

All Means All...Even the Yes-But and Whadabout Kids

by Marsha Forest and Jack Pearpoint

Our belief is: "ALL MEANS ALL!" No buts about it. Still we hear a litany of buts that are international in nature: But...we're too small... we're too big... we don't have the budget... we don't have the community support... we don't have the training. *But* really means, I don't want to do it, or I'm not willing to figure out a way to do it! *But* is an excuse word. There are no excuses for losing the numbers of students who are presently being kicked out, pushed out, or dropped out of our schools.

The people in the system need to show students that they really care. Words like *love, compassion, caring, and helping* need to replace words like *control, testing, and behavior management*. What better way for any system to start than to welcome ALL students into its schools and classrooms and to stop sorting kids into little boxes labeled with various acronyms? Some of the kids who challenge systems the most are colloquially labeled the "Yes-But" or "Whadabout" kids. The remainder of the article introduces you to three such kids and their respective school communities that accepted and overcame the challenge.

■ Annie

Bill Gillenwater is the principal of Scott Elementary School in Greeley, Colorado. He decided in February, 1990, to close his special education rooms and move all the children into their age-appropriate homerooms — with the necessary supports going to the classroom teacher. To some this was heresy and lunacy; to most it was simply a practice whose time had come. From Bill's diary, he recalls: "I believed that moving to a fully inclusive school was really a civil rights issue. I didn't feel we could make the needed change by putting this up to a staff vote. In my mind, the rights of children were clearly being violated at the school in which I was principal. We couldn't wait an additional 20 years to correct this."

On August 20, 1990, new and historic general education class lists went up at Scott elementary. Included were several Yes-But kids, but one really stood out — Julianna, known to those who love her as Annie. Annie was a small, frail and beautiful child. For years, Annie and her family had been shuffled from program to program in search of the magic-bullet without success. Annie's parents simply wanted their daughter to go to school with her brother and sister. They wanted Annie to have friends, to have a chance to be a little girl.

In this school of 620 pupils, there was a small but vocal minority of parents and teachers who did not want Annie around. "There are special places for kids like her," said one parent. "Children labeled autistic and profoundly

retarded don't belong with or near my son," wrote another. In Bill's diary was recorded: "I felt that I must be truly hearing what school principals in Mississippi heard in the 1960s. We've come so far and yet not moved an inch as a progressive and democratic society. I won't be intimidated by this vocal minority!"

Bill and the Laurence family rode out this negative wave. They had a great deal of support from friends all over Colorado and indeed from all over North America. They needed it. The most important support, however, was provided directly by Annie's classmates. To the children, Annie was not a child with challenging behavior, a case of mental retardation or autism. To these children, Annie was just another kid, just a friend.

On January 26, 1991, the Laurence's decided to have a pizza party for Annie. They invited all of her classmates. They thought maybe six would show up. To their shock and delight, 35 people showed up — children, families, friends. Norm was happy to run for more pizza. "Never in our wildest dreams did we think so many people would come," said Norm and Ellen.

The last words in this story go to Annie's wonderful teacher, June Griswold and her third grade class at Scott Elementary School. They were asked, "What advice would you give others who are thinking about inviting students similar to Annie to their schools?"

- "Tell the teachers that all kids act more normal if they are with their friends."
- "Tell everyone to treat all kids like regular kids, 'cuz like all kids are like regular kids."
- "Having Annie here has made me feel better about myself."
- "Annie makes us all feel happy. Without her we wouldn't be the best class that we are with her here with us."
- "I learn more when Annie's around. She makes me feel like I belong, too."

■ Sam

Brian Cullen is the energetic principal of St. Francis, an elementary/middle school in Kitchener, Ontario, with over 350 students. Brian decided in 1987 to close his segregated special education classes and move 17 students from self-contained classes into the regular education stream. His philosophy is straightforward: "Nothing is impossible if you have the commitment to educate all kids. You just have to work harder, problem solve, and find the right combination of supports so that kids can learn in natural settings. Some

principals still think it's okay to reject and separate kids. I just don't hold that philosophy. It is not okay to reject anyone. Another school would have recommended a psychiatric residential treatment facility for the two boys I'm talking about. But we decided they belonged at our school and we'd do everything possible to make them welcome."

