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The Case of EMEF Amorim Lima

São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Every child learns: Autonomy and affection as components of inclusive education.

Introduction

The public elementary school Amorim Lima has a different approach to management; one that prioritizes autonomy and respect for students. When Cleiton, a student without a definitive diagnosis enrolled, the school entered a state of anxiety given his challenging behavior and different learning and relationship forming processes. It became necessary to reinforce one of the core pedagogical values of the school: unconditional belief that every child can learn and therefore belongs in school.

* This case study was developed based on a compilation of interviews of a manager, three teachers, two school staff and the parents of the student in question. We are immensely grateful to everyone who made themselves available to tell their stories and would particularly like to thank Liliane Gracetz, Conrado Hübner Mendes and Daniela Alonso for their support in the revision of this case.

EMEF Amorim Lima: A Turning Point

The Amorim Lima public elementary school (EMEF Amorim Lima) celebrated 40 years of existence in 1996 and gained Ana Elisa de Siqueira as its principal. At the time, the community was claiming better services for the students, especially regarding understaffing and frequently canceled classes. Inside the school, teachers were worried about high drop-out rates in public schools and were seeking solutions to keep students in it. Principal Ana Elisa made a radical choice: in addition to seeking more teachers to avoid cancelations, she had a hunch that dropout rates would diminish if the school became more participatory. As such, EMEF Amorim Lima broke down the barriers that separated its internal space. They also focused on extracurricular activities which increased the students' and community's participation in the school so much that they came to believe in a collective school management.

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This case study was researched through interviews of those involved. The case studies of Project Diversa presented are meant to be used by mediators in continuing education courses as a basis for discussion. They do not serve as an endorsement, source of primary data or effective nor ineffective teaching practices.

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In 2002, the consolidation of these movements resulted in the construction of a research committee made up of educators and parents who sought to collect data and analyze rates of learning, coexistence and engagement at the school. The work of this commission discovered a dissonance between the Pedagogical and Political Project² (PPP) and their daily activities. In an effort to align what was registered as the PPP and what was actually taking place, the school managers sought partnerships with other educators, pedagogues and psychologists, resulting in the connection between EMEF Amorim Lima and Escola da Ponte, a Portuguese school with a different approach and pedagogy.

From this moment on, Amorim Lima had a turning point; new values were adopted, leading to innovative practices in the classrooms.

New Values, New Practices

A new pedagogical policy project was defined based on the values of intellectual and moral autonomy of all those involved (students, educators, community), respect between people, and solidarity. These values were supported by a culture of and dedication to knowledge. Group activities became a core practice as a way to seek collective commitment to engagement and promote a democratic environment based on individual responsibility and shared public space. “Everyone is responsible for everyone else”, says the principal. For the policy to become a reality, it was necessary to invest in collective training of the educators through sharing common and best practices in educational planning and classroom management.

The new project envisioned democratic management of the school through various committees, with the Pedagogical council positioned at the center. In practice, it is possible to see the profound way in which the school and its classes have changed.

The lecture model was done away with, and only used in special circumstances; the new format favors research groups. The traditional gridlock of desks and walled classrooms were torn down to make way for spacious study and research lounges. From that point on, students formed groups of 5 instead of sitting in rows, and were seen as researchers.

The content of the annual curriculum was transformed into a research roadmap, conceptualized as an instrument of autonomy and focused on deep exploration of the topics. At the beginning of each school year, the student finds out what they are slated to learn. The roadmap is based on

² The Pedagogical and Political Project (PPP) is an obligatory document that Brazilian public schools have to develop in order to receive governmental funds.

the national curriculum, in line with the Law of Basic Guidelines (Lei das Diretrizes Básicas - LDB) of Brazilian Education, with the National Curricular Parameters (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais -PCN) and other educational reference documents.

The research roadmaps are designed to respect the pace and autonomy of the students. There is no default sequence that must be followed. The educators mediate their use, but students have the autonomy to decide the order that best suits them. They act as collaborators in the construction of knowledge (and not as its exclusive master). Two teachers accompany the groups in their tasks, troubleshooting questions and stimulating reflection on the themes proposed in the roadmap.

A tutoring system, where each student in the school has a designated tutor, complements this model. The tutor is responsible for monitoring the learner closely, helping their apprenticeship, implementing self-assessment processes and, if necessary, guiding the development of the student. This way, the student benefits from individualized attention, aiding them hone in on their unique trajectory, with a focus on their personal strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, the intellectual and cognitive training is complemented by artistic, physical and aesthetic components, focused on a wide array of human expression, since both body and emotionality are perceived as essential components of knowledge, thus development them is also the responsibility of the school.

