Finding Our Why

Meeting Raj in first grade, his passion for learning was so evident—he was filled with curiosity about the world around him. His dinosaur knowledge was encyclopedic, and he had never seen a Lego set that he couldn't assemble to perfection. Raj spent most of his day in a small supported classroom for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), working to develop the social and executive functioning skills that were elusive to him and that created barriers to his interactions with others. Our goal was always to have him spend more time in the general education classroom when he was ready. We surrounded Raj with adults and carefully controlled the variables in his environment, trying to teach him these skills in a context that was wholly different from the cheerful hubbub of a typical first-grade classroom. The academic expectations in this specialized setting were predictable but in no way rigorous, emphasizing rote skills and fluency rather than application and comprehension. We would have Raj join, or more accurately visit, the typical first-grade classroom for a small portion of each day.

Raj's difficulties with social interactions and his need to make sense of his sensory world in unique ways contributed to daily evidence that he "wasn't ready" to be in general education. Raj and his first-grade classmates learned this message and internalized it.

Raj developed a deep sense of being a visitor in that classroom. He did not feel that he truly belonged in that community. He would often be taken back to the special classroom sooner the more pronounced his behaviors became. Without intending to, we had created a cycle that reinforced the very behaviors that we said we were working to change. A sense of belonging is in many ways the deepest human need. Raj felt that sense of belonging in a small segregated classroom with many adults, and if vocalizing in unusual ways helped him get back to that place, then that is what he would do.

At the same time, the classroom teacher and other students were learning the message that Raj was a classroom visitor. He wasn't *really* part of the class. His name was not on the first-grade teacher's attendance list. When he showed up, he sat at a table in the back of the room instead of having a desk like everyone else.

He wasn't part of the frequent child-to-child negotiations that happen among first graders on the playground. Rather, Raj came into the class in orchestrated ways—with adults always near him—being given different tasks rather than reading books like the other students during reading time. Even though we may have made explicit statements about Raj being part of the class, the message was clear to the teachers and students that Raj was a visitor rather than a true community member. This message led to an implicit lack of ownership in his education from the classroom teacher. The teacher was aware of Raj's learning differences far more than all the sameness that he shared with first graders everywhere. And if the adults don't behave in a way that clearly communicates that "Raj belongs," how can we expect the children to not embody the implicit or explicit "othering"?

We thought about Raj and other students in similar situations, with so many adults working to teach skills first in a separate setting and then have those students gradually earn their way into general education classrooms. We realized it almost never happened. Students educated in special (segregated) classrooms, grouped with other children with similar learning challenges, did not move on to general education classrooms. Almost all students in these classrooms maintained a parallel educational track through their public school career. This parallel track was separate and clearly not equal, in terms of richness of academic curriculum and diversity of social experiences. This parallel track came at a great cost to the culture of the school as a whole. In an age where educators are, rightfully, thinking deeply about how to interrupt patterns of inequity and eliminate bullying behaviors in schools, we needed to take a long hard look at ourselves and our actions. If we want students to value diversity, deepen understanding of differences, and develop qualities such as empathy and compassion, how can we continue to draw lines between who belongs and who doesn't?

We realized that it was time to examine our beliefs and assumptions, time to think and act differently. We knew it would not be easy or smooth and that we would be incredibly imperfect in the journey. Yet we knew it was the right thing to do. We knew we would continue to have individualized schedules and supports—not a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion. When your starting point is that everyone is *in*, everything changes. This book is about that journey: what we have learned, where we have stumbled, and what we are still questioning. But when our basic paradigm shifted to truly believing that all children belong, we knew our journey was the right one.

> When your starting point is that everyone is *in*, everything changes.

As for Raj, his trajectory changed as we lived into our model of inclusive practices, eliminating self-contained programs and educating all students in general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools. We saw him six years later when we were visiting a language arts classroom in one of our middle schools. The class was sitting in small groups, three or four students to a table. The teacher introduced an activity to help

the students dig deeply into a novel. The activity involved some elements of a game, some visual and textual supports, and academic discourse between students. When we had selected that class to visit, we hadn't known that Raj was in that class—and he certainly didn't stand out when we entered the room. He was working at his table group with his peers, carefully following the rules of the game, referring to some of the visual supports as needed, fully engaged in the academic conversation. When his peers started to engage in a side conversation, he reminded them of the task at hand. The peers sighed, as one might from a reminder from a sibling, then smiled and got back to the work in front of them. The teacher (a general education language arts teacher) came around and provided feedback to Raj and his table, as he did to the others, but perhaps a bit more often. The social and academic learning for Raj, as for the other students in the classroom, was complex and rigorous. Raj still experiences ASD. He still interacts with the world in some ways differently than his peers. But that difference is now seen as part of the fabric of diversity in the classroom, where it is our responsibility to find ways for Raj to maximize his strengths alongside his general education peers.

