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Square Pegs, Round Holes: Working With Our Campers, Not Against Them, Elective 2

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SUMMARY:	This is a series of staff activities (including text study, personal reflection, problem-solving strategies and experiential learning) to help counselors consider the varied needs of campers and how to set everyone up for success. - <i>Submitted by Sarra Alpert</i>
TOPICS:	Communication Skills, Inclusion- Special Needs, Leadership Development, Managing Challenging Behaviors
LEARNING OBJECTIVE:	Staff will be better able to identify campers who are experiencing challenges in fitting into the camp structure, activities or social environment. Staff will be deepen their ability to empathize with (and therefore better tailor their communication with) campers who are struggling. Staff will have a stronger range of strategies for how to work with such campers so that they have a successful summer.
AUDIENCE:	Staff working directly with campers (counselors and specialists)
LENGTH:	75-90 Minutes
APPENDICES:	Text study: Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, Piska 12 “Procedure” handout “I Won’t Pretend That Disability Simulation Works” by Emily Ladau “The Child” by Loris Malaguzzi Text study: Midrash Tanhuma, Numbers 10
MATERIALS:	Flip chart and markers, paper for notetaking, copies of handouts for all participants
SETTING:	Circle of chairs

Session Description:

1) Framing text study (5 min):

Read Piska 12 selection together. Ask participants to interpret/paraphrase the text. (For example: Our life experiences are shared and yet varied. The text highlights the value of honoring each person’s personal relationship to God, and by extension, to the world around them. If God can not only allow for our many differences but encourage them, how much more so should we be able to do that for ourselves and each other? But in addition to valuing difference, this text emphasizes that our worlds are “one and the same” – so we have to figure out how to allow for those many capacities to coexist powerfully.)

2) Pair and share (5 min):

In pairs, participants should each share one thing that motivates them to be their most successful and one thing that holds them back.

3) Journaling and short small-group discussions (15 min):

Participants should take 5 minutes to journal on the following scenarios:

- Think of a time when you found yourself frustrated by someone else's difficulty. What prompted that frustration? How did you handle it?



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- Think of a camper you thought of as different and/or annoying. How did it affect your interactions with this camper?
- Think about a difficulty or challenge that regularly impacts your life. When have you felt comfortable being honest about what you need to help with that? When have you felt a need to hide this difficulty?

In small groups (3-5 people each), participants should share some of what they discovered through their journaling. They don't need to share the specific examples they identified, but rather can discuss what they found in how they've approached such situations in the past.

Note: you can offer multiple ways to engage here -- for example, people can either journal or sit and think about their answers to the questions; people can debrief in small groups or debrief by continuing to journal.

4) Two approaches to experiencing challenges (25 min):

Approach #1:

Hand out the attached page that begins "The procedure is actually quite simple." Ask someone to read the page out loud. Then ask the group: what is the procedure described in this paragraph? Some people may figure it out (the answer is: doing laundry), but most likely will not.

Discuss: What made it difficult to understand this paragraph? What was your experience like in not being able to understand it? What are other situations in which you've found yourself unable to understand something when you felt you were "supposed to" be able to understand it?

Approach #2:

One-third of the group should leave the room (you can call these participants Group 1). The rest of the group is told that when Group 1 comes back, half of the remaining participants (Group 2) should pair up with one of the Group 1 participants and attempt to ask them questions about their day (what sessions they've attended, what they think of the conference so far, etc). The remaining third of the group (Group 3) are supposed to be as distracting as possible while maintaining a distance of about a foot from any of the conversations. The Group 2 participants should ignore the distractions completely – the more it appears as if they don't notice the distractions, the better.

Bring Group 1 back. Participants from groups 1 and 2 should pair up and begin conversation as the Group 3 participants do their distracting best.

Discuss the experience:

- For Group 1 members: How did they feel? What was most frustrating or overwhelming? What did they notice Group 2 members doing to try and hold their attention? What worked and what didn't?
- For Group 2 members: How did they attempt to handle their Group 1 member as they became understandably distracted by the activity in the room? What reactions did they find themselves experiencing as they attempted to hold their Group 1 partner's attention?



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Both of these activities help us experience a more extreme version of a universal experience -- we all feel distracted sometimes and we all feel like we don't understand what's going on sometimes. The goal of experiential activities like these is not to pretend that this helps those of us who don't have significant cognitive or learning challenges truly understand the experience of living with those, but rather to help us better connect those challenges with the related experiences that we have had, and to therefore be better able to ask ourselves the right questions when we see someone not being able to function at their best:

- Am I assuming anything dismissive (like "they're just not trying")?
- Am I asking this camper real questions about why X activity/situation is hard for them?
- Am I creatively considering what adaptations I can make to make this more accessible?
- Am I building real trust with this camper so that they know I have their best interests at heart and am genuinely trying to understand their experience?

