Real People/Real Changes

The Evolution of Amy

Revolutionary Common Sense from Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

At the time of this writing (2003), Amy Morris is a student in a Master's level OT/PT class at the University of Oklahoma, where my Disability is Natural *book is the primary text. It's a "revolutionary" class, in that the PT/OT students are taught to see children with disabilities as children, first, and the focus of the class is ensuring children with disabilities receive the assistance and supports they need to succeed in inclusive environments. To achieve this goal, each student is required to spend time in typical, ordinary environments. The following is an assignment Amy turned in to her professors after observing at a neighborhood daycare center. With Amy's permission, I share it with you, along with Amy's comments from Emails we exchanged after I read her report. Her message gave me so much hope for the future, and I hope it will do the same for you.*

Since the weather was so nice today, the four- year-old class that I observe and the three-year-old class played together outside on the playground for the entire time I was at the daycare. This was the first time I had met the three-year-old class. One child in this class ("TJ") has autism and is five. I was told TJ attends a "developmentally delayed" kindergarten class from 12:30 to 3:30 every day, and the rest of the day (6 AM to 6 PM) he is at the daycare center in the three-year-old class. I asked why he was in this class (since he is five, almost six), and was told, "Because TJ acts like 'a three' and his three-year-old brother is in the same class."

At least five times during the time we were all outside, TJ was told to sit in time-out for "throwing rocks." When he wasn't in time-out, he usually sat underneath the slide, swinging his arms, and spraying small pebbles. When his teacher saw this, she yelled at him, and back he went into time-out (sitting on a ledge by the teachers and myself). When the teacher released him from time-out, he would go back under the slide, and it started all over again. (You get the picture, right?)

For two hours, while all the other children were playing together, TJ interacted with only one child. A little girl ("Tami") walked up to him while he was shaking the fence, gave him a rock, and tried to hug him. (This seemed an appropriate thing to do from Tami's perspective: she saw that TJ enjoyed playing with rocks.) Then TJ covered his ears with his hands and rocked back and forth while Tami stood beside him. The teacher's comment was, "Tami has no idea how to interact appropriately with children. I think she's mentally retarded." And then the teacher turned back to her coworkers and continued the discussion of her plans for the evening.

Kathie Snow would have had a heart attack if she had been there today! I almost did, too. What I observed is in blatant opposition to every single point we have learned in class. TJ is *not* with age-appropriate peers and he isn't given any real opportunities to interact with other children, especially since he spends a third of playtime sitting by the teachers. I'm guessing he has very few "real" people in his inner circles. The teachers have very low expectations of him, and they don't facilitate any opportunities for him to experience learning. I wish I knew what his family life is like. His teacher said he sits in the corner and swings a "Power Ranger" around all day during class time. And she just lets him do this! How sad is this?

I'm appalled that this child is being deprived of so much that he needs and deserves—deprived of having a typical life, something that shouldn't even be questioned. I'm even more appalled that the teachers, and maybe even his parents, don't "get it."

I can't think of another college course that has so fundamentally changed my way of viewing the world. I was an Early Education major for a year and a half, and during the "Educating Exceptional Children" course, my classmates and I learned about disabilities and developmental delays, along with ways to utilize a resource room and an IEP so "these" children can learn "life skills" and "get a job someday" doing some mundane task that no one else would want to do because "they enjoy these types of activities." I can't *believe* I took a class that taught me to look at people as labels and categories, to not even treat them as human beings with feelings and dreams! And I didn't even think twice about it before now. It makes me feel like such a horrible person.

Today, I had to bite my tongue when the daycare teacher said "mentally retarded." I wanted nothing more than to get up on a soapbox and try to open her eyes like mine have been opened over the last month.

I talked to TJ while he sat beside us. In this brief conversation, I learned that he likes computers, his favorite color is green, and he doesn't like to wear his glasses. His teachers have known him for years, but not only did they know *none* of this about TJ, they didn't even believe it was true when I told them.

Children are children, first. I will *never* treat them like they are their disability labels, like they don't have feelings and can't hear you talking about them, and like they don't have desires and preferences. I will make sure that I do all I can to give them the natural opportunities they deserve to learn and develop and express their wants and needs. And I will do all I can to help other people see this, too.

After I received Amy's report, we exchanged Emails, and her insights continued to move me. She wrote:

When I first read your book, the old-fashioned values in which I was so well-versed made me extremely defensive, and I struggled immensely with the material. I didn't want to listen to your message, believing that what you said could never happen in the "real world."

But the more I read, a little voice began to whisper, "Maybe these ideas aren't so crazy after all. Maybe I'm the one who is not being realistic." Then, when I was able to witness truth-in-action that afternoon at the daycare center, I was flooded with emotion. The personal meaning of my experience is truly indescribable—it was akin to learning there was no Santa Claus. I realized that my fundamental value system (and that of so many others) was terribly flawed, but then everything fell into place and made sense to me. It is much more than that, however. Understanding is really only part of the battle. Now I'm moving to the "standing up for what's right" position, and learning to challenge and educate those who still believe in the traditional system, helping others learn that there's a better way, and getting them to follow it.

I commend the challenges that you tackle. Being someone who you have changed, I know that at times you must encounter extreme resistance. I only hope that I am able to be as strong, diligent, and passionate as you, and that my work will someday be as meaningful to others as yours is to me.

In Amy's most recent Email, she reported that her first 8-week internship assignment this fall will be at an inpatient/outpatient "center for children with disabilities." She added, "I know this will be my first true test. I'm excited and scared at the same time."

Amy's work—her words, her passion, and her evolution in thinking—are extraordinarily meaningful to me, as I hope they are to you. I am filled with great hope: as a new generation of professionals who "think differently" enters the field, the lives of children with disabilities—those living today and those not yet born—will be filled with opportunities to succeed as children, first. My thanks to Amy for allowing me to share her story with others.