

family

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Abstract

This short article describes an example of sensitive media reporting. A young boy who had autism was killed in an accident and the newspaper article reporting the event was unusual in that it did not label the child. **Keyword:**
Attitudes

Crash Kills Boy, 8

by Gregory L. Veech, Teacher
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Headlines might have screamed, "Handicapped child struck and killed!" or "Autistic boy run down in Johnson City!", but the evening newspaper simply read, "Crash kills boy, 8."

Information might have been gathered from his special education teachers or related therapists and printed, "Ricky was an autistic boy who was unable to talk and possessed poor self-preservation skills. His behaviour was unpredictable and required constant attention." Instead, parents of Rick's classmates were interviewed and replied, "He was a very happy and loving child. His life will be missed."

Personal information might have been reported, "The autistic boy attended a special school that possessed state-of-the-art methods in treating handicapped children." But the story read, "Ricky attended Harry L. Johnson Elementary School in Johnson City, where the boy had just completed the second grade."

Funeral services might have been dominated by family members and various paid professionals (ie doctors, teachers, and therapists). But Ricky is remembered by a much richer and diversified circle of friends. Fellow students and school club members from his kindergarten, first, and second grade classes were present to mourn the loss of a close friend. Parents of these classmates also filled his circle. These parents had connected with Ricky and his mother through classroom activities (ie the P.T.A. and school social clubs such as the Circle of Friends). A tragic end to a young child's life.

Why weren't the headlines of his death cluttered with labels pointing out his differences? What was it that allowed the school and community to see Ricky based on his abilities rather than his disabilities? I think the answer is as simple as stating that he was included. Included in his home school. He was given the unconditional opportunity to fully participate in all school classes, activities, and functions.

You see, he was part of a school that believes all children can learn and will learn well. A school that understands how children learn at different rates. A school that values age appropriate educational placement and instruction. A school where labels are viewed as blocks to effective learning. He was a valued member of a school and community that is committed to the full inclusion of all its children regardless of handicapping conditions.

Effective teamwork on the part of all stakeholders involved in Ricky's educational life was essential. Parents, children, teachers and therapists worked together for all children. In the beginning, children asked questions. "Why doesn't he talk?" "Where does he sleep?" Quickly, these questions were

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directed towards Ricky himself. When children were asked questions about Ricky by visitors, they were blunt in re-directing others stating, "Why don't you ask Ricky?" Knowledge bases were exchanged and new understandings about meeting Ricky's needs were developed.

Success was quick to promote the fruits of inclusion. Ricky began to communicate his needs to teachers and classmates using symbols and sign language. Modelling his peers, he demonstrated improved attention, self-control, and independence throughout the school day. Ricky was not the only person who benefited from inclusive practices. Children learned sign language, concern for others, and began to view each other based on what they could do rather than what they could not do. One child said, "Ricky doesn't talk, but he tells me what he wants by pointing". They began to solve problems together. Drawing after drawing, idea after idea, invention after invention were brainstormed in the classroom with children, teachers, and parents to ensure that Ricky's needs were being met. Inclusion had become natural not forced, accepted not rejected.

Crash kills boy, 8. An unfortunate statement of pain, loss, and tragedy. A statement without labels that, for a saddening moment, captured how a school and its community viewed a child with a handicapping condition. He was a boy. He was eight years old. He was included. He will be missed.