Sam was described as a child with developmental handicaps who was nonverbal and whose behaviors made it difficult for him to learn or get along with others. He came to St. Francis from a distant residential treatment center for people with psychiatric problems. Sam had lived there for four years. Initially, he went for "an assessment." He ended up living there. He is now in a group home and goes to a regular high school. Brian explains the initiation to Sam at school: "When he came to our school, we knew very little about him. He simply showed up. Our first step was to get to know him. On his second day at school, he defecated and started throwing feces around the room. Kerry Gorman, a great teacher, called me on my beeper for the first time in four years. Together, we cleaned the kid up, put him back together, and continued the rest of the day. That afternoon we had a major planning meeting."

There is no doubt Sam was one of the Yes-But kids. But for Brian, there was no doubt that Sam had to stay. It never entered his mind that Sam should go anywhere else. Brian's first concern was to pull together a team of teachers. Another critical support for Sam was his Circle of Friends facilitated by Kerry. Brian remembers the first few weeks:

We figured this was a really neat challenge. We never had a kid like Sam before. We had to set up a system to get rid of this behavior. We were also worried about chunks of the day when Sam got involved in unsafe activities. He'd run into the street and lie in the middle of the road. He'd dive in puddles of mud. One other annoying problem was that Sam would slap other kids. We were worried.

There was no shower in the school so we used a pail and sponge. We had to dress for Sam's bad times, so we got big lab coats from the shop teacher and we wore boots. This was messy stuff. We think Sam really enjoyed people washing him so we switched to teaching him to clean himself, which he did. This of course took longer. He would dump the pail of water so we got him a mop. We never resorted to punishment. We needed extra clothes and that's about it.

I can't believe how the other kids reacted. They were disgusted at first, but they were really sensitive. They were never mean, in fact, they were actually getting closer to him because they felt so badly for him. It was surprising but not one parent complained and believe me, they all heard about Sam.

It took a good three months before we noticed any real change, but by the end of the year the defecation problem had been eradicated. Sam didn't run in the street very often, and he didn't slap anyone — well hardly ever."

At the eighth grade graduation ceremony, Sam got his certificate and the biggest round of applause of any student. Brian credits what was done to an intuitive sense about what is right and just for all kids. He says: "I don't even think about it anymore. You can take as many courses and workshops as you want, but somewhere along the line it all comes down to a gut reaction about what to do that is respectful to the youngster in question and safe for everyone else. It's the right thing to do. That's it. This kid is still really a big challenge. We didn't cure him. We did what we could do."

■ Len

Another Yes-But student at St. Francis was Len. Len came with several labels: multi-handicapped, communication disorder, trainable mentally retarded and severe behavior disorder. Brian called Len "VP" (for Vice-Principal) because he spent so much time in Brian's office refining his confrontational skills. Behavior was the big issue. Len had been shunted from class to class. He had already been kicked out of four or five others schools for his "antisocial, aggressive behavior." Reports said: "Len is too behavior disordered for the trainable retarded class and too retarded for the behavior class." This would have been funny if it weren't so tragic. He was also called a "non-reader with no interest in academics." When he arrived at St. Francis, he was 11 years old. He was placed in the regular grade five class, along with the other 11 year olds.

Len used really foul language to the teachers. He would swear like crazy. Then a miracle occurred. For six weeks there was not one incident in the regular grade six class. Joan Marsh, another amazing teacher, showered him with love and gave him the impression she was crazy about him. However, in the seventh week he freaked out! He was back in my office, but this time there was a real difference. I could talk to him this time around. He cooled down quicker, was more rational, and wanted to get back to classroom. I asked him, "What's happening? What's the matter?" His answer floored me. He said, "I really like grade 6, Mr. Cullen, but I can't fucking read." He could have blown me over with a feather. I was so moved. He finally told us something he really wanted to do. None of us had ever thought of Len reading. "Well, you better get back and learn to read. We'll teach you right away!" The special education resource team figured out that Len loved GOBOTS (robot puzzles). They went shopping that evening and GOBOTS became the initial step in Len's reading and writing program.

