

One Size Does Not Fit All: A Case of a Student Who Encountered a Problem in an Exam

Assem Rakhimbekova

Drawing on a narrative story of a gifted student, who studies at the school for gifted children, and who suffers from stuttering that made him difficult to articulate his words and deliver his ideas properly, this case study draws the attention to the problem of children with special educational needs, who are neglected at schools and have to cope with the study tasks that are designed for normal and gifted children. The case begins with describing the case genre and the context of the school setting, and then explores the events and challenges faced by a student, who encounters a problem in an exam. This narrative research asks readers to consider how teachers and school leaders must accommodate learners with special needs.

Keywords: stutter, gifted children, external summative exam.

Case Genre and Context

As a distinct form of qualitative research, a narrative design allows reporting the experience of individuals, and the discussion of the meaning of those experiences for the individuals and community (Creswell, 2012). Narrative inquiry affirms the relevance of learning from participants in a setting, while the learning occurs through the stories narrated by individuals, such as teachers or students; and the literature plays a minor role in directing the study (Creswell, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hare, 2010). This case presents a narrative of the experience of a boy with special educational needs, who encountered a problem in an exam while studying in a school for gifted children; the study employs pseudonyms for the main characters.

Amir was accepted in a school for gifted children when he was thirteen years old, since the school only accepted students from grade seven. He passed all the necessary examinations on the following subjects: mathematics, the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages; and logical thinking. He was accepted as one of the students who scored the most points. All the exams were in a written format, and Amir did not have to pass any oral examinations, which would have been very challenging for him as he spoke with a stutter. He suffered from stuttering, and it was very difficult for him to articulate his words and deliver his ideas properly. Although, as his mother once stated during a parental meeting, Amir spoke better, albeit with a slight stutter, when he was at home in a surrounding where he felt comfortable and free. Amir's curator also claimed that he spoke with a slight stutter when he communicated with his peers, and that he would even sometimes relate anecdotes to his friends. Amir was one of the high performing students in his class. He excelled in mathematics, physics and chemistry. He also demonstrated a very good knowledge in his IT lessons. Language teachers also highlighted his strengths saying that he wrote very good essays, compositions and other written works. However, they also stated that it was very difficult for Amir to narrate a story, or express his opinions before the class or a teacher. Amir also participated in extra-curricular activities; he played the dombra, a Kazakh national instrument, professionally and participated in various musical contests and competitions. Overall, he was one of the high achieving and well-performing students at the school. The only thing that he struggled with was his speech.

School Setting and Regulations. The school, where Amir was enrolled, accepted children on a competitive basis, enabling to educate gifted or talented children. The curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning processes were organized to serve the children at the school. These children were assessed formatively at every lesson. Then at the end of the term they wrote summative examinations on different subjects. The school also provided tutorials and extra-curricular activities to support children who needed additional lessons. In grade ten, students pass external summative examinations on the following subjects: mathematics, Kazakh, English, and another subject that is chosen by the learners. The external English language exam includes four parts: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Each section of the exam is held according to strict timeline limitations. Listening is 30 minutes, and one hour is allocated to reading and writing. The speaking exam is usually conducted on a different day. Each student is given a fixed time (5-10 minutes) during which he or she is to complete all the tasks. All the parts of the

exam are summed up and students get their final results. This exam is obligatory and students prepare for it with their teachers and attend extra special classes. The teachers are very supportive and always ready to help learners.

Case Narrative

Problem and Teachers' Concern. When Amir was in grade ten, the time to take his external summative exams arrived. Amir did not want to show his concern about the speaking exam, however, his English language teacher did worry about this. Amir's teacher and examiner felt the need to take some steps before the actual exam, while his teacher stated that she had no concerns about the various sections of the exam except the speaking part. Extra classes were set up to prepare him for the exam and Amir received additional support and help. The issue with Amir and his possible failure was taken to the vice principal, who was very supportive of Amir, since he was aware of his strengths as well as his speech disorder. The decision was taken to talk to the principal and to write an explanatory letter to the committee, which was in Astana, explaining them that the child required additional time (not 5-10, but 15-20 minutes) to pass the speaking exam. Providing an additional time for student is both common and acceptable practice in special needs accommodations, including cases of English language learners (Schissel, 2014).

False Expectations. The actual day of the exam was imminent. The preparation procedure was successful, and most students felt confident. However, Amir felt differently. He did not want to show his anxiety, but it could be detected from his behavior. Surprisingly, Amir's parents were uninterested in the exam procedure, even though they knew that he was going to face a huge challenge. Moreover, he was an A student who was expected to obtain Altyn Belgi, the mark awarded to an excellent student in the Kazakh education system, the equivalent of the Gold Medal. Hence, if he failed the exam he could lose the opportunity to get Altyn Belgi, which would be another stress for him.

Case Outcome

Two days before the exam the vice principal was approached. He said that there was no response from the examination committee regarding the possibility of providing an additional time for Amir. On the last day before the exam, the vice principal stated that the rules given by the external exam committee could not be broken, and that Amir would be given the fixed time to take the speaking exam. This demonstrated the unfortunate and high educational accountability, and the top down approach of the educational system in the country that placed Amir undue pressure and stress. However, both his examiner and his English teacher, tried to support and help him, and this help proved beneficial for his emotional well-being. As Brookfield (1995) states, the care giving role of teachers is much more important in developing and maintaining children's emotional states rather than only developing their cognitive skills, which is why it was crucial that Amir would feel supported throughout the process. The other valuable idea by Brookfield (1995) involves building restorative relationships with learners who are generally excluded. One of the four techniques that was suggested by him was a 'non abandonment', which implies that a child is not alone, and is not abandoned by others with his problem, instead teachers try to support him, which helps him to feel open, unsuspecting, and unafraid of his environment (Brookfield, 1995). Hence, the support, that Amir's teachers provided, helped him feel safe and secure, despite his challenge. On the actual day of the exam Amir's teachers understood that it was meaningless to wait for reasonable solutions from the administration of the school and other authorities, as they supported the idea that *one size fits all* learners and all of them should cope with this successfully. Because Amir could only pass the exam successfully if he was provided with additional time, it was necessary to come up with a solution that would best work for him. It was decided to allow him to answer as many questions as he could, and assess him on only his possible three or four answers as he would only manage to answer three questions out of six. The result was that Amir successfully passed all his examinations, and demonstrated his will to learn and combat difficult situations.

As educators, teachers should have the confidence and a sense of care and love towards their learners. One of the valuable ideas that have emerged from Amir's situation is that learners' strengths should be assessed prior to their weaknesses, because their strengths help them to overcome their weaknesses. Amir's strengths helped his teachers to believe in him and his abilities.

Teaching Notes

1. This case invites teachers and school leaders to think about their practices and of the 'one size does not fit all' approach. It is important remembering that every child has his own strengths and weaknesses, which should be taken into account.
2. This case also raises the issue of high educational accountability and the top-down approach in the system of education.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you evaluate the case?
2. What might be the alternative solutions for this case?
3. If you were the principal of this school or one of the members of the administration, how would you address the problem?
4. Was the decision taken by the teachers reasonable and fair enough with regards to other students?

Suggested Readings

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