

## Listening carefully for inclusion: A principal's awakening

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This article is a reflective piece of learning in process and what it means to be a principal of all children. The narrative is an extension from the doctoral work I completed at the University of Alberta entitled "A Narrative Inquiry into Mothers' Experiences of Securing Inclusive Education" (Raymond, 2002). This research inquiry facilitated the composition of parents' efforts for securing inclusive education for their children with disabilities. Through this work I was awakened to the resistance parents' encounter and the complexities of understanding what is best for children with disabilities from a parental perspective. Upon completion of the doctorate I returned to my school district in a principal position. As an educator I wished to work in a school that welcomed all children and to seek ways to engage in caring and supportive relationships with parents to meet all students' needs.

Upon returning to the school landscape as a principal, I had come to understand the stories of the mothers in my research resided within me and I felt a responsibility to hold them dearly. Lopez's (1990) storybook "Crow and Weasel" speaks to the sense of responsibility I felt. In his book, two characters, Crow and Weasel, set out on a journey. Along the way they discover their spiritual relationship to the land, learn respect for others' traditions and learn responsibility to one another. On their journey they meet Badger who tells them

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. One day you will be good storytellers. Never forget these obligations. (p. 48)

As I listened to the mothers' narratives and reflected upon how I make meaning of these narratives and their affects on my journey as an educator, I was awakened to how I must take care of these stories and my obligation to tell their stories of inclusion. The mothers' narratives helped me to further construct my responsibilities as an educator to respond positively to parental requests for inclusive education for their children. As Lopez says, these stories had helped me to stay alive, to care for myself as I continue to find my place on the school landscape in creating inclusive schools. This restored knowing resided within me as I returned to the school landscape positioned as school principal.

I wondered as I returned how I would live in changed ways? How would this knowing be experienced in my shifted position as school principal? How would this knowing bump up against the social narrative of the institution that I returned to? How would I create spaces for parents of children with developmental disabilities, parents whose stories might resonate with the mothers' stories I carried with me?

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### Stories to Live and Work By

I encountered, earlier than I thought in my role as principal, an understanding of how the mothers' stories would shift my response to the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities. Weeks before school was to start, I learned about a student with a developmental disability who might, potentially, attend my school. The student was to attend a special education class the upcoming school year. However, her parent had not filled out the necessary papers to secure the placement and had, as a consequence, forfeited the place in the special education classroom. The principal of the school where the child had been directed, called to alert me of the matter. The student resided in my school residency area. The principal of the other school pointed out it would now be my responsibility to secure a placement for this child as the school district policy stated. In the mean time, I would be required to provide a spot at the neighbourhood school until a special education placement could be located. The neighbourhood school was seen as a place of waiting, not a place of being for this child. I had yet to meet the child or her parent. I knew only that she was disabled and her parent was now being directed to speak with me to assist her to secure a school placement for her child.

On the school landscape, placement decisions for students with disabilities are constructed from the authority of professional knowledge (Day & Pennington, 1993; Eraut, 1994; Hargreaves, 1999; McNamara & Slingsby, 1993; Mercer, 1995; Russell, 1993; Williams, 1998). This paradigmatic professional knowledge of student placement decisions is based on a theoretical perspective within the culture of professionalism. It creates and maintains professional authority and contributes to the separation between professionals and their clients in determining decisions of school placement.

I did not wish to use my professional knowledge based on theoretical perspectives within the culture of my profession to create and maintain expert authority. I wanted to develop relational knowledge of this child and seek this parent's personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) of her child to determine how to help this mother secure an option that reflected her vision of what education should look like for her daughter. Holding the mothers' narratives I had collected for my dissertation in my mind and body, knowing they would want me to have relational knowing to understand the plotline this parent wished for her child, I waited to hear her desires. I wished to share authority (Oyler & Becker, 1997) with this mother in deciding what her child's education placement would be.

I waited in anticipation for this family to appear. Prior to their arrival, the school secretary informed me the child with the developmental disability had siblings attending our school and the child with the disability had been at our school last year and had been sent to a special education class, at another school, mid year. I began to know a story of this family before they knew a story of me. I heard how they were storied and saw the gaze of others questioning this parent's motives. I wondered, "What was this mother's story?" "Why had she not filled out the forms to secure the special education placement for her daughter?" I knew the parent had a story. I wanted to listen to her request for her child's school placement, to discover her story as new. I did not want to hear this mother's story through the gaze of others. I wished to hear her story.

It was days before I finally met the family. The mother came the day before school was to start with three children in tow. She said she wanted to register her daughter who attended a different school last year. The mother made no reference to her child's disability, although upon meeting her it was apparent her daughter had a developmental disability. I sensed the mother's urgency and apprehension as she asked to register her child at our school. I invited the mother to sit in my office and told her about the call from the principal from the school where her daughter was to attend this fall. I told her the placement had been forfeited. The mother responded, in a matter of fact way, that she wanted all her children to attend the same school. She did not use the word "inclusion". She just quietly said she wanted to register her daughter here because her other children attended this school.

