The importance of peer relationships

BY KATY FATTALEH

So many of our schools offer inclusive programming. Students are fully integrated into their school communities because they are a part of a class roster with typically developing peers and receive portions of their instruction alongside those same peers. They attend assemblies and field trips just like everyone else. They receive the instruction that best suits their needs, upholds their IEPs, and helps them reach their goals. However, social/emotional learning has not been a traditional goal of the inclusion model.

Inclusion in schools is about academics. It's about making sure that students have equal access to the curriculum. What The Nora Project is proposing is a broader view of the term. We agree that inclusion must provide equal access to the curriculum, because ALL kids can learn. It is our duty as educators to create an environment in which students' needs are met. That said, The Nora Project believes that inclusion presents an opportunity that we just aren't seizing - the opportunity to give students equal access to peer relationships.

Take Joey, for example. Joey has autism and is high-functioning. He receives some of his instruction in his homeroom alongside his typically developing classmates, and the remainder in a different room with a special education teacher. Because of this, Joey is frequently transitioning back and forth between classrooms, so he often shows up after a lesson has started, and leaves before it's over. Joey misses out on those unstructured moments with his classmates where they interact with one another naturally. Sometimes, Joey gets overwhelmed and has a meltdown so extreme that his classmates are forced to evacuate the classroom. When this happens, nobody explains to his peers why Joey got upset, and none of them can quite figure out what the trigger was. Nobody has taken the time to explain the Joey has certain triggers at all, or that there are ways to help him feel more comfortable and even-tempered in the classroom. Joey's relationships with his typically developing peers are strained as a result. While they may demonstrate respectful, polite behavior, without fully understanding Joey, his peers are unlikely to engage him in an authentic friendship.

Special Education staff are highly competent individuals who ensure that their students are receiving the best possible education. They work hard to create an inclusive environment. General Education teachers are equally competent, trained individuals, though their training rarely includes instruction about how to create an inclusive environment. They are reliant upon SPED staff to make it happen in their schools, and if we're lucky, they ask a lot of questions and put in the extra effort required to make all kids feel like they are a part of the classroom community. Even when this happens - when staff work together to provide an inclusive environment - they often overlook the social/emotional instruction required to help students develop relationships.

The Nora Project aims to create space to allow students and their peers with disabilities to build and nurture friendships. Students are given the opportunity to learn about one another and about how to support one another's needs. Once students understand each other better, once we break down differences, students can start to focus on what they have in common. The result is authentic, lasting friendships and more inclusive classroom culture. In a Nora Project school, Joey would not only be a part of the classroom community on a surface level. Instead, he and his peers would be given the tools to get to know one another, to understand the other's needs, and to begin to explore what they have in common. Joey would develop relationships with his peers that go beyond the current expectations of inclusion. As students come to know and care about one another, they develop important empathy skills that transform classroom and school culture.

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So, at The Nora Project, we believe that inclusion should be about more than equal access to academic curriculum. To "do inclusion" right, we must broaden our definition, expanding our focus to the culture of classrooms, schools, and districts. Truly inclusive cultures are empathetic, supportive, and values-driven. But to achieve a culture of inclusion, we have to teach our students how to recognize one another's needs and adapt to meet them.