The shift that is embodied in Raj's story happened over time and with great intention. We used to have a fairly traditional model of general education and special education—including "resource rooms," with mostly pull-out supports, and self-contained "program classes" in areas like behavior, life learning, and social communication. We had resource rooms at every school, but program classes were clustered at a few schools. Students were bused from their neighborhood to the self-contained classes in order to receive the program level of support.

In our new model, every student is at their neighborhood school, every student belongs in their general education classroom, and we bring individualized supports to them. Because every student is different, it is not a one-size-fits-all model. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team still grapples with times when a student may need some instruction in a small-group setting or different types of modifications to their schedule or curriculum. But by and large, we have changed how we set up our general education classrooms and deliver instruction in the first place to make our schools more inclusive, more focused on the needs of the whole child, and more intentional about creating multiple access points for all learners. Thousands of small moves, conversations, strategies, structures, and details have moved us along in this journey of inclusive practices. It is not perfect; it is hard, and it is in process.

And it is the right thing to do.

WHY INCLUSION?

Comedian Michael Jr. (2017) has a video on YouTube where he talks about the importance of understanding "The Why." During a stand-up routine, he pauses to ask a man from the audience to sing a song. The man happens to be a high school

choir director, so he confidently starts into a stately version of "Amazing Grace." It is a solid, respectable performance. Exactly the sort of thing a choir director hopes to hear from his students.

After a few bars, Michael Jr. stops him, and the crowd gives a genial cheer. Then the comedian gives the singer some context: "This time, imagine your uncle just got home from jail, you got shot in the back when you was a kid . . . give me the 'hood version' . . . if that exists."

The man pauses and then begins again, summoning up a profound and powerful mix of pathos, hope, and pure joy. As he works his way through the opening verse, the audience begins to be transported along with him to a transcendent place. People are standing, cheering, dancing, shouting "Amen!", and mock fainting. The camera cuts to Michael Jr.'s face, and his eyes bulge in disbelief.

During the first rendition, as Michael Jr. explained, the man knew "The What"—sing us a song. Simple and direct. Effective. But nothing that would leave a lasting impact on his audience. When he sang the song a second time, he knew The Why. He was able to draw on stores of emotion and passion that he may not have even known he had. And you know his audience would be talking about it for weeks. Michael Jr. sums it up for his audience: "When you know your Why, your What becomes more impactful because you are walking toward, or in, your purpose."

When we think about creating inclusive cultures in our schools, it is important to know *The What and The How*. Much of this book is dedicated to The What and The How of one school district's journey toward greater inclusion.

However, if we do not explore The Why, we will be missing out on deeply powerful internal resources. The work is hard at the start—changing mindsets and overcoming deeply ingrained institutional habits. And it will get harder as you get deeper into the work. So building your sense of The Why is critical at the start, and it is indispensable as you move deeper into the experience of inclusive school communities.

Leaders need to know their Why deeply (TED^X, 2009). And we need to help each individual at each layer of the system to know their Why too. We need to recognize that your Why and my Why may not be the same. And we need to learn to tell the story of our Why and provide opportunities for others to tell their stories too.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH SUPPORTS INCLUSION

As educators, we are charged with making decisions that are grounded in research. For many of us, this part of our Why is particularly important in public education. Educational research is a broad and varied field of academia where there are many different values, approaches, and conclusions to be drawn. Yet when one compares

the preponderance of research studies over the past 35 years on students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings in comparison with students educated in specialized classrooms, it is clear that inclusive education leads to better outcomes (SWIFT, 2014, 2014–2020).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The primary barometer of school success over the years is academic achievement, and here there is great clarity about the benefits of inclusive education. Achievement outcomes for students served by special education in both reading and mathematics are significantly higher in inclusive settings (Agran et al., 2018). There may be multiple factors at play in considering how inclusion leads to improved academic achievement.

> Achievement outcomes for students served by special education in both reading and mathematics are significantly higher in inclusive settings.

First, the role of teacher expectations in student performance is well recognized. According to a report from the Brookings Institution, "teacher expectations do matter as they have a causal effect on student performance" (Papageorge & Gershenson, 2016). When students are separated from grade-level peers because of their learning difference, educators may subconsciously adjust their expectations for the level of work students will produce. The learning difference or disability becomes the defining feature of those students in segregated settings, and the expected learning is almost always reduced in depth, breadth, or complexity.