To close this section, read and discuss "I Won't Pretend That Disability Simulation Works" by Emily Ladau.

5) Identifying relevant scenarios (15 min):

Make a list of some of the camper needs (best to limit these to needs that fall into the broad category of physical or mental health) that can lead to challenges in the camp environment. For example: anxiety, eating disorders, ADD/ADHD, autism spectrum, impaired mobility, impaired hearing.

Make a list of what information a staff person might want to gather or just pay attention to in order to best figure out how to understand this camper's needs and help them succeed (this is information they might gather through observing the camper or through speaking directly with the camper). For example: medications and their side effects, have they been sleeping, how are they doing socially, what's going on at home.

6) Creative solutions (20 min):

Start a list together of strategies that can be used on various levels within the camp environment to help make sure that we're actively trying to meet as many campers' needs as possible (levels can include staff training, co-counselor work, direct interventions with campers, activities that highlight a range of abilities and talents). For example: staff training session with mental health professionals, regular meetings between co-counselors to review what they've been observing about their campers, helping a camper with anger issues identify when they're starting to get agitated and what strategies they can use to calm themselves down, a bunk ritual where each camper leads the group in their personal favorite activity at one point over the course of the summer.



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Split into small groups (3-5 people) for 10 minutes. In small groups, continue making this list. One person in each group should take notes to give to the facilitator so that they can compile it and send it to the full group afterwards.

Come back together to share a few highlights -- ideas that people are particularly excited to try and bring back to their camps this summer.

7) Closing texts (5 min):

Read Malaguzzi poem and Midrash Tanhuma text

Additional Notes for Bringing it Back to Camp:

This is designed to be led with staff who work directly with campers. It could be divided up into multiple sessions if you'd like to spend more time on each element.



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APPENDIXES:

Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, Piska 12:

Rabbi Levi said: “God appeared to them like a statue with faces on every side, so that though a thousand people might be looking at the statue, they would be led to believe that it was looking at each one of them. So, too, when God spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, „The Divine Word is addressing me.“...

Moreover, said R. Jose bar R. Hanina, God spoke with each and every person according to each person’s particular power. Nor need you marvel at this. The manna tasted differently to each: to the children, to the young, and to the old, according to their power (capacity). Infants according to their capacity: like the taste of milk from a mother’s breast... The young according to their capacity, for of the manna they ate it is said, “My bread also which I gave you, bread and oil and honey”... and the old according to their capacity, as is said of the manna they ate, “the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.”.....

Now if each and every person was enabled to taste the manna according to his particular capacity, how much more was each and every person enabled to hear according to his capacity. Thus David said, „The voice of the Lord is in its strength (Ps 29:4) – not “The voice of the Lord in His strength” but “its strength” – that is, in its strength to make itself heard and understood according to the capacity of each and every person who listens. Therefore God said: Do not be misled because you hear many voices. Know that I am God who is one and the same.”



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The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange items into different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first, the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another fact of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one never can tell. After the procedure is completed one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually they will be used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life.

(Bransford & Johnson, 1972, p 722)



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I Won't Pretend That Disability Simulation Works (03/11/14, Huffington Post)

Emily Ladau, Disability Rights Advocate and Owner of Social Justice Media Services

Activities meant to simulate the experience of disability are so often lauded as moving, powerful, eye-opening experiences. With just a few hours in a wheelchair, wearing earplugs, or wearing a blindfold, people supposedly gain a deeper understanding of what life with a disability truly entails. I, for one, don't buy it.

The goal of increasing sensitivity and awareness is a respectable one, but I've long wondered if simulating disabilities ever truly accomplishes this.

How can what amounts to a game of pretend enlighten a person about something that has shaped my entire life? Of course, I realize there are several people and organizations out there that are trying to do their best to use simulation activities to create positive change. But at the end of the day, the temporary glimpse into disability that such exercises provide are just that -- temporary. It is simply impossible to fully immerse yourself in another person's being.

