

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES: A WARNING TO US ALL

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Today I had one of the most disturbing experiences I've had in a school in a long time. I was invited to observe a grade one class at a well respected small school associated with a major Canadian University. This school also serves as a training facility for new teachers as well as assessment and remediation specialists.

Tommy, a six year old child, labelled as a "special needs" student was grudgingly accepted in the school because of the strong advocacy of his parents and because his brother and sister go to this school.

The family are wonderful people, very caring and concerned about the education of their three children. The mother unstintingly volunteers her time at the school and is the type of woman who thoughtfully prepares home made goods for meetings. This family want the very BEST and that is what they deserve for all their children.

Tommy has been diagnosed as having a developmental delay. He is a tall boy, good looking with glasses that consistently slip off his nose. He looks like a young absent minded professor. His walk is somewhat clumsy, his speech slow and laboured at times, and his behaviour noticeably different than his typical peers.

Because of his family, Tommy has a shot at a future with full participation in community life, family life and work. He will likely go on to higher education and have a good quality of life given the many opportunities that the family will provide.

According to his Dad, "We want Tommy to fit in as best he can and have a sense of belonging. We than believe he'll learn."

This family should not have to continually struggle as they are for a place where their child will get the basic ABC's.

- A. Acceptance
- B. belonging
- C. community

What I saw today was a child clearly not accepted, not belonging and clearly not a part of the classroom community.

* This is not the fault of the structure of the classroom (and excellent organized learning centre full of stimulating materials.)

- * This is not the fault of the teacher (an excellent and warm experienced woman who just got Tommy in her class this Sept. and who had no preparation, training, etc for Tommy.)
- * This is not the fault of the children who are themselves products of the values of society at large, * and it is certainly not the fault of Tommy or his family.

What I saw today is a sad case of benign neglect -- a school who has never fully welcomed children who are vulnerable, children who are different, children who are truly hurt. It is a case of neglectful child abuse by a society and school system who don't welcome diversity and who fear the different especially the child with a disability.

It is the fault of a university system that spouts educational change without welcoming it inside the doors of its own training facility. It is the fault of educational leaders who are too comfortable and secure to face the hard facts of building communities where truly all are WELCOME not only those who are physically fit and beautiful but those who can't walk, talk or move as fast as the rest of us.

I am sad and mad at what I saw today. I would not send my own children to this school until it is dramatically changed. I believe Tommy and his family are the change agents who can bring the gift of love and acceptance back into a school that will turn out the next generation of leaders in our society.

I believe Tommy, his excellent teacher the new school director and his family can turn around the situation I am about to describe. It will be a better school and a better world if they do.

An hour and a half of observation:

I simply entered the grade one classroom and without a word sat in various locations to observe Tommy in the class. The children did not know why I was there as they have many adult visitors and student teachers. They are comfortable with visitors and so paid no particular attention to me. I made no contact. I just sat and wrote notes.

Notes taken Sept. 25, 1989.

10:40-10:55

A student teacher was reading a story to the whole group. Bananas were passed around as a treat. Tommy was right in the middle and listened attentively with the rest of the group (21 children) to the story.

The teacher and I had a quiet chat while the story was going on re some issues that were of concern to her:

- * concern with Tommy's tapping other kids on the head
- * concern re Tommy's hugging children too often and too hare
- * concern re Tommy's asking too many questions at inappropriate times during show and tell period.

It is interesting to note that in a meeting held for an hour before my observation these three major and important concerns were not raised by the teacher. The topic of the meeting was how to modify the others drew letters or pictures, and how to access a computer and software.

While I believe all these are important questions to address, the key issue didn't even get raised which was Tommy's behaviour. This behaviour will and is preventing Tommy from being a social part of life and thus learning.

10:55-11:10

All the children were to go into small groups and draw a picture of something that lives in the sea. This was related to the story read to the whole group.

Five little boys (ages 5-6) all sat at a table. The following is their verbatim conversation:

(everyone was drawing and talking)

boy 1 - Tommy's a jerk.

boy 2 - Tommy you go galloping after people and spit at them.

Tommy - No I don't.

boy 1 - You're a jerk

boy 2 - You're stupid.

boy 3 - Tommy's stupid.

Tommy - Don't say that.

boy 1 - You can say whatever you want to say anywhere. No one can tell us what to say...

boy 2 - But not the F word. f*u*c*k , fuck, fuck, fuck.

(They all went back to their drawing for awhile)

boy 1 - Remember when Tommy was teasing you and he dirtied his diapers and we called him bubble blower and bubble brain.

boy 2 - I have a new name for Tommy -- dirty dumb diapers, snot nose.

Tommy - (laugh)

boy 1 - Look at what Tommy's doing.

boy 2 - first he scribbles, then he cuts and cuts and cuts, and then he glues. He's so stupid.

boy 1 - Look at what Tommy did -- piss brains, ass holes.