The social nature of learning means that the connection and conversation with peers in the learning process are embedded in the positive academic impact of inclusive education on students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The underlying assumptions of constructivism (Bruner) and social learning theory (Bandura) are evident in what is generally considered best practice in classroom instruction today. The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) developed a model of the key elements of effective instruction, known as The 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™ (Fink & Markholt, 2011). This model includes many components, yet the heart of the instructional framework is students interacting with one another and engaging in rigorous academic discourse, with entry points that make those tasks accessible and meaningful to each student. With this understanding of what effective instruction looks like for all students, it is not surprising that when students with disabilities gain meaningful access to this same sort of instructional approach, their outcomes would improve as well.

Additionally, John Hattie's (2008) research highlights that students' belief in themselves as learners is one of the most important factors in educational success. This self-efficacy has a significant impact on achievement (Yusuf, 2011). When students are taken out of general education classes and removed to an alternate

setting, what self-talk occurs for those students? The message many students internalize is that they are not capable of learning the content or not capable of learning with peers who they may perceive as more capable. By creating inclusive learning communities, we have shifted the classroom culture. Expectations are higher for all students, and different ways of learning are normalized. Students served by special education can develop authentic self-efficacy and a deep sense of belonging.

SOCIAL, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS

School is about so much more than developing academic skills. In his powerful TED Talk "Disabling Segregation," Dan Habib asks his audience to think about a memory from school. Almost no one selected a memory of learning an academic skill. Instead, people reflected on the people they were with, the friends they made, the adventures they had (TED[X], 2014). Why would we ever assume that this would be different for students with learning differences?

We know that learning is a social activity. Dr. Patricia Kuhl, from the University of Washington's Institute for Learning and the Brain, notes that from infancy, humans are always trying to figure out what those around them are doing, and this deeply influences learning (Merrill, 2018). Understanding this strong social component of learning has deeply influenced what is considered best practices in teaching, with high levels of student-to-student academic discourse being considered a strong indicator of rigorous learning. Students learn with and from their peers, and wise teachers use this peer learning in positive ways.

Some students may have challenges in peer interaction connected to their area of disability, as is often the case with students on the autism spectrum. Yet for students with ASD, it may be even more critical to be surrounded by peers with strong social skills. Woodman et al. (2016) found that inclusion in school decreased antisocial behaviors, improved independence skills, and led to more positive long-term social gains. We have certainly seen a dramatic increase in age-appropriate skills for students with ASD in our district when they spend a major part of their day in typical settings with a wide variety of peers.

> Students learn with and from their peers, and wise teachers use this peer learning in positive ways.

In many districts students who have complex communication needs are often segregated into schools or classrooms where curriculum is "functional" and peers are unable to model language. With no peers engaging in language, should we be surprised when students in these settings do not grow in their communication skills? When students with complex needs are included along with peers in typical classrooms, and appropriate access plans are in place, they make meaningful gains in social skills, self-advocacy, and independence (Haber et al., 2016).

IMPROVING INSTRUCTION FOR ALL STUDENTS

An important consideration in the move toward inclusive classrooms is the academic impact for students who are not served by special education. Will the outcomes for other students decline, due to a decrease in academic rigor, pacing, or other concerns? This question goes to the very heart of concerns that some administrators, teachers, and parents may be wrestling with as they consider fully committing to inclusion. It is a worthy question and one for which we share our two responses, which are likely interrelated: (1) research outcomes and (2) teachers' deeper understanding of instruction.

Analysis of research shows that inclusion has a positive or neutral impact overall on the academic achievement of students without disabilities (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Kalambouka et al., 2007; Ruijs et al., 2010; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). These studies vary in the specific outcomes that they examined, from results of standardized tests in reading and mathematics to measures of student engagement during class time. The common thread throughout is that there is no negative impact on academic outcomes for students without disabilities at the macrolevel. At the same time, we are keenly aware that at the specific-classroom level, our obligation is to ensure that *all* students are learning. If we gather evidence that some students are not engaged, are not increasing their understanding, or are not challenged, it is absolutely our responsibility to address it—whether that student has an intellectual challenge or a different home language or whether that student qualifies for Talented and Gifted services.

Inclusive practices make teachers *better* teachers. In the model of education that many of us grew up in, the teacher presented information and the student learned it, or not. Now teachers are charged with ensuring that students are actually learning. As teachers consider the range of learners in their classrooms, they must think deeply about what the essential learning target is and where it fits in an overall learning trajectory. This consideration allows the teacher to create different pathways toward the same essential learning target, for students who need significant support to engage with the topic as well as for students who may already understand the topic at one level but need to extend or deepen their learning. As teachers work in this inclusive way, their own skill at designing and refining instruction deepens.

