both schools, I trained teachers in collaborative problem solving. Though attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and life coaches have used collaborative problem solving for many years, psychologist Ross Greene recently translated that model into an effective school practice in his book *Lost at School* (2008).

Greene notes that the behavioral difficulties of most students with chronic issues are the result of lagging skills and unsolved problems. Certainly when it comes to students with social and emotional needs, their lagging skills often lead to a hefty amount of performance issues, discipline referrals, and suspensions. Rather than solving the problem, the issues compound.

**Greene's Collaborative Problem Solving  
Model Uses Three Steps:**

**Empathy:** The adult(s) gathers information from the student to better understand the student's concerns that drive his behavior.

**Define the Problem:** The adult brings her concerns or perspective to the problem-solving table.

**Invitation:** Both the student and adult seek to identify realistic solutions.

Coaching *can* be an effective way to facilitate the collaborative problem-solving practice. Not only does the coach know how to lay the groundwork and use the problem solving process, but the effective social, emotional, and behavioral coach also brings a considerable wealth of strategies to the table. Plus, the coach monitors and troubleshoots the plan so it doesn't get thrown under the bus at the first sign of distress. Of equal importance, the coach offers support to teachers who are uncertain or overwhelmed.

For coaching to work in practice, ideally the school culture is as interested in solving its problems as it would like the learners to be. At the very least, the teacher seeking help from the coach needs to be committed to finding solutions. This realization was hammered home to me through the vastly different outcomes of two very different learners in the two school districts where I used collaborative coaching.

## **School A: Working Jonah into the Mainstream**

Over the years, Mrs. Johnson had been the calm of many a classroom storm. A veteran inner-city primary school teacher, she recognized the traumatic stress stories that characterized the lives of so many of her learners. She handled every tantrum and classroom skirmish with empathy; her trademark soft voice; personal warmth; and excellent no-nonsense, classroom-management skills.

The late September morning I walked into Mrs. Johnson's kindergarten class, I found her practically dumbfounded. The reason? Jonah, age 5. He began kindergarten with the defiance of a life-worn 18-year-old who wasn't going to be ruled by any authority, and he was having another bad day.

By September's end, Mrs. Johnson had pressed the call button so many times that every teacher in her wing, every administrator, every security guard, and both guidance counselors knew that someone needed to get to that class fast! School personnel had his mother, a single parent working a full-time day job as a health aide, on speed dial. The leaves on the trees hadn't even begun to turn color, and yet Jonah had already been sent home or unofficially suspended a few times. His mother finally disclosed to school

personnel that Jonah had a diagnosis of ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. She agreed to follow up with the medication recommendations previously made by Jonah's physician.

Psychiatric diagnoses aside, Jonah had severe difficulties in school. He rarely participated in group activities. He didn't speak with peers unless he had an unkind remark to make. He taunted other children. He frequently bolted out of the room. He had mood swings and became a one-man wrecking ball when something ticked him off, which was frequent given his low frustration tolerance. Clearly, Jonah had extreme difficulties and special needs.

We fast-tracked him for an IDEA evaluation and wondered if the school would be able to serve a child with such severe difficulties. While waiting for the determination, as the coach, I designed a response team for Jonah that included the social worker, the guidance counselor, the security guard, the vice principal, his teacher, the classroom aide, and his mother. Whenever possible, we elicited what help we could from Jonah as well. We used collaborative problem solving and developed a list of positive behavioral supports to use. Jonah understood that everyone was working on his behalf. Because Jonah often required supervision and one-to-one assistance, at my suggestion, the principal provided a one-to-one aide.

Initially, Jonah responded to all our interventions about 30–50 percent of the time. Six weeks later when the child study team (Individualized Education Program Team) found him eligible for IDEA services rather than an out-of-district placement, we were able to serve him in a pull-out resource program. It took constant vigilance, and it paid off. By April, Jonah was interacting with his classmates. He was leading games, heading the lunch line, going to music and art classes, and making social contact.

For me, the ultimate joy came the morning in early May when I walked into his classroom. Jonah, who once rarely made eye contact with anyone, jumped out of his seat and ran across the room to give me a hug. That was quite the change from a morning four months earlier when I sat in a room and watched Jonah throw blocks at me. He'd carefully calculated each throw to come close enough to me to get a reaction without making contact. The morning of the hug, both Mrs. Johnson and I blossomed into smiles at his prosocial spontaneity. Jonah was finding his place in the mainstream.

## **School B: Letting Down Tajaney**

Midway through a grade-level professional development training with 1st grade teachers, Mrs. Cuthbert, a veteran teacher, raised her hand. "Mrs. Dorn and I team teach the inclusion class. We need your help with a child," she said.

"You must be talking about Tajaney," another teacher remarked. She turned to look at me. "Good luck with that one! She tore kindergarten apart."

Mrs. Cuthbert continued. "She's the most difficult child I've ever taught. Both the special-ed teacher and I don't think she belongs in an inclusion classroom."