Herein lies the problem with disability simulation. It may make a person more aware of another person's experiences, but it doesn't dig deep to the root of discrimination against people with minority identities. Instead, it's more likely to evoke empathy or pity than true acceptance. I've heard reactions that point to this time and time again. For instance, while chatting with an able-bodied friend of mine who had to wheel around Washington, D.C. for a school project, she told me "I don't know how you do it. When I tried to get on the train, I gave up and got out of the chair to lift it over the gap. It's so hard being in a wheelchair."

Assuming that a majority of people who participate in simulation activities have similar reactions (which most that I've encountered do), why isn't this sparking real noticeable change in ending the stigma and accessibility barriers that I face every day? Twenty-three years after the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, the disability community still encounters inaccessibility in so many places. Clearly, the takeaway message that is hoped for from disability simulation is not getting through.

Some may argue that this is because too many disability awareness activities just aren't being done the right way, or that enough people aren't involved in them. Well, I'd like to counter that they're just not working. Simulation is not an ideal way to transform society's view of disability.

Consider the fact that for so many, disability is an identity and a culture, as are race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Now, imagine if schools and organizations began to hold widespread Black Awareness events, during which white people would put on blackface and go around in public for a few hours to gain an understanding of the experiences of black people. I think it's an understatement to say that would rightfully result in a nationwide angry uproar for several reasons.

First of all, the term "awareness" makes minority groups sound like a problem. Second, a brief activity can never replace a lifetime of experiences. If being black and being disabled are both identities, why are disability awareness events the only one of its kind deemed to be acceptable, while awareness events for other identities would undoubtedly be deemed offensive? To me, it feels like the opposite of acceptance to have my entire identity as a person with a physical disability reduced to an isolated simulation experience.

If this logic hasn't convinced you that disability simulation isn't effective, take a moment to ponder the situation in reverse: My disability severely weakens the joints and muscles in my legs, so the



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only way I can experience walking is by wearing heavy leg braces made of metal and plastic. The awkward waddling I occasionally do around my kitchen during physical therapy in no way gives me a true understanding of what it feels like for an able-bodied person to walk, go up stairs or climb over obstacles each day.

In much the same way, an able-bodied person using a wheelchair to awkwardly push themselves around in no way gives them a genuine understanding of what it feels like for a disabled person to wheel around and be stopped in his or her tracks by a high curb every day. In each case, the simulation isn't natural or accurate. Both myself and the able-bodied person are using nothing more than external devices made of metal and plastic to do something we don't normally do, and this does not translate to comprehension of deeply internal experiences of someone we're not.

Furthermore, it would be silly if while speaking to someone who walks, I said, "I don't know how you do it. Walking is so hard." Of course it's hard -- for me. But for an able-bodied person it's instinctive. And using a wheelchair is hard for an able-bodied person. For me, it's innate. Moreover, being disabled is not so challenging solely because of my physical circumstances, a stereotype that simulation often leads participants to believe; it's hard because of environmental, social and attitudinal barriers.

So, you can be "aware" of me all you want. You can attempt to roll a mile in my wheelchair. You can analyze and discuss and dissect the experience from a million different angles. But we must move away from equating empathy with acceptance. We must embrace differences as a fact of human existence without first needing to imitate them, for these kinds of activities are not effectively contributing to long-term advancements in the disability rights movement.

Emily Ladau is a passionate self-advocate who recently graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in English from Adelphi University on Long Island, New York, where she was born and raised. Using her love of writing and communications, she is just beginning her journey on a career path towards creating positive change for the disability community. Emily blogs at Words I Wheel By where she writes about her experiences as a disabled 20-something and explores disability rights issues. She loves connecting with people, and invites you to like Words I Wheel By on Facebook and follow her on Twitter @emily_ladau.

The Child

by Loris Malaguzzi

The child
is made of one hundred
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking

A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening

The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak



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of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.

to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.

The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

If you see a great gathering of people, recite the blessing “Blessed is the Wise One who knows all secrets” (Baruhk hacham ha-razim). For just as their faces are different from one another’s, so are their minds unlike one another’s. In fact, each person has a distinctive and individual mind.

You can see that this is so from the request that Moses made at the time that his death was drawing near. He said to God: Master of the Universe! The mind of every single person is known by You, and you know that no two people are exactly alike. When I leave them, I plead with You -- should you appoint a new leader, please appoint someone who will accept each and every person according to that person’s individuality. How do we know that Moses made this request? From the way he addressed God as Adonai Elohei ha-ruchot l’kol basar (Adonai, God of the various kinds of human spirit).



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MIDRASH TANHUMA, PINCHAS #10 (Torah commentary, Numbers)