> Inclusive practices make teachers *better* teachers.

One analogy that we like to think about is the technique of professional bowlers. Most amateur bowlers aim straight toward the center pin. If they are consistent, they will have a good chance to knock down seven or eight pins in the middle. But the corner pins (the outliers) are less likely to be impacted. Professional bowlers often do not aim toward the center of the pin cluster. Rather, expert bowlers often send the ball down the edge of the lane, curving their balls toward either side of

the pin configuration. They are secure in the knowledge that by effectively considering the outlying pins, they increase their probability of hitting both the outliers and the pins in the middle.

Like the bowler aiming to knock down all of the pins, teachers need to design lessons and activities to reach *all* learners. Sometimes this means we don't start by bowling down the middle. Thinking about learning targets through the lens of many, diverse learners is challenging. That is one of the reasons why having teams to share expertise and codevelop strategies is so critical to the success of inclusive practices. Future chapters will delve more deeply into this.

INCLUSION AND THE WHOLE-CHILD MOVEMENT

Wise people in our district who came before us established several *vision themes* as values to guide our educational strategies and commitments. One of these vision themes is "Educate the Whole Child." Having this commitment to the whole child and ensuring that this value was realized for students caused us to think deeply about the role of special education.

Published in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Info Brief, the tenets of whole-child education are as follows (McCloskey, 2007)):

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.

- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.

- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.

- Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.

- Each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

These are the goals that we have for every student. We do not see any exceptions in these statements, qualifiers that imply that students with disabilities aren't a part of "each student." And if on the front end, we plan for learning environments where "each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community," we interpret that as a charge to make our classrooms work for each student, every student. We do not see any justification in these statements for sorting some students into separate classrooms. Rather, the goal of

personalization means that we need to make our classrooms work for every student—that we should expect learning differences and plan for them. A commitment to the whole child is a commitment to inclusion.

EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

> Some argue that the social justice occurring in . . . inclusive education is not the responsibility of schools. But if not, then whose responsibility is it? A country's systems and institutions teach by example what the country, state, or community values: either inclusion or segregation or exclusion. (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 9)

Children spend the majority of their days in public school classrooms from age 5 to 18 years. These are formative years, when young people are making sense of the world, deciding their values, and developing habits of mind that will influence their ways of being for the rest of their lives. Our community understands this formative power of schools. This is one of the reasons why parents and other community members get so involved in debates about topics such as sexual health education. Advocates on both ends of what should be taught in schools will emerge at school board meetings around the country where sexual health curricula are being adopted. Though the content these advocates are espousing may be vastly different, both sides agree that this is the moment in life when children are forming their values and what the school presents or doesn't present may influence behavior.

Grouping children by perceived ability, even to the extreme where some students are forever removed from interaction with other students in a school setting, clearly sends a strong message to all children about who belongs and who doesn't. In their most formative time children experience an "othering" that has been wholly constructed by the adults around them. It is not reasonable to think that experiencing this would not affect children's belief about who belongs in our communities. Students who are segregated into self-contained classrooms experience a clear message that they don't belong with "typical" peers. Perhaps just as impactful on our society, students without disabilities who are in those typical classrooms experience a lack of learning diversity. They come to believe that this is "normal" and that students who are not there are "others." This leads to a lack of understanding that disability is in fact a normal and predictable part of the human experience (Snow, 2013). The unknown becomes scary, and so the segregation of human experience continues.

> In their most formative time, children experience an "othering" that has been wholly constructed by the adults around them.

A recent powerful example of this occurred at one of our schools. Several new students enrolled with very different learning profiles from what staff at that particular school had experienced for a long time. It led to a busy time for staff, trying to learn more about these students' strengths, needs, and communication styles. Some of the staff were frustrated because they had to significantly readjust their schedules to meet the needs of these students, along with the needs of all of the others. One staff member, in a moment of frustration when asked to work with a student who had limited verbal communication and significant personal care needs, told the learning specialist, "I'm not here to babysit"; she resigned her position the next day. This came at a very human low point for all involved and certainly did not reflect the deeper belief that all children can learn and it is our responsibility to find out how to engage each student. Yet we were encouraged when the learning specialist told us,

> See? This is exactly why we need inclusion. Folks of our generation were raised in a segregated world, and when situations are tough, many fall back on the beliefs of that time. When our students are grown, they will understand that disability is natural and everyone belongs.

Her commitment to equity and inclusion was strengthened, rather than lessened, through this challenging experience.

