

Stranger and Stranger in a Strange Land: Living overseas and how it has influenced my understanding of students with “special needs”

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ABSTRACT

This is a series of light-hearted reflections from a person who has worked in special education her entire career. After moving from the United States to New Zealand, she uses her experience adjusting to her new country, to better understand the perspectives of the children and young people with whom she works.

Practice paper

KEYWORDS

Communication skills, social interaction, cultural differences, life skills.

Having worked with students in special education in various capacities over the years, I believed I had a fairly good understanding of what life was like from the other side of the Individual Education Plan. The truth is, I had no idea. I was an educational psychologist in the United States, where being American is quite normal. I considered myself typical, without ever giving it much thought.

That all changed when I moved to Wanganui, New Zealand.

This article is written for those of you who want to take a moment to reflect on your relationships with students who have “special needs”. I write because I believe that each of us has had personal experiences where we were disabled. By taking from these events and the empathy they provide us with, we can bridge the gaps between people and their differences.

From my own experiences I now understand how much of being “handicapped” is often the particular set of circumstances we are asked to function in. I could be considered perfectly fine in one situation and disabled in another. Nothing in me changed when I got off the plane, but I have been treated differently ever since. My primary disability, if you will, is my accent. It is the first thing that people notice, the jumping off point for assumptions of how much I know or don't know, and the predictor of how well I will be accepted into various folds.

If a person has had a close friend with an accent, they are more comfortable with me and we quickly move beyond what separates us to discover our common ground. However, if someone has had a bad experience with someone like me, they are less likely to have anything to do with me. I had not experienced this before: being treated according to the category I had been put into. People would dance around

that category, asking me if I was a Canadian first to make sure they didn't offend. (Honestly, I had no idea that I was in a category that might be offensive!)

Just like many children, trying to succeed in a new setting, I perfected my use of survival strategies. I would nod and smile, pretending I understood, because I did not want to look stupid. I repeated bits of phrases (“Ah, yes ... chockablock”) to keep the flow of conversation. In no way did this mean that I understood what had been said. Looking back, similar to some of our students, I believe I comprehended three to four words in every sentence. Terms that I had not come across before threw the rest of the conversation out of comprehension. Is ‘chuffed’ a good or bad thing? What about ‘gobsmacked’ and ‘knackered’? I relied on gestures and visuals, and the general context of discussions. I asked that everything be written down. How embarrassing when I'd say, “I'm sorry, could you spell that?” and got, “Sure: B-e-n.” I now listen to National Radio; now that I understand what people are saying, that is. In the beginning, between all the unfamiliar cities, political figures and sport icons, I did not have enough prior knowledge to even begin to learn.

I wished that people would check for my understanding: have me paraphrase what they had said to confirm that I knew what I was expected to do. Draw me a picture, model the steps, anything. Sometimes I thought it would have been easier to move to China, where it would be that much more obvious that I was from a different culture. Here, I am also from an English-speaking land, and assumptions are made about what I do and don't know. (How many times have I done the same thing, not getting to know Billy the child and person, because I know so much about autism?)

I have always believed in the importance of life skills for students with disabilities, but never more than when I needed them myself. You see, because I was a new resident of New Zealand, Kiwis were more than happy to fill me in on their culture. Unfortunately, they started with things like the history of New Zealand, the current political structure, and the geography of the South Island. What I really needed was: what do I wear to work? Where can we buy groceries? How do I drive on the other side of the road? How do I set up a bank account, and how in the world do I reply when people say, “EFTPOS?” Is the green money worth more than the red? Do I need to tip in restaurants? Who can I say “Bugger” in front of?

When people didn't help me with these things, it was only because they ... assumed. First off, I look like everyone else. Sometimes this worked in my favour, as I could sneak through with the others, drawing little attention to myself. Sometimes this was a disadvantage, when people forgot to accommodate me because they had forgotten that I had "special needs". I cannot tell you how many meetings I have shown up at the wrong time or on the wrong day, because I thought that half three meant 2:30, or that 'Tuesday a week' was in two days instead of nine. Or the time I did bring a plate ... instead of bringing a dish to share.

I have also discovered how difficult it is to have differences that are immediately obvious. In my case, as soon as I open my mouth. People make assumptions the minute that I sound different – of what I know and how well I can relate to their situation. The challenge is to keep their belief in me from affecting my belief in myself.

A colleague shared a story with me of how her accent impacted her work. In her office, people could not distinguish between her "Murray" and her "Marie", which made it difficult since one of each worked in the same building. Similar to a child undergoing speech therapy, she had to relearn her pronunciation of each, in order to communicate more effectively in her new environment. She had not known she had a problem until others needed her to change. I wonder how many of the students we work with have experienced this.

I have talked to many teachers about the 'invisible curriculum', the set of social and behavioural rules that some of us pick up with ease and others miss completely. This too came alive for me when I was living in a new country. I know, for example, that I have been perceived as rude, brusque, forgetful, pushy, and disrespectful. What I am not so sure of is when or how. When I make these mistakes, please do not see them as behaviour problems or personality traits of mine, or all others like me. I honestly misunderstand the expectations in the environment. Please use these moments as teaching opportunities – do not assume that I am pick up your culture incidentally.

Like a student diagnosed with autism, I am often working twice as hard each day, doing the same learning as my peers, as well as trying to make sense of social norms and unspoken rules. I am fortunate to be fully mainstreamed, as it were. My learning has come that much faster with the constant modelling of high functioning Kiwis.

I've moved again, this time to Nelson. And I've had to adjust again. You see, in Wanganui, there weren't many Americans, so I was treated as a bit of a novelty. In Nelson, Americans are notorious for buying up real estate. So, opinion of me changes again, based on a second label connected to the first one, which I swear does not fit: rich. Perhaps this is similar to the child with a disability who comes with loads of funding and is accepted wholeheartedly into the school. Later when she moves into a decile 10 school, that has limited funding to support her, everyone really wishes she would go somewhere else.

I ask each of you to take a moment to draw on some of your own experiences. Whether it was a trip overseas or a point in your life when you were so stressed that you had word-finding difficulties. At one time or another, we have all been labelled, whether we believed that label applied to us or not. Let these experiences show you that we are all humans, struggling in one way or another. People do not really have "special needs". They have the very same needs as the rest of us – to experience love, acceptance, success – and we have only to figure out the ways to meet those needs. In them, in all of us.

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