

Life in Room 506, the Sequel or All That, And Compassion Too

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For a while, I have to admit, we felt like celebrities. In my New York Times-centric universe, I assumed that everyone in the entire world had read the magazine cover story on Thomas Ellenson and the immersion class in Room 506. When people asked me where our youngest daughter, Lena, was attending kindergarten, I'd say, "She's at Manhattan School for Children...(wink, wink)...You know...(nudge, nudge)...the famous class...the one in the Times.

Though I'd sometimes encounter blank stares, I was still delighted with our placement. One person at work whose child attends a private school glanced over her reading glasses one morning and with apparent concern, asked me if Lena was going to be "okay" in this class. It confused me since it seemed to me we had been really fortunate. For starters, the class size rivals those at private schools, 219 children, with now fewer than six adults in the room at any given moment, including three paraprofessionals assigned to each of the children in wheelchairs.

But my colleague's question was not so strange. Mimi Little's son Jonathan is in Lena's class, and her daughter Somer is in the first grade immersion class. Mimi admits that at the very beginning when she walked into Somer's kindergarten immersion class last year, she was worried about how it would affect her daughter. Those concerns have now withered away. "My kids brag about being in an immersion class," she told me over coffee one day. "They compete over how many wheelchairs there are in their class." Mimi secretly envies her kids. Like most of us, she went to schools where children with obvious disabilities were separate and invisible, an arrangement that can consign us to a lifetime of discomfort around people who are different.

Lena didn't have any preconceptions about kindergarten. Despite not knowing a soul at the outset of the school year, she quickly adjusted and became a thoroughly happy camper. She came home from school bursting with stories of gadgetry and classmates. There were different wheelchairs for indoor and outdoor use, special seats and a computer that helps one child, who is non-verbal as well as non-ambulatory, communicate. The fact that her partner was a boy with CP made Lena feel like she had won the lottery. He was, alas, frequently absent in the early days while his bussing situation was ironed out, which only served to endow him with ever more mythic status in Room 506. Meanwhile, Lena's teachers, Mia and Lisa, told me that Lena had already displayed an unusual degree of compassion. I suspected that the same words might have been uttered to many other parents in the class, but still, if there is a higher compliment about a kindergartener, I'm unaware of it. One day early on, Lena asked if her classmates/friends who had special equipment would someday be able to walk and talk like other children. My answer clearly saddened her, slightly shifting her conception of the universe.

In those early days, I felt I would have been content if all Lena learned about in her kindergarten year was acceptance and a deeper understanding of the diversity of people. It's more than a lot of us learned. As my husband is fond of saying, his curriculum in kindergarten consisted of blocks and stomach fights. But kindergarten is not what it used to be; the pressure is on, and people expect more. Sure, social development is important, but there are those citywide tests down the road and a metropolis full of high-achieving kids to compete with. Although many people say reading need not start early for all children, if it's not falling into place by first grade, teachers and parents start to worry.

I have always loved Manhattan School for Children's approach to education, its appreciation of literature, ability to pique young curiosity and its concept of a diverse community of learners. Lena's older sister went to school here in kindergarten and first grade, until we made the painful decision that her learning style was better suited for something smaller and more structured. But while she was here, I generally felt that her homework assignments, projects, and classroom work were consistently thought-provoking and showed a kind of nimbleness on the part of her teachers that I valued deeply. Somehow, despite the numbers, the bright teachers at MSC I encountered seemed able to respond to children as individuals, reaching them at whatever particular level they happened to be temporarily parked on. In fact, they made it look easy.

That skill and flexibility is evident in Lena's teachers. The wheelchairs and gadgets and friends who speak, travel, and learn differently are an integrated part of the whole landscape of the class, but they are not the curriculum. The curriculum is reading, writing, stories, graphing, vegetable gardens, and Taiko drums, in a normal and interesting kindergarten class that seems to me to be challenging every child on his or her level. Every sense is involved, every portal of access to these little sponge-like brains, an approach that benefits and enriches every child. Lena stands at the cusp of reading. She is sounding things out, spelling words, recording thoughts in her diary, and counting to 100 in various ways. Every day she is moving ahead-taking time out to hug the paras, or rub her classmate's head-all with the obvious support and love of her classmates and teachers. Famous or not, I think she is one little girl.

