Abilities
by Lynn Zaritsky

This is a true story about Bob, a 14 year-old young man with cerebral palsy, as told by Dr. Richard Villa, one of the country’s foremost authorities on inclusive education. When Bob’s new foster parents brought him home, they enrolled him in their local junior high school, and Villa got busy.

The word “inclusion” can strike terror into the hearts of educators and parents alike who do not fully understand it. Students with various disabilities are sometimes “dumped” into classrooms without the teachers or the other students having been given any direction or support whatsoever. But Bob’s school became educated in the true meaning of inclusion.

It started before Bob even entered the doors. A videotape of Bob was shown to every class in the school and, from the beginning, students were asked for their participation, ideas and feedback. A team was then formed. The usual specialists were invited, but so were Bob and some peers. First discussed were Bob’s strengths. Though they had never before met, it was evident to his peers that, though non-verbal, Bob was very friendly. “Great smile” went up on his list of strengths. His foster parents added “loves music.”

Bob’s goals were discussed. He needed to work on “tracking,” or visually following a moving object. A teacher famous for his animated teaching and pacing around the classroom was assigned as his math teacher -

Bob would track this teacher. The peers decided “being cool” was a goal they thought he would want, so they cued the foster parents on cool clothes and accessories, and arranged to meet him daily at his bus, taking him with them to hang out together before school. Other goals were considered - learning to activate a switch so eventually he could independently operate various assistive technology; vocalizing, as a movement towards speech; coordination movement and broadening range of motion.

Roles changed. Students became innovators and teachers. Teachers, professionals and para-professionals developed new skills in meeting Bob’s needs.

Bob just didn’t sit in each class-

room, surrounded by his peers - he became one of his peers. At the beginning of each class, the students would take no more than five minutes to creatively brainstorm how Bob could be included in the day’s lesson, while simultaneously meeting both their educational goals and his. When frog anatomy was studied in biology, the class decided that Bob’s group would dissect their frog on his wheelchair tray. He squealed like everyone else when the frog parts were held up in front of his face - his goal of vocalizing was easily met that day.

When Bob’s homeroom teacher told the class they could listen to music for ten minutes each day if they could get him to operate a switch, both Bob and his peers were rewarded when he flipped the switch that turned on the music. In PE, Bob became the “designated runner.” When his partner hit the ball, he would then grab Bob’s wheelchair and race him around the bases, accompanied by the music of Bob’s laughter. When his math teacher taught about the geometry of a circle, Bob’s wheelchair tires became practical lessons.

Bob became popular. Kids began to hang out at his home after school and one of the cheerleaders invited him to the Halloween dance. The second year after his placement in this school, Bob died suddenly. An entire busload of children from his school attended the funeral to mourn the loss of a good friend.

Bob never walked. He never talked. Yet he was a master teacher of creativity and problem solving, and spoke volumes on the worth of a human being. Because of the opportunity for true inclusive education, Bob was valued for who he was, positively involved in the lives of others and deeply loved.

Maybe it’s time to really understand and implement inclusive education, not just because it’s the law, but because everyone benefits so richly.

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