

A Great Story Of Inclusion

FROM <http://www.momnos.blogspot.com/>

Saturday, September 19, 2009

The purplest

I keep thinking about Barbara Joosse's book *I Love You The Purplest*. In it, two brothers ask their mother which one she loves the most. She explains that she loves one of them the reddest and the other the bluest. Together, she loves them the purplest.

Why has that been on my mind?

Well, today is Bud's tenth birthday. Ten years old. A decade. He understands the significance of this milestone. Last night as we cuddled before bed, he asked me if I'd still cuddle with a ten-year-old. (I assured him I would.) This morning when he woke up, he was surprised to find that he still had his nine-year-old voice.

But this story really starts two days ago, when I picked Bud up early from school to take him to a doctor's appointment for medication management. On the agenda: a discussion about altering the timing of his mid-day medication in hopes of easing what has been a bumpy transition to fourth grade. Though the transition this year has not been as difficult as it's been in some other years, it has been marked by Bud's resistance to being in the classroom. It's clear to me that he likes his teacher, Ms. Walker, and the paraprofessional who works with him, Mrs. Nee. He likes the children in his class. He likes being in school. But, I think this is the year when the developmental gap between Bud and his peers has felt daunting to him. Though the atmosphere in his classroom is wonderful, the rest of it - the language, the concepts, the higher-level academic focus - has all been confusing for him. Even during down-time, his peers are all *High School Musical*, and he's all *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. It has been easier for him to choose to spend his time in the nest he's created in Special Ed with the team who is familiar, predictable, and comfortable.

And so, as Bud left school early on Thursday, Ms. Walker seized the opportunity, scrapped her plan for social studies, and pulled the rest of the class together for a little impromptu planning session. Most of the children in the classroom have known Bud for a long time, though some of them have never been in his class before. Ms. Walker told them that Bud was reaching a milestone this weekend - double digits, the marking of his first decade. She reminded them how hard it can be for Bud to manage things like birthday parties and she asked them how, as a group, they might help him celebrate in a way that would be comfortable for him.

They spent the rest of the afternoon putting their plan together.

On Friday, Bud arrived at school to find that his classmates, Ms. Walker, Mrs. Nee, and the whole staff in Special Ed were wearing purple, Bud's favorite color, in his honor. A

little later, Bud's friends presented him a book they'd made. The book is purple, of course, and it features a two-page spread of each person in his class - each child, his teacher, and his para. The first page has the person's picture and name, to help Bud get to know the people he doesn't know as well. And the second page has a birthday message - in purple ink on purple paper - to Bud from that person.

As a class, they had brainstormed a list of things that make Bud special, so there are a lot of reoccurring themes on the pages of the purple book - you bring joy to our class, you always do your best, you are creative. But there are unique messages in there as well: "I like being your friend because you are funny, cool, and a good dancer;" "the songs you sing are great;" "I think you'r specal becace you'r joks are hulareaes." Two of the children, Travis and Kelly, wrote "you are one of my best friends."

While Bud was engaged in something else, Kelly showed Ms. Walker a CD she'd brought in and together they snuck to the classroom's CD player to cue up a track. They turned the volume up slowly and watched for Bud's reaction as Dierks Bentley's "Every Mile A Memory" filled the room. Bud raised his head, smiled, and started singing along:

"Texas stars in a purple night,
Not seein' 'em with you, baby, oh they never do look right..."

Bud's classmates from last year smiled in recognition. His new classmates listened to him, then spoke up in appreciation - "Hey! He really can sing!"

Then they sang to him - but knowing that a cacophony of fourth grade voices might be overwhelming for him, this rendition of Happy Birthday was delivered in a loud whisper. And according to Ms. Walker, it was the rockin'-est loud whisper she'd ever heard. And then, finally, it was time to eat the cupcakes Bud had brought in, and he even got to bring the extras down to his friends in Special Ed.

The magic didn't end with the celebration, though. It spilled over into the rest of the day. During math, the other children worked on complicated math tables that were beyond Bud's grasp, but Bud sat at a desk with Mrs. Nee and created a different kind of math table. One by one, the children approached Bud's desk, where Bud greeted them by name, and asked "Which do you like better: cats, dogs, or birds?" Each child gave a response (and sometimes an explanation), which Bud tallied, as the other child left to tap another friend to join Bud.

The children in the class also worked together to help Bud complete a fill-in-the-blanks poem about himself, offering up their suggestions for how to complete each thought. The poem, which Ms. Walker printed out for me in purple ink, goes like this:

BUD

Who is fast, funny, caring, and cool

Who finds happiness in quiet, country music, and computers

Who needs attention, Mom, and friends

Who is afraid of "boo," thunderstorms, and sudden loud noises

Who would like to play guitar, hang out with Dierks Bentley, and go on a hike

Who likes to wear purple crocs, his dino vest, and earplugs

BUD

The class commemorated the day with a group photo, which Ms. Walker printed and pasted on the last page of the purple book. It's quite an image - a sea of purple, in shades from pale lavender to deep violet; teachers and support staff framing and scaffolding around the back and edges; the middle swarming with beaming children; and, in the center, Bud, his old friend Kelly leaning in by his side, and his new friend Kallyn standing behind him, her hands gently but firmly on his shoulders, making him feel centered, and making him feel safe.

If you looked at the picture, you'd be hard-pressed to figure out which child was celebrating a birthday. The smiles are wide from edge to edge - wide despite the fact that Ms. Walker had been frank with the children: this was not to be the standard procedure for celebrating birthdays this year. This time was different - because in this class, in this school, "fairness" does not equal "sameness." Fairness means making sure that every person gets what she needs to succeed, and so, by definition, to be fair, sometimes we must have different rules for different people.

And the children, because they are a product of this educational environment, don't just get it - they celebrate it. They celebrate it because they know that in a school in which helping a classmate get comfortable and feel included is just as important as social studies, they can be certain that every person matters. And if every person matters, then they matter.

The children in that classroom know that they are loved. Some of them feel loved the reddest. Some of them feel loved the bluest. And when they come together in that classroom, they create the purplest community they could ever hope to find.