Above all, the new pedagogical policy prizes *an attitude of respect towards all cultures, races, religions and any other form of diversity and holds a conviction that each student is unique, can and must constantly build and express their identity within a collective that does not mitigate or placate. We believe that every child is able to learn and develop at their own pace and on their own given the conditions to do so.* (Pedagogical Policy of EMEF Amorim Lima, p. 4)

“We understand each other’s weaknesses and skills. There are some children who are able to do things better than others, at a certain moment, and those who at that moment don’t fare so well, other times, do better in other times. At one time it’s one student, at another time it’s another. This gives educators the perception that everyone can learn” says Ana Elisa.

These characteristics make Amorim Lima a school with a perspective of inclusive education, which upholds, above all else, respect for individual rhythm and therefore the need not for mass, but personalized services which is focused on the student. And yet despite this open mindedness, the matriculation of students with disabilities brought the school immense challenges.

Inclusive Education at EMEF Amorim Lima

In 2004 when the school modification Project began, the first child with a disability matriculated into the school. However, the principal considers that the first efforts of inclusion occurred in 2006, to meet the needs of the child with severe autism. At that time, the whole school was still adjusting to the new teaching method, a challenge in its own right. The entrance of the child put fuel on the fire. Ana Elisa says “that was when we started to worry. The school was in complete anguish. The teachers were very distressed because the presence of the student raised difficult questions: what is the meaning of school for this child?”

In light of this challenge, the school moved to create partnerships. A Professional psychology group provided two psychologists to monitor the child. But this intervention went far beyond supporting just this one student; the professionals began to help the teachers, staff, other students, etc. to understand that the place of that child was at school. Gradually, people’s perspectives changed. The principal pointed out that accepting differences is easy for children who inherently create new strategies to build relationships that include everyone.

The change wasn’t quick or without pain, but according to the principal “today we know that these children are part of our school. That they have the right to be in school, and it’s up to us, the educators, to figure out how it should be.”

However, Cleiton’s needs brought a new component, forcing the institution to revisit its core values and strategies. The school, conceived by its creators as a temple of knowledge now faced the unknown.

Cleiton and the Anguish of the Unknown

Cleiton was born in Bahia³ countryside and developed more slowly than expected. His mother, Míriam, remembers comparing him to her nephew of the same age and realizing that something was wrong. When he began to crawl, his parents noticed that he relied on his toes. They began a battery of doctor appointments, exams and treatments. He was diagnosed as deaf, which was inconceivable to his parents since they had noticed he followed sounds easily (for example, he focused his attention on objects that made noise when they fell). His father, Hilário, moved to

³ A state at Northeast of Brazil.

São Paulo⁴ for a job opportunity and his mother, figuring that there would be better treatment options for her son in São Paulo, also moved.

The battery of tests and consultation continued. He was diagnosed with adenoid hypertrophy and shortened tendons in the feet, which were both corrected surgically. Difficulty communicating led him to speech therapy.

But they were never able to precisely determine what was affecting Cleiton's cognitive development. Was it a genetic anomaly? No one was able to say with certainty.

The boy started studying at an institution which historically worked with HIV positive children. However in 2006, the institution sent him to EMEF Amorim Lima.

When a child enrolls in school in Brazil, parents are not obligated to inform the school of any disabilities. Thus, the EMEF Amorim Lima accepted Cleiton without any information about his past. Many teachers and staff members, knowing where he previously studied, assumed he was HIV positive.

But his behavior soon began to give him away. He was agitated, upset, hit other children, pulled their hair and had very little patience. He frequently got up in the middle of class and left the room. He had bouts of aggression and swore loudly in the hallways.

His first teacher, Anna Cecília, an experienced teacher dedicated to the new values of the school, was taken by surprise due to his behavior, not having any information that would help her. She managed to accept him and, along with other children, created strategies for coexistence. But the school staff entered a state of anxiety and in an attempt to control this negative feeling, began repeatedly asking the parents to come to the school. The teachers wanted to know what he was diagnosed with so that they could "walk on solid ground," but the family did not have any information to offer them. Friction between the parents and the school began: the parents refused to believe in Cleiton's behavioral problems since he did not act that way at home with his parents. They were bitter over the treatment their son was receiving and for being accused of problems all the time. The school was perturbed by the presence of the boy. The principal remembers: "It's hard to admit, but there came a moment where everything was so chaotic that we felt it would be better if he no longer came to school. . ."

