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Seidman: Teach to Sarasota students' potential, not deficits

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News that the Sarasota County School District had inappropriately placed a student with learning disabilities and an average IQ into a specialized curriculum intended for those with severe cognitive limitations — and let him linger there for years before abruptly returning him to mainstream classes — was any parent's worst nightmare.

A judge's ruling that the district had denied "DJ" a "free and appropriate public education," was a victory for special education advocates, who believed this student (and others as well) was transferred into the program to avoid the consequences of a low-scoring student taking state tests and bringing down school scores.

The situation left me angry, but also counting my blessings. Because my son might well have suffered a similar fate.

At the age when "DJ" was placed in the Access Points program — where he spent six years thinking he was an academic overachiever because so little was asked of him — my son's learning disabilities were starting to surface. I fought to keep him in a regular classroom until middle school, when district officials overseeing his Albuquerque, New Mexico school decided he was a "better fit" for a program designed for the hearing impaired that would transfer him away from our neighborhood school.

My son did have a mild auditory impairment, but quite honestly, that was the least of his problems. A diagnosed processing disorder had more to do with his academic struggles than his hearing, which was fully corrected with aids. Nevertheless, because his learning deficits did not fall under one familiar label — not ADHD, not autism, not Downs — district officials decided to latch on to the one diagnosis they could quantify. In sixth grade, he was bused across town to a program for students who were not only hearing impaired but, in many cases, completely deaf.

Need I say it was a disaster? Separated from everyone and everything he'd known, my son was placed in a classroom with students who were part of a completely foreign culture, most of whom knew sign language (he did not). Though what was expected of him academically

was less than what he was capable of, his grades fell as his social and emotional health deteriorated. After a year, I pitched a fit and got him transferred back to our neighborhood middle school.

That year away proved hard to redeem. Not only had he missed exposure to the mainstream curriculum, he'd been absent during a key transitional time in adolescent development. Until he graduated from high school six years later — not at the top of his class, but not at the bottom either — he remained a loner and socially isolated.

My son lost a year; “DJ” lost six. That is a tragedy, quite possibly a life-altering one. According to reporting by my colleague Ryan McKinnon, the precipitous plunge back into a mainstream classes caused “DJ” to become severely depressed, even suicidal, and exposed him to extreme bullying — not to mention what it may have done to keep him from reaching his full academic potential.

As a parent and a former teacher (of ballet and after-school programs), I've learned that, with sufficient guidance, support and encouragement, children of all abilities can frequently exceed the “realistic” expectations we set for them. It can be a delicate balance to set the bar high enough to provide challenge rather than frustration, yet not so low as to dull ambition or interest. But every child deserves that opportunity to reach beyond his or her grasp.

My son was late on almost every major developmental milestone. Would it have been easier to settle for what he could do rather than push him out of his comfort zone? Of course. But instead of acceding that some things would never be within his capacity, I chose instead to let him know I believed in his ability to do more. And ultimately, he exceeded the limitations others had predicted for him. And pleasantly surprised his mother as well.

True satisfaction and achievement come from hitting a goal you weren't entirely sure you could ever reach. It delivers a boost of confidence that becomes a catalyst to push even harder. It's why we should be teaching with an eye to students' unlimited potential rather than their deficits, so as not to risk, even inadvertently, imposing restrictions.

In one of the more devastating acts of bullying “DJ” suffered after being returned to mainstream classes, a classmate picked him up and stuffed him into a trash can, then posted a video on the incident on social media, alarming district officials.

But maybe they shouldn't have been so shocked. Metaphorically speaking, anyway, it wasn't all that different from what they had done to him.

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