The power of this mother's convictions as she sat in my office, the urgency I heard in her voice, the tentativeness of the response she thought she may get from a stranger, transported me to a world where hearing parents' stories matters. I knew I must take care of her story. The power of her personal practical knowledge of what was right for her daughter was clear. The few words of her narrative captured the emotional struggle embodied in her words. I responded unequivocally that her daughter would be granted the opportunity to attend school with her siblings. I would not seek an alternative placement because this is not what she wanted. As Lopez reminds me, stories care for me, my research participants' stories provided me the substance to respond to this parent.

I knew the hierarchy of status and the place of privilege of principal on the landscape of schools. I responded to this parent from a different plotline, not from the traditional place of professionals who control educational decision-making. My response provided this parent a space for her voice in the dialogue in her child's education. But I knew I held the balance of power in allowing her to shape her child's educational experience. I wanted to work to create a different place, a place of shared authority. I sat with this mother, and hearing her narrative, I believed the neighbourhood school was the right destination for this child.

### **Supporting the Child's Inclusion**

A principal's attention to the supports needed for the successful inclusion of children with developmental disabilities is important for the success of a child's inclusion. I needed to address appropriate supports to ensure this student succeeded. As I talked with the parent, I told her we would work to develop a modified program to best meet her daughter's needs and that I would need to seek support for the teachers and provide adequate assistance for the child. This was my responsibility. However, I felt it was necessary to share with the mother what needed to be in place to support both her daughter and her daughter's teachers to ensure a successful year.

Being new and unaware of the school staffs' skills and abilities, I pondered how I would respond to the matter of support for the teacher and assistance for this student. This was an evolving process working with the teacher on a weekly basis to hear her concerns, seek resolutions and gather the supports needed to help the student be successful.

The teacher questioned, two weeks into the school year, if a special education placement was being sought for this student. The professional gaze constructed a story that a segregated special education program would be best for this child. The story of inclusion is a competing story on the school landscape. It is not the dominant story. As teachers, we have learned to live in, and to feel comfortable, in the plotline where children with developmental disabilities are best taught in segregated settings. In my need for others to hear, and validate as knowledge, parents' personal practical knowledge of their children, I worked to invite the teacher to enter a conversation that shifted the dominant story of segregation. As time passed and supports were put into place, it was exhilarating to watch this teacher support this student, to understand a new possibility for who she, as classroom teacher, can be for all her students in an inclusive classroom.

### **Fragility of Inclusion**

I knew the support for this child's inclusion was still tenuous. As the principal, I needed to keep a watchful eye on this student's inclusion. A child's inclusion is not about one year but about twelve years and beyond. The inclusion of this student was not only for this student but for other students too. This student's inclusion was a chance to change the dominant social narrative of segregation for her and other students.

It was imperative as the principal that I continue to respond with care to both the family and the teaching staff to ensure this student and future students' success. Changing a dominant social narrative is difficult. Restorying is a challenge. I was obliged to help the teachers at our school see new possibilities for this student and others in an inclusive environment.

There will be a need for a story of transition to be constructed as this student moves to the next grade. As the school principal, I am mindful of the comments of teacher colleagues as they explore their feelings of what inclusion is all about as this student moves from grade to grade. It is necessary to attend to questions of doubt and respond whenever there is a need. Signs of questioning are there. It is important not to avoid them but to work with the classroom teacher to figure out positive way to ensure for the student with the disability learns alongside her classmates. In response to teachers' concerns, I tell stories to advocate for why this student is best served in her neighbourhood school.

The narratives of mothers that I have heard have highlighted the barriers families face year-to-year, school-to-school in securing and maintaining an inclusive education and have made me aware of how fragile inclusion is for children with developmental disabilities. Who the principal is and her story to live by are important in the success of inclusion. There will be many obstacles along the way for this child and her family. Always present on the horizon is the dominant social narrative of segregated education. I worry. This parent lives in a low income community and her child attends an inner-city school. I am aware of the rhetoric of equality and the reality of domination that occurs within the process of institutional policies and practices that this family will face in the next twelve years. This child's inclusion is not safe. This child's family's social and economic arrangements create a greater disproportionate distribution of power and resources (Fine, 1987). I need to be thoughtful about who I am as principal, being sensitive to barriers and needing to create space for this mother and others to work through the barriers they may encounter as their children progress through their school years.

### Remaining Awakened to Parents' Desires for Their Children

This mother's story has come to me. I must never forget my responsibility to take care of it alongside the other parents' stories in my role as principal. On the school landscape I must continue to be open to listening to parents and what they desire for their children allowing this listening to further shape my actions as a principal to support all children. This awakening has helped me to understand my role in creating a school that welcomes parental knowledge in shaping their children's education. My role is to create a welcoming place for all children no matter what their abilities and to do this through building genuine relationships with their parents to strengthen the school community.

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