(A teacher came over and the boys got quiet and did their drawing. Tommy was cutting out his drawing and so were the other kids.)

11:00- 11:15

(The teacher went to another group)

boy 1 - Anus Duck, ass duck -- that's what we'll call him.

boy 2 - Ass brain. Franks, you know frankfurters up his ass.

boy 3 - Another fuck. Know what that means?

boy 4 - Poop, poop, fart, fuck.

boy 1 - Tommy is the fart warrior. Tommy terrorizes everyone in the school so poo on him and not poo in the toilet.

boy 2 - Cutting his picture and saying) I'm not going to cut his anus off. (The two boys saw a fly on the wall and started going over to catch the fly with the scissors and trying to cut the fly..)

boy 2 - Tommy if you come over here one more time I'll cut his anus off.

boy 2 - My picture is on the beach, there are girls in bikinis, one is doing a hula dance.

The boy were getting a bit noisy at this point and the teacher came over and again they got quiet and started to work. Tommy left the group to walk to another group doing a large activity on the floor.

The minute he arrived in the group attention was drawn to Tommy. He was told:

"don't touch the drawing"

"don't get in the way." He was brushed aside.

"Tommy's writing on our paper."

"Get away."

"That's not what you're supposed to do. Stop."

Tommy then kissed Sally. The kids tell Sally to get another kiss. Sally follows Tommy around saying, "Tommy can I have a hug, can I have a kiss, can I have a hug." She repeats this several times.

Tommy says, "I'm going to do my work now." He goes to a table and sits alone and puts his head down. A few minutes later he wets his pants.

I am afraid to show this to Tommy's parents. They will be hurt, sad, probably cry. I cry just thinking about Tommy and how hard he tried to be part of the group and how he got rejected every step of the way.

Who has the behaviour problem here? Surely not Tommy. Tommy's wetting his pants was a logical outcome of his treatment, his rejection. It is to Tommy's immense credit and fortitude that he has tried so hard to "belong".

The other children are not "born that way". It is not in the nature of a child to be mean. These children are simply the products of a world where to be different is to be segregated, shit off, put away with others like you.

These children don't understand Tommy and they have not been allowed to explore their feelings and fears about Tommy. They need to ask why Tommy is different and then come to an understanding that difference is valuable.

This can't be done by lecturing. It can't be bought in an educational kit. It must be done through patient conversation and legitimizing talking about what is not always easy to say. This school says all the right words about individualizing and using child centered curriculum to "maximize and enhance learning." But everyone is afraid to death to talk about what really matters which is who is Tommy, what are his dreams, his fears, his strengths, his needs.

No one dares talk about the untalkable -- that Tommy in really is different, and that he belongs and is part of our "family". We must dare to talk to children about love and what that really means in practice. We must ask the children to help us build and better system.

What worries me is the smug complacency at this school. The priorities seem to be that is important to fix the curriculum, fix Tommy fix the schedule. But what about the environment, what about the deep underlying message we can read so clearly in the words of the children.

A friend of mine commented that the dialogue above was a "jewel" He said it is a message for all of us, a scream fro the heart of children who are afraid, who need help, and who can't understand what is happening around them."

This dialogue is a symptom of a deeply wounded society. It is the cynical conversation of five and six year olds who are talking like a 35 year olds at a bar and mimicing the world around them in a horror and grotesque masquerade of decadent adult life.

Lets say we're not sure how to "cure" this deep spiritual decay and malaise I observed today. Let's say it is important to sit down and build a classroom , a school and world where Tommy can be welcomed.

Tommy will not learn in the environment as it stands today and I would add, neither will most of the children. They will certainly not learn what it means to be loving, just minded or caring people.

Let's say we don't know what to do but that we need and must change this atmosphere of hostility and fear into an environment of acceptance and love. Let's not blame the children for the faults of their elders. Let's not blame Tommy. Let's work together for change.

There are strategies to change this situation, but the school must:

1. face the fact that they have a deep problem
2. name the problem
3. make a commitment to systematically plan a change
4. put that plan of action into effect over a long range of time
i.e. at least one year
5. commitment, funds, time, personnel to make change happen.
Deeds not words.

CONCLUSION

I will show this to Tommy's parents. I trust that they will use the information and do what they have to do.

As a teacher and professional educator I too will do something. I will show this report to the people in power at the school and in the university. I will offer to help. (I will I am sure face their anger and wrath for telling the truth as I heard it verbatim from the mouths of their own students.)

I will commit myself and my work even more so that I do not have to see the pain of a sweet little boy who quietly went to a table alone and wet his pants in protest against his loneliness and his rejection.

I will cry and then I will work even harder so that Tommy, his family and my family can live in a more just world full of diversity, full of difference -- a pure kaleidoscope of humanity.