

Why Am I Here?

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He reluctantly walked into the room, eyes on the floor, hands stuffed into his pockets. Slumping down in his chair, huddling inside his jacket, he put his head down on his desk.

She ran into the room pushing everyone out of her way. Taking off her jacket she flung it on the floor and flopped down in her seat, knocking her books onto the floor.

When I taught a class of children labeled “perceptually handicapped” I knew many methods for teaching reading to children with reading problems, writing to children with writing problems, and arithmetic to children with arithmetic problems. What I didn’t know was that these methods wouldn’t work with children who were too discouraged to learn. The children lacked faith in their own ability to be competent individuals. When I realized how discouraged they were, it was obvious that I had to convince the children (who ranged in age from 6 to 10 years) that they could learn that they were not failures as people.

Most people have choice of when and to what degree their imperfections are shown to the world. Because of observable differences and the tendency of our educational system to label, handicapped children have the choice denied them. Under these conditions discouragement comes easily to handicapped children. They need to be bombarded with encouragement in order to develop their potential as competent, responsible individuals. Handicapped children need to be inoculated with “the courage to be imperfect” (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 38). An encouragement program (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963); encompassing the components of placing value on people as they are, teaching responsibility, integrating into the group, using cross-age helpers, and accepting feelings; can help handicapped children develop into confident, responsible, learning students.

Placing Value On People As They Are

Most children have a period of adjustment when they enter a new classroom or school. The children in my class all came from schools outside

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the local area and faced the task of adjusting to a new school as well as a new type of classroom setting. None of the eight children really understood why they were being bussed to a school different from the one their siblings and peers attended.

I began the school year by explaining the meaning of handicap to the children. We talked about ways in which things and people are different. Apples are different from oranges, hot dogs are different from hamburgers, dogs are different from cats, boys are different from girls, and each person is different from every other person.

We looked at each other and discovered that we had different color hair, different color eyes, and different color skin. We also discovered that we were different sizes and shapes and even that we had different skills. Everybody was good at something (even if it was smiling) and everyone had difficulty with something. I had difficulty singing on key. Tomi had difficulty talking well. Rob had difficulty writing well. We talked about having strengths and weaknesses and that in spite of them we could still be cooperative, happy, friendly, and responsible people.

Teaching Responsibility

I placed a great deal of emphasis on giving responsibility to the students. Whenever possible children were given a choice in deciding what they would do. This helped them learn to make decisions and develop a sense of responsibility. Children were given choices regarding their behavior, such as; "You can stay with the group if you listen to the other students or you can go to your seat and work alone." This way the students began to accept responsibility for their own behavior rather than have the responsibility rest solely with the teacher.

Each day every child was responsible for choosing one assignment and completing it. Each child was responsible for taking homework home and returning it completed and for bringing lunch or lunch money to school (I had to work hard to convince parents that these tasks were the children's responsibility not the parents' responsibility). I expected the children to be able to make decisions for themselves and to take responsibility for their daily needs.

To achieve this goal I requested that parents designate a place where the student could place the things he/she would need ready for school the next morning. If a student were to come to school unprepared, the class and I had decided on the appropriate consequence for that event. For example, if a student were to come to school without a pencil he/she could not do work that required a pencil unless someone would lend him/her one. Often the student would have to give (temporarily) something of his/hers in exchange for the pencil—a shoe or a jacket.

Homework was a privilege. It was only given to those students who were responsible enough to do homework and return it, and who had done their work in class. Forgetting homework resulted in no more homework being assigned until the forgotten homework was completed and turned in.

Integrating Into The Group

As the year progressed, we re-evaluated our strengths and weaknesses and saw them change. We learned not to make fun and laugh at people when they made mistakes because mistakes are the opportunity to try again. We learned that we all had some important contributions to make. Children were encouraged for working on difficult tasks, for making an effort, for trying, not just for successfully completing tasks.

Using Cross-Age Helpers

Acceptance is important for all students. Students with learning disabilities have additional difficulties being accepted by peers, especially when they are placed in a self-contained classroom. To break down the barriers which existed between our classroom and the rest of the school we invited the 4th grade across the hall to send one or two students to visit our class each day and work with us. This was a modification of the cross-age-helper program (Lippitt, Eiseman & Lippitt, 1969). We became so popular that the 4th grade class had to establish a schedule so that everyone in the class could visit. (We became popular with the teacher too who now had a way to give some of her poorer students extra skill development by letting them work with us during their visits.)

Accepting Feelings

Throughout the year we took time to talk about ourselves, our interests, concerns, and feelings. Pictures from magazines were used by the children to make up stories about feelings and differences. The pictures were also used to illustrate books that the children wrote (or dictated and I recorded).

The dittoed books contained sentences such as:

I get angry when (I can't write on the line)

I feel happy when (I finished my work)

I wish I could (Learn quicker)

I get sad when.

My mother

My father

My teacher

My sister (brother)

If I could do anything I wanted to I would

School is

Having The Courage To Be Imperfect

Slowly, over the course of the year, the children began to enjoy school and take pride in themselves and their work. I knew we had achieved a modicum of success when the children consented to appear before the PTA Study Group in order to explain our class to parents, demonstrate some of the special techniques we used for learning, and explain why they were in the class. I introduced them by saying that our class was for people who had difficulty learning. Some of them see things differently than most people, some of them hear things differently than most people, and some just have trouble learning. The children then told why they were in a class for the perceptually handicapped:

Ken (age 10): "To get smart and learn—to get help—I can't get some things—this class help me with work."

Tomi (age 10): "Learning how to talk—sometimes you voice get loud and small—sometimes I not know what a good sentence."

Lori (age 9): "Cause at Abbot I was afraid, I'd cry at school"

Louise (age 9): "We're here to know how to read and do writing. Didn't know how to write fancy in first grade—get mixed up—don't do arithmetic kinda good."

Roger (age 10): "To learn to count—mixed up on words."

Tanya (age 9): "I don't know—didn't know how to do words in kindergarten."

Regen (age 9): "Learn better when talk. Write things come out on wrong side."

Judi (age 6): "Other school got in trouble for doing wrong things. Easier to learn when people say things—we're all people—different people have different faces and all that—different skin, act differently—do things differently all of us have different hair."

These children had come a long way toward accepting their strengths, their weaknesses, and themselves. They no longer had completely negative views of themselves, and yet they were aware of their special problems. They had the strength to admit to their handicaps and work on accepting them rather than view handicaps as disgraces which had to be denied and hidden.

Learning is enhanced when children have a feeling of belonging, a sense of their own self-worth, and socially acceptable goals. Children need to be encouraged rather than discouraged and to be responsible for their own behavior. Handicapped children have a more challenging task achieving this positive view of themselves than do most children. Without a good self-concept their already limited functioning may be reduced even more. In place of feelings of discouragement they need to develop courage. The courage to strive and sometimes fail, but the courage to keep on trying and setting new goals.

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