⁴ Capital of the state of São Paulo, at Southeast of Brazil, which is the richest city on the country.

The climate between the family and teachers became even tenser when the teachers decided Cleiton should repeat first grade. When he returned from vacation, his aggression continued and his new teacher did not know how to deal with it, further increasing Cleiton's anxiety and hindering group socialization. The coping strategies developed with the colleagues the previous year vanished, as they were in other class, now. His new teacher frequently became overwhelmed and was often reduced to tears.

Cleiton didn't understand why he couldn't be with his old colleagues. He missed the social connections he had made and saw the new teacher as an intruder. He needed to feel part of a group again.

That is when the problem reached its height. Cleiton, his family and his teachers were lost; their relationships terrible. With all this tumult, the student barely learned anything.

However, the family still wanted to partner with the school: they reduced the amount of time Cleiton spent there, frequently visited the school and joined them on field trips. At this point the school realized they didn't know what to do. They needed help.

Acceptance and Change

Gradually, the parents came to understand the needs of the school and took the first step towards solving the problem: they accepted the suggestion of the educators and send Cleiton to therapy. The school did not excuse themselves from the process and asked for support from the therapist as well. Changes occurred primarily in the emotion realm: while working with the student, the therapist was able to show the school that Cleiton placed value on it in general, and particularly respected his teacher. This change in perception was due to a modification in the staff attitude towards the student: they began to feel valorized by him. Overtime, tensions subsided and the teacher was able to keep Cleiton in the classroom.

The school also started to change their stance related to Cleiton's parents and began informing them of their child progress during PTA (Parent-Teachers Association) meetings. As Cleiton felt more integrated and accepted by the teacher, his relationships became calmer and he began learning more.

Cleiton then went on to second grade. His new teacher, who was also his tutor, created a strong bond with him. A process of mutual acceptance began to take shape. It wasn't just Cleiton who began to accept his role as a student, but the school also realized that he belonged there. Reflecting on the changed perception of the school, the principal says:

Everyone needs to let a lot of things go. We, educators, need to let go the idea that a school is just a place to learn Portuguese, math, geography, history. . . that is very difficult for educators. But we have to understand that school is much more than that, particularly in elementary school. One has to want the children to stay in school, no matter what kind of challenges they present. We need to understand that children with disabilities are part of society, and as a part of society, they need to be where social life takes place, which is in a school.

Understanding the students as a heterogeneous group facilitated Cleiton's development as it allowed him to excel in certain activities, dispelling the perception that he was incompetent. One of his skills, for example, was the ability to recognize the letters of his own name. Many of his classmates did not yet possess this skill, but Cleiton found it easy and sometimes helped his colleagues learn and recognize the letters of their names. The class then began to see him as competent.

He created a new repertoire based on knowledge through which he showed his abilities and utility in regards to the differences between students, which in turn affected his relationships and helped him to understand himself better.

A core policy of the school's Project became evident to the staff at Amorim Lima: **every child learns**. It might be in a different way, and it might require new teaching strategies, but first and foremost, it is necessary to believe in each one's ability to learn: educators must invest in understanding how to teach since the right to education must be guaranteed. Based on this value, one must "construct knowledge regarding how to reach each individual despite their differences" confirms Teacher Anna Cecília. One must create educational and instructional procedures, enabling technology and partnerships.

New Pedagogical Procedures in the Classroom

Based on this newly elaborated value, Cleiton's teachers modified their practices in the classroom not only to enable his integration but to also make it easier for him to learn. Ana Elídia, his second teacher states: "It's not an easy task, but it's not impossible either. One needs to adapt on a daily basis, express doubts and seek out partners. . . Alone, I would not have succeeded. . . Family and other students need to act as partners and participate in the process and decision making. I as an educator should not try to make decisions alone, that is the big mistake that we made, not just with students who needed special attention, but with everything."

The teacher rearranged her routine in a way that met Cleiton's needs without neglecting the other students. The school slowly learned that he had a different need of space. To address this issue, the teachers used conversation circles so the students could express their opinions and create accurate perceptions about "differential treatment" and how and why Cleiton was now able to leave the classroom when he felt it was necessary.

