

Chapter 8

“I Can’t Believe I Was the One Who Excluded Him”

CASE 3: THE EARLY YEARS

Crosscutting Themes: Advocacy, Communication, Relationships/Trust.

Leadership Competencies: Advocacy, Professional Learning, Fosters Relationships, Lived Experience of Students, Collaboration, Problem-solving, Values Inclusion.

The first time I met Abdel was when he and his parents came into my office at Oak Park Elementary for a pre-Kindergarten enrollment interview. Abdel has Down syndrome and was a happy, bright kid. He was attentive and listened carefully in the interview, observing everyone and everything happening around him. I could sense that his parents were anxious about their son starting Kindergarten. At the end of the interview, I assured Abdel’s parents that Oak Park was safe for Abdel to learn and grow. I told them that we would ensure Abdel was well cared for in the school and promised that he would receive any individualized supports he needed.

When Abdel began Kindergarten in the fall, the transition was smooth. He became near and dear to his teacher, Mr. Rodriguez. They developed a special relationship and Mr. Rodriguez was a constant advocate for Abdel. When Abdel had difficulty reaching some of the equipment on the playground, Mr. Rodriguez was in my office rallying to get a more accessible play structure.

When Abdel had difficulty hearing people speak in the auditorium, Mr. Rodriguez asked me if we could get a better speaker system installed. Mr. Rodriguez, who had been teaching at Oak Park for nearly a decade, was one of the most compassionate individuals and educators I had ever met. It was no surprise to me that Mr. Rodriguez and Abdel had formed a close connection.



Figure 8.1 Accessible Playground. Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com>. Credit: fstop123.

As the school principal, I organize weekly school-based team meetings with all staff members who work with students who have special education needs. The team includes teachers, paraprofessionals, the resource teacher, our vice principal, and me. When I began my role as principal at Oak Park, my vision was to create an environment where staff felt comfortable approaching me with their classroom challenges—so I worked hard to build trust within our team. I had heard that staff had not always got along well with the previous principal, largely because of his communication style, so I wanted to change how staff viewed the role of principal. When I was hired, our staff began to do professional development workshops every other month on nurturing inclusive school environments for students as well as conflict management with parents and guardians. My background as a special education teacher compelled me to foster inclusive classes and school spaces not just for students with special education needs but for *all* students. I also tried to regularly visit all of the classrooms in my school and talk with students and teachers letting them know that I cared about them.

One day as I was making my rounds and talking to students, I noticed Abdel sitting by himself, away from the rest of the kids. I approached him and asked how he was doing.

“I’m good,” he responded. “But sometimes I wish I could do stuff that the other kids do.”

"What do you mean, Abdel?" I asked him gently.

"I didn't get to bake cookies today. The other kids got to bake. But I didn't get to 'cause I was reading with Mrs. Arnold." He crossed his arms and frowned up at me, tears forming in his eyes. Abdel was referring to the resource teacher, Mrs. Arnold, who helped him with reading for thirty minutes each day.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to bake, Abdel," I said, my heart aching for the boy who so badly wanted to be included in everything that the rest of class did. "I have some chocolate chip cookies in my office. Do you want to come eat one with me?"

Abdel smiled up at me, clearly excited that he was going to have cookies. We walked back to my office and enjoyed a snack together.

I returned to Mr. Rodriguez's classroom at the end of the day. I told him about my conversation with Abdel and how he felt excluded from the rest of the class. Mr. Rodriguez got very quiet and told me, "I feel so badly. I didn't mean for Abdel to be excluded from baking." Then, to my surprise, Mr. Rodriguez opened up to me about his niece who also has Down syndrome. He told me that he had been nervous that she wouldn't get the specialized supports that she needed, especially with reading, which is why he advocated for Mrs. Arnold to work with Abdel on his reading skills each day. Things started to click for me. I began to understand where Mr. Rodriguez's protection of Abdel stemmed from because Abdel probably reminded Mr. Rodriguez of his niece, and he placed his worries for her on Abdel. He cared about Abdel so much and wanted him to be included—but had unintentionally excluded him from a fun activity.

The next day, Mr. Rodriguez sat down with Abdel. He apologized for making him feel excluded from class and told him the class would bake again that day.

Later that day, Mr. Rodriguez chatted with me in the staff room. He told me, "All I see when I'm working with Abdel is my niece. All I want for them is to be included. I can't believe I was the one who excluded him."

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you think that Abdel's parents and/or the school's resource teacher should have been included in this situation? Why or why not?
2. If you were to write the next part of this story, what would it look like?
3. What is the line between advocating for students and overstepping your position?
4. What strategies could you as principal use to support teachers when they approach you because they don't feel confident in their teaching abilities?