

MENTAL DIVERSITY IN OUR SCHOOLS

Julia Falla, Principal, Greaves Adventist Academy, Montreal, QC

Most of us are used to ethnic diversity in our schools, but can we get used to mental diversity? If we reflect on students who are different because their brains work differently, we may have some difficulty seeing them in a regular class setting. How do we cope with the difference? Where do we begin?



We live in an individualistic society which, paradoxically, wants to be considered integrative. We integrate cross-curricular topics, projects, competencies, and technologies, and the list can continue. In our daily plans, we take into consideration activities which could integrate multiple intelligences, learning styles, cultural differences, and so on. But how do we integrate mental diversity?

What makes us humans is our ability to communicate and to be socially involved with others. Students with *Asperger Syndrome*, a mild kind of autism, often have extreme difficulty interacting socially, preferring to focus on narrow fields of interests. Often they are able to pursue those interests with great intensity. It may sound paradoxical also, but some students with this mildest form of autism, called *Asperger Syndrome*, may turn out to be geniuses. Through history, we see the examples of Albert Einstein, Emily Dickinson, Amadeus Mozart, and the Nobel laureate (2002) Vernon Smith who spoke openly about what he calls the deficiencies and the selective advantages of *Aspergers*. “I can switch out and go to a concentrate mode, and the world is completely shut out. If I am writing something nothing else exists. I think it is different kinds of minds, and it is important to recognize that certain mental deficiencies may actually have selective advantages in terms of activities. We have lost a lot of the barriers that have to do with skin colour and with other various other characteristics. But there is still not enough recognition of mental diversities. And we do not all have to think alike to be communal and to live in a productive and satisfying world.”¹

Michelle Dawson, an autistic researcher from the University of Montreal, states that she does things that may be difficult for others and others do things that are difficult for her. But how do we deal with these students in our classroom?

The first step is acceptance. As a teacher, as an administrator, are we ready to accept them? They say that they do not want to be seen as different from other people. Then, acceptance becomes the essential element to begin to love them.

We have one student with *Asperger Syndrome* in our school. He came in Grade 3, and now, he is in Grade 4. When the parents came to see me, and asked me if it was possible to give him a chance, I looked into the eyes of these SDA parents not knowing what to answer. In seconds, my mind went to the teacher, to the students in the class, and to the other students in the school. Are they going to accept him? They asked me for a trial, for one chance. I said to them: “Well, let’s try together.” It was very difficult at the beginning. I had him in my office on “many” occasions. But the more he came to my office, the more I got to know him.

¹HERERA, Sue. (2005) “Mildest autism has selective advantages” , MSNBC

One of my first observations was that when I spoke to him with a soft tone of voice, he would look at me, and then allow me to enter into his world. I could explain to him what behaviour or what attitudes were not appropriate in the class. And, with a deep breath, he would say, “Okay, I am going to apologize.”

His Grade 4 teacher made additional observations. She has realized that for any task to be done in class, she has to explain to him why it is important to do it. This reasoning persuades him to work.

She has also observed his high level of thinking. Very interesting debates take place in the classroom when he expresses his points of view. He feels good when sharing his knowledge about different topics.

He also has a need to sometimes have his own space in his own world. Because he likes computers, the teacher allows him to work on the computer during a certain period of time. This activity relaxes him and satisfies his need for occasional isolation.

Finally, his teacher has recognized his desire to be helpful. This was the key to be accepted and respected by the whole class. She asks him to use his ability with computers to help the students having difficulties using the computers in the Computer Lab.

This child’s parents are so grateful for his experience in a Seventh-day Adventist school. To see that their child now loves to go to school is a great joy. They have even observed improvement in his social abilities and his interaction with others. He has also expressed to them his desire to excel in academics in order to be listed on the Honour Roll. They pointed out that these changes have been possible because their child is accepted and loved not only by the teacher, but also by the students in the school.

It was, and it is still, a blessing for us and for the parents to have this child in our school! Such children, whose brains may work differently, have so much to contribute when given the opportunity. Much can be gained if we open ourselves up to accept and accommodate these differences.

¹HERERA, Sue. (2005) “Mildest autism has selective advantages” , MSNBC