To guarantee Cleiton became literate, the school adapted their learning materials to include letter blocks and games, especially scrabble. With the letter blocks, which students could manipulate freely, it became easier for him to create words more concretely. The letters, made of durable material, could be moved around in a more dynamic form than writing on a blackboard

The partnerships that the school and the family established then helped improve the relationships between the student, the family and the school. Cleiton became more confident and began enjoying going to class more and more.

Gladys, Cleiton's second grade teacher, played a fundamental role in his development, due to the strong emotional bond she established with him. She had to modify how she looked at others, and focus more individual attention on everyone instead of solely focusing on technical aspects and content. She states that by addressing the emotional aspect of learning, you can improve students' attention and ability to learn.

In her function as a tutor, she created a specific routine for him. As part of this routine, she used games, like scrabble and lots of colors since she noticed that these kinds of activities captured his attention longer. What he considered play time was actually attached to educational lessons.

At the same time, the confidence of the teacher and their emotional bond diminished Cleiton's aggression, making his inappropriate emotional outburst less and less frequent. The teacher went so far as to help Cleiton change his tone of voice in the classroom as many perceive it to be "angry" and bothered the students.

Thanks to Gladys' specialization in mathematics, Cleiton became more and more interested in the discipline. The cost and change received when buying chewing gum was used to develop basic concepts, as was the passage of days, such as "how many days are there before your birthday?"

Conversation Circles

One of the most important devices that helped Cleiton participate in the school community was not directly linked to the content of the curriculum. The device had been created during the

pedagogical modification, with the goal of placing an emphasis on unity and development of group reflection with the goal of resolving daily conflicts. Conversation circles existed where students selected subjects to be discussed by the whole class. Cleiton, who frequently became a topic of discussion, always participated in the circle just like any other student. In this space, the students could openly discuss the difficulty they faced in relationships, not just with Cleiton, but in general. Through this activity it became clear that all relationships are subject to pitfalls which need to be discussed and worked on in order to improve. With this opportunity to express and position themselves, and also listen to other students, they were able to reflect on their own behavior and prejudice.

The conversation circles proved to be a very effective tool of inclusion that permitted everyone to reflect on everything, where everyone had the right to talk and felt the weight of responsibility in maintaining relationships.

Cleiton's Development

The changes that permitted Cleiton to participate in the school, along with the partnerships and improved relationship with his family had a positive effect on Cleiton's autonomy. At the time that this case study was written, he enjoyed new things, getting to know new people and his independence. He felt like part of the collective and participated in activities such as the research groups, activities and conversation circles at his own pace, but in an integrated way.

The main change that the teacher adopted was in the teaching pace, not the content. He likes being independent, and asks for help when he feels it is necessary; he also needs to be monitored a bit more closely. The teachers reported that several repetitions helped him grasp concepts.

In terms of literacy, he still struggles to understand texts, but in four years he went from recognizing the letters of his name to reading and writing words. He now understands that written language is a form of communication. In the beginning he habitually ate notebook paper, but now he understands the paper is meant for writing.

He now makes drawings, paints and cuts. His sense of responsibility and respect has increased in relation to his teachers and colleagues. He uses his force (which was once used to attack people) to help others, showing his true potential.

His parents, also integral to the development of their son, have become aware of the achievements their son has made, while also recognizing that he has his own pace for learning:

“Does he struggle? Of course. There are days when he is hyperactive . . . but we keep going. Today he knows the difference between things. Before he couldn’t explain himself . . . now he can do some basic math and he already knows how to write his name. It’s a slow victory, but we will succeed. As his teachers say: only with time will he learn.”

Discussion Points

The importance of school is that it prepares him today for society tomorrow. It prepares him for work, for being a Professional. A normal school can provide all the opportunities needed to learn and even go beyond. The labor market is there, without limitation, with room for everyone, regardless of a person’s disabilities. One just needs to be prepared, that’s why I believe in his future. (Statement from Miriam, Cleiton’s Mother).

We are going to fight until the end so that he can reach his goals. We won’t differentiate him from other people. We are all human. Unfortunately, prejudice still exists. But we need to prepare society to take care of this type of problem better, because it’s not easy. Only those who face the issue understand it. (Statement from Hilário, Cleiton’s Father).

This case study presents various strategies that EMEF Amorim Lima used both in classroom and in school management to make room for the student, Cleiton, to participate in all of the school activities. Above all, the changes the school made are a result of deep reflection by the school regarding its role. Returning to the original question put forth by the principal, one must consider: what is the role of the school for students with special needs?