"Is she classified?" I asked.

A child study team evaluation had begun the month before.

With Mrs. Cuthbert's invitation, one crisp winter morning I went into the room to see how coaching might help. Within nine minutes, I counted six negative comments the teacher made to Tajaney. I also noticed that what the teacher interpreted as not following directions was actually a very purposeful approach to the task on Tajaney's part—not a ruse to call attention to herself.

During circle time, Tajaney wiggle-wormed nonstop and wound up making unintentional body contact. "See," Mrs. Cuthbert said. "The other children don't want to be near her. She really makes herself an outcast. "Tajaney's every behavior was interpreted as attention-seeking. That motive also supported another staff concern: Tajaney's "neglectful" mother. The teachers were sure the little girl didn't get enough attention at home, a conclusion they drew in part because Mom did not ensure that homework was done.

Later that day with the guidance counselor, Mrs. Cuthbert, and Tajaney present, I coached them through a collaborative problem-solving conference. Though only in 1st grade, Tajaney quickly identified her main concern: "Some people don't want to be my friend."

By the end of the conference, Tajaney had developed two strategies she could use: 1) During circle time, she would sit far enough away from the other students so that she could windshield-wiper her legs. 2) In the lunch line, she would measure her arms elbow-to-elbow to give space to the other students so she wouldn't run into them as usual. I noted to the teachers that Tajaney would need them to cue her to use the strategies at the moment needed until they became second nature.

At the meeting, we practiced the strategies. Everyone claimed to be on point. The next time I came back, Mrs. Cuthbert told me, "Nothing worked. Tajaney was still bumping into kids. And now there are more problems. She's not doing any homework. We really can't help her. We've got lots of needy kids in this class."

The pressure they felt was valid. These teachers did have many students with considerable need. They also had the pressure of No Child Left Behind and adequate yearly progress biting their heels. Informal assessments indicated that Tajaney would perform below average on the state test.

When the child study team finished their evaluation, Tajaney was placed in a self-contained behavioral disorder classroom. Though the case manager didn't really believe the placement was warranted, the school's culture was such that she knew Tajaney wouldn't catch a break. As it turned out, the mother who did not supervise homework happened to be illiterate, and therefore unable to help her daughter. A proud woman, she chose not to share that information with her daughter's teachers.

Could Tajaney have been served in an inclusive setting? Most likely, although I doubt her needs as a learner would have been met. Her behavior and her parental circumstances branded her. In cultures where "move 'em out" prevails, children such as Tajaney will rarely be integrated into school life.

## **A Different Way Out**

Reflection leads me to question whether Tajaney's teachers genuinely sought coaching to improve their practice or to find an effective solution. They may have hoped the outside professional to validate their belief: "She doesn't belong in our class." Now, they could say, "See, we tried, but even the coach couldn't help."

Yet as we saw with Jonah's school, the collaborative coaching partnership enabled staff to successfully meet the needs of a very difficult and challenging student. In the future, Jonah's teachers will build from this experience. Fear and frustration will no longer rock their classroom worlds. They have more strategies, including collaborative problem solving, to meet the needs of their learners. Jonah's educators have been empowered.

Why would School B's educators, or any educators for that matter, cling to the self-fulfilling prophecy that they are not equipped to help learners with social and emotional needs? Or that the more intensive degree of service delivery in a self-contained, special-

education placement is the better answer? Were they deliberately setting out to ensure that nothing worked for Tajaney? I hardly think so.

The first step for School B educators is to be mindful of the beliefs and emotions that either disempower or empower them. The actions of Tajaney's teachers seem to be driven by fear, the belief that they didn't have what it takes, the attitude that the situation was larger than their capabilities, and the practice of looking for how things might fail rather than focusing on how to make a solution work.

Simplistic though it may seem, the research on resilience, optimal performance, confirmation bias, and positive psychology all note the great influence attitude and belief have on behavior and problem solving. Jonah's teacher was willing to be curious and experiment. Tajaney's teachers were afraid and hit the default switch. Jonah's teacher believed that something might work; she was willing to work the problem and the solutions.

Jonah's teacher engaged in two additional practices that helped make the positive difference. She watched her internal and external language, taking care to use positive words and to reframe weedy, negative thoughts. She practiced what she preached to her students: I can do it! Mrs. Johnson also acted as though what she did made a difference. She was mindful of the difference she wanted to make.

### **For Further Reading:**

Fowler, M. (2009). Mindful discipline for emotionally distressed learners. In S. Feifer & G. Rattan (Eds.), *Emotional Disorders: A Neuropsychological, Psychopharmacological, and Educational Perspective* (pp. 269–282). Middletown, Maryland: School Neuropsych Press

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind*. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD

Katz, M. (1997). *On playing a poor hand well*. New York: Norton

Zander, R. & Zander, B. (2000). *The art of possibility*. New York: Penguin

## **Resources**

**Greene, R. (2008). *Lost at school*. New York: Scribner.**

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