Len is now in high school and is reading at the grade four level. He can read announcements on the public address system and is doing well. He isn't perfect and he isn't cured. He has good and bad days, but he's still at school and he has changed dramatically.

All, continued on page 23

Nature, continued from page 11

determined and then criticize the idea and organize against it. Those who introduce a new way of thinking are labeled as unrealistic, starry-eyed dreamers and are often accused of being unappreciative of all the hard work and thought which preceded the current way of doing things. You cannot sell your vision to these individuals because their primary interest lies in trying to preserve the status quo and protect themselves from having to do or be anything different. Change is just too scary for these folks. Because they are primarily concerned with how change will impact them personally, the only potential for gaining their support is to demonstrate how the change might benefit them.

This story well illustrates what happens to us with regard to the choices we make in life. Take a moment to consider the options available to the little penguins in the colony. To which group do you identify with regard to the issue of inclusive education? Admittedly, the penguin story is simplistic and people do not neatly fall into one of four categories or necessarily remain there. Responding to innovation or change is a developmental process. All of us, even the plungers, go through phases such as wanting to know how this is going to affect me? Some go through those phases more quickly, and are more readily able to embrace new ideas and move them forward. Many factors impact people's tendency to plunge, follow, join, and wail, depending upon the change they are confronting, as well as aspects of their lives which have little to do with the specific innovation. There will be times and issues in each of our lives where we might accurately be labeled a plunger, follower, joiner, or wailer.

Lastly, a word to the plungers associated with developing more inclusive school communities. The importance of the penguin story lies in understanding the existence of people's differing reactions to change and using that information to work as constructively and positively as possible with each individual and group. In that regard, we offer a few final thoughts:

- Remember that the resistance to change demonstrated by people is designed to protect the resistor, not to attack those initiating change (Karp, 1985).
- Recognize that you will encounter a few individuals who have engaged in such an extended period of negative thinking that a condition called martyrdom has taken over. Beware of trying to convince them to change their minds. These are individuals who have chosen to be convinced about their own lack of choices.
- Keep in mind, and more importantly, help others to keep in mind that developing effective educational systems to support children's learning is an ongoing process. Hopefully, we are continually working to improve upon past practice. That does not mean that past practice was bad or wrong, only that all things can be improved upon. Framing inclusion in

this way may help folks to understand that inclusion is an evolution, and not a revolution.

- Don't lose sight of your own positive traits; having a vision, being willing to take risks, focusing on solutions versus problems, being enthusiastic and energetic, and recognizing that your security is internal, not external.
- Keep your sense of humor and put "have some fun" on your agenda every day.
- Circle yourself with at least a few friends and colleagues so that you have a safe haven in which support and celebration are both realized. The relationships you develop in this change process will add great meaning and depth to your life.
- Never lose sight of the children. Include them in the efforts to become a more inclusive school community. They are often some of the most creative, energetic problem solvers on the team. Remain focused on the vision of children learning together. Once you've experienced the power and magic of that vision in action, you will feel affirmed, knowing that the plunge was worth the effort!

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All, continued from page 19

■ Conclusion

The families and school personnel for these three kids had fears, but they persisted and triumphed. They have shown what is possible. None of these schools had extraordinary funding or staff. They were ordinary schools doing extraordinary education for all children. They had principals who were leaders with a vision and mission to educate ALL children. They are still the exception, but with such leadership this could one day be the norm.

In a delightful twist of logic, the education system NEEDS these children the most. The Yes-But and Whad-about kids are the very people who may restore spirit and meaning to our communities, nurture our sanity, and salvage our survival as a race of caring human beings. What we do and how we treat the students we call Yes-Buts and Whadabouts tell us about who we are as people, as professionals, and as a nation. Our values come clear in our reaction to these very students. They are the barometer of our values and our vision. There are no "Yes-Buts," no "Whadabouts." Just kids - KIDS who BELONG TOGETHER.

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