The Perspective of Families

When starting the work in our district, we began to meet with families of children served by special education to hear about their hopes and dreams for their children. Not surprisingly, "I want my child to be happy" and "I want my child to be successful" were some of the universal themes we heard. These themes would likely be the same for parents of any children. In addition, there were things that other parents may take for granted, such as "I hope someday my child is invited to a birthday party," "I want kids in the neighborhood to know my child and say hello," or "I just want my child to be at the same school as all the other kids on our block." In our model of inclusion, these hopes and dreams that used to seem very hard to attain are now just the norm.

Families know their children best and are able to understand their broad range of strengths and challenges. One of our families chooses to introduce their daughter this way: "Kara is funny, loves to run, is incredibly passionate about fairness, hates loud noises, is a fan of Taylor Swift's music, enjoys hands-on learning. Oh, and she is on the autism spectrum." This description captures a critical point: autism is an important part of Kara, but it is not all of her. Placing her in a class for students with ASD misses so much. What if we placed her in a class with only fans of Taylor Swift? Or if we placed her just with funny students? Why does autism have

to be *the* defining feature? We talk more about how individuals with disabilities choose to identify themselves in the section about the power of language in Chapter 4.

In our old system, where some students were sent to segregated classrooms in a different school, families that already had to navigate the challenges of having a child with significant learning disabilities were then expected to balance having their children sent to multiple schools. Here is an experience recently shared with us that poignantly illustrates the impact of noninclusive school systems on families:

> A good friend in our neighborhood [in a different school district] has kids the same age as my own kids. Their son is one of the most physically gifted people I know. He could ride his bike all over the neighborhood long before most boys his age were out of training wheels. He can climb trees with feline agility. He is strong. He has a huge smile and a great laugh. He also has an intellectual disability.
>
> He was in my son's class in elementary school and developed friendships with other boys in the neighborhood. But when it was time for middle school, the district decided to send him to a self-contained classroom in a school across town. The special ed team tried to convince his parents that this would be the best place for him, that he would receive better academic support at his level, and that he would develop a community of friends in the self-contained class. His mom understood all of these things, and maybe even believed them. But when she told me he was slated to attend a different school than all of the neighborhood friends he had grown up with, her eyes welled up with tears.
>
> Those tears have stuck with me. She was heartbroken because her son would be torn away from the community he knew and from the friends he belonged to. He would have to ride a specialized (short) bus rather than ride his bike to school like the rest of the kids in the neighborhood. He would have different experiences and inevitably grow apart from his friends.
>
> Now that his sister is in middle school (at the neighborhood school), the parents are split between two schools. Two PTAs to attend. Two school carnivals. Two fund-raisers to donate to. Two bell schedules to learn. Two sets of administrators to meet.
>
> The siblings don't get to ride to school together. They don't get to see each other at lunch and talk about school drama together. They don't get to cheer for the same sports teams or wear the same school colors on spirit days.

These may seem like small things in the grand scheme of life. But in many ways, these shared experiences are the things that form the foundations of a family. They are the things that cannot be replicated in other ways. Of course, some families choose to send their children to different schools, but this family didn't have a choice. The district had a program—a self-contained classroom at only one middle school. The boy had no choice but to go. And it left his mom in tears.

The voices of families have been absolutely critical to our journey. We will share more stories about specific family experiences in future chapters. We have also learned with and from families outside our district through organizations such as Family and Community Together (FACT) and Northwest Down Syndrome Association's All Born (in). Both are groups of parents who have courageously fought for inclusion and access for all in our state, and they have been amazing leaders and partners in this work. When we listen to families, the need for inclusion, the need for belonging, the need to value every child is clear. As John Dewey (1899) declared in *School and Society*, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy" (p. 19).

All parents want their children to be valued, to belong, to be challenged, to succeed. Inclusion, done well, is the path toward fulfilling this for all children.

MOVING FROM *WHY* TO *WHY NOT*?

There are so many reasons for inclusive education: the basic human need for belonging, improved outcomes for students with and without learning differences, improving instructional practices for all students, consistently implementing ideas of social justice and civil rights. Thinking through these powerful reasons, the question shifts from why we should create inclusive schools to why we wouldn't do this.

Inclusive education does require change. It requires uncovering assumptions and beliefs; it requires different roles; it requires trust, innovation, collaboration, and capacity building. Becoming an inclusive school district requires intention. With intention, being an inclusive school district is a completely achievable goal.

Our purpose in writing this book is simply to lay out the ideas and structures that worked for us. You may do things differently. You may discover more effective ways to move forward. What is important is that we are all on the path to becoming more inclusive every day. Our children deserve this.

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