



Response to “Rocky Choices”

Innocense Gumbs

<http://justiceinschools.org>

“Rocky Choices” is a case study about a child named Kate who regularly has emotional outbursts. Though she does not have a specific diagnosis, she did receive an IEP (Individualized Education Program), which allows her to remain in her regular third-grade class. Because Kate has had so many outbursts at school, her teacher, Ms. Brown, and her principal, Mr. Thomason, are debating whether or not to preemptively move Kate to an isolation room when she is feeling triggered.

The case study specifically focuses on a situation when the class has broken into small groups to do an activity on rocks and their classification. A discussion between two of the boys in Kate’s group starts to turn into an argument, which distresses Kate. Ms. Brown must decide whether or not to separate the group, make Kate go to a different “think room,” or switch to a class discussion. Ms. Brown believes Kate will be best served by staying with her peers and wants to accommodate all of her students, but she doesn’t know how to balance both of those goals as she watches Kate on the verge of another classroom outburst.

Though the authors of the case study gave only three options to mend the situation, I believe there’s another option. Ms. Brown should take Kate out of the class so she could have a minute to calm herself down outside the class door. Then Ms. Brown should allow the class to continue with the activity, allowing all the students to finish their work and take a step back from the situation, while also letting Kate know she can rejoin her group whenever she feels ready. The next day - after everyone in the group has had time to cool off - Ms. Brown should talk to Kate, as well as her parents, about the past day’s events and how she feels about her anxiety and some of her classmates’ reactions. Then Ms. Brown should talk to Kate’s groupmates on how they felt about Kate’s response and on their own behaviors as well, finding ways to communicate with each other without raising voices. With all of these one-on-ones, Ms. Brown is able to prepare all of her students for a group discussion on how they feel as well as providing Kate an opportunity to talk to her classmates about her needs in the classroom. I think these discussions would allow Ms. Brown to get a better sense of how each group or person is feeling as well as providing a sort of reassurance to the students that she is supporting them and Kate at the same time.

Though this is a solution to the problem presented, there is more than one problem that needs fixing. Kate is in jeopardy of having another outburst in class, which could lead to the children complaining about Kate’s disruptive behaviors to their parents, who would then most likely complain to the principal, creating an even worse situation for Kate. Sending her to the thinking room right away whenever Kate risks having an outburst won’t ever allow her to deal with whatever may be causing her outbursts in the class. I think the ‘think room’ is a sort of buffer that doesn’t allow Kate to actually adjust and learn how to express herself to both her teacher and classmates. So there must be a solution to solve the larger problem of whether to keep a special needs child in a regular class or to move them.

The solution to the underlying problem is to give the class lessons about difference to create a more inclusive classroom and allow Kate the opportunity to have more one-on-one support with a special aide. In my experience, most children who have one-on-ones excel amazingly, performing better than similar students removed from their primary classroom. Furthermore, if Kate talks with someone about her challenges with anxiety she may have fewer outbursts because she would be able to express herself and have a chance to calm down. Now if the school could not afford to pay for a one on one aid

for Kate, then the school would have to find some other way to give Kate the constant support she needs, without which Kate wouldn't be receiving the same level of education her peers would be receiving. This support will help her learn how to better control herself. While the case mentions that Kate did have a one-on-one aide in second grade, there's no mention of an aide in third. I think this is a problem.

Ms. Brown should also give the class lessons on understanding children with differences because when you are unfamiliar or don't understand something you can become awkward. Teaching the children will open their eyes at a young age, making them more tolerant of all types of differences that people have. Many teachers are able to teach successfully about tolerance and diversity. For example, the well-known Jane Elliott first did her anti-racism exercises with her third-grade class. She taught her class about racism by pretending that people with blue eyes were superior to people with brown eyes. The activity consisted of blue-eyed students being praised and complimented on the first day. These students were told they were better and smarter than their brown-eyed peers. The blue-eyed students got to stay at recess later and got seconds at lunch. This caused a rift between the students.

The next day Jane Elliott switched the tables and made the brown-eyed students the superior group. And just like the blue-eyed students, the brown-eyed students could get seconds and stay at recess longer. At the end of this experiment, Jane Elliott saw that the students performed better in all subjects when they had the superior eye color. Jane Elliot's story shows us that while differences don't define a person, it is important to be aware of them. Elliot also shows us the power of education to teach young people to be more understanding of difference and sensitive to one another.¹

By providing Kate one-on-one support and teaching her entire class about the importance of recognizing differences, I believe Ms. Brown can help bring a helpful outcome for everyone. Giving Kate one-on-one support and teaching the class more about students with different needs are solutions that not only benefit Kate, Ms. Brown, Mr. Thomason and the other children but everyone as it helps to teach the next generation that even with differences we can accept and welcome each other.

¹ "Jane Elliott." Jane Elliott, 2019. <https://janeelliott.com/>.