

Normalcy: A Fleeting Term, An Obsolete Idea

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October 17, 3892

Recent discovery of documents from the early 21st century have provided further evidence for a time when those with “special needs” were a minority. As historians tell us, it was a time where in fact children with cognitive and physical disabilities were few among us. This new evidence brings up the very question we have been struggling with for centuries: What is normal? If what was normal back then is abnormal now and vice versa, which is the correct normal? How can we define normalcy if it is constantly changing? This evidence awakens us to the possibility that normalcy is not something that changes, it is something that has never existed.

The question that has arisen due to the discovery of these documents is should the term “normal” be erased from our vocabulary and should we treat all individuals the same. Or does the term “normal” benefit society in that it helps us identify those that need extra, individual attention?

Diary entries from Tallinna Laagna Lasteaed-Pohikool in Estonia have given us insight into how individualized education plans for “abnormal” children were.

“There are these people in the back of my room. They’re always there. They sit and watch, like I’m some fish in a fish bowl, and they scribble in their little notebooks. I keep asking my mom about them, she said they just like to learn about how kids learn. I think she’s lying to me. I asked around. Finally, I got a 6th grader to explain it to me. He said they are working on my IEP, my Individualized Education Plan. They are going to make a plan for me to learn motor, cognitive, communicative, social, and self-help skills. I don’t understand why they are observing me like some caged animal. I think maybe if they asked I could tell them

how I would like to learn. But maybe they know something I don’t.”

From this entry, you can also see the absurdly high involvement of professionals, constantly diagnosing problems and looking for textbook solutions. This can be seen from an entry from another student at the same school.

“I have very busy days. I walk through the hall of my school where everywhere is posted “Together getting better every day.” It’s a bit intimidating, that I will never be 100% better. “Better” is something I might never reach, but I have a lot of people helping me get there. First I go to my occupational therapist. She helps me not be so scared of loud noises. Then I go to my classes where my teachers teach me about math, science, history, English, and reading. Then I go to my speech therapist so I can say my words right. Then I go to my physical therapist so I can work on my motor skills. I have a lot to get better at, don’t I?”

Should we question our lack of professionalism today? With the rapid increase of diagnoses from the 21st century to the 25th century, diagnoses began to lose all meaning. This led to a decrease in diagnoses in the 28th century. Labels began to drop off because everyone had one and therefore they failed to define a person as different, or of needing special help. But maybe that individualized attention wasn’t so bad. Consider this entry, from a girl at a blind and deaf school in Tallinn.

“My family is not in a home like most people, it is in my school. I was brought from an orphanage when I was two years old to the Helen school. Here, they take care of me. I am surrounded by many teachers who have watched me grow up. They love me and I love them. They know me, like really know me. They know what I like, how I learn, everything about me. I think sometimes they know me better than I know myself. They tell me that when I was younger, I used to grip them so tightly, maybe scared that they would leave. My hands would travel all around their arms, up to their face. I wanted to know what they looked like, so I would feel their eyes, their nose, mouth, hair, ears. I tried to understand, but it was difficult. Thankfully, they help me with everything. I have my own schedule I follow every day. I have a place to sleep every night. I even have a kitchen that I cook in. I love to cook and bake and I think I’m quite good at it. I am preparing to go to a school to become a chef. I couldn’t do any of

this without my teachers who are preparing me to live a life of my own."

The fact that she was surrounded by people who loved her and took care of her helped her survive and live a good life. She not only had the individualized attention from one professional, but from many.

In the 21st century, diagnoses that set a child apart were so rare that homes were created for just these children where they could learn to later function properly in society. Consider these two journal entries from children at the Solhagagruppen in Stockholm, Sweden.

"I wish I had more friends. People just don't seem to like to play with me. That is why I'm so happy I get to go to Solhagagruppen every weekend. I was scared to go at first. It wasn't part of my routine. Every weekend I sit and watch my favorite TV shows. I have a list, and I watch them in order, the same way. Then I play my computer games, 30 minutes on each one. So when my parents told me I was sleeping somewhere else, in a different bed, in a different room, I was not happy. I couldn't explain why, so I just yelled, screamed, and cried. What if they don't have a TV? What if they don't have a computer? I was so scared. But they dragged me there, and I couldn't be happier, because although my schedule is different, I have friends. I get to eat with them and play with them. We like the same TV shows and computer games."

"I started going to Solhagagruppen when I was three. Now I am 21 and ready to go and live on my own. If you told my parents 15 years ago that I would one day live on my own, they would have laughed. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't get dressed, shower, cook, eat, or do anything on my own. But I learned. Solhagagruppen gave me schedules, with pictures, so I could easily follow step by step how to do things like shower. When all I would do was watch TV all day, they showed me a picture schedule to make me feel better about leaving the TV for a while to do something else because I knew I would come back to the TV later. This allowed me to experience new things, and even to make friends. They gave me the gift of competence, and now I'm leaving for the real world."

Would these children have been so happy and successful if not given the special attention due to their diagnosis?

Did they give too much individualized, special attention in the past, or do we not give enough now? If we still labeled and diagnosed children today, each one would have something. Is it too much to ask of our schools to therefore create an individualized learning plan for each child? Is a label necessary in order to teach a child the way he or she should be taught? Things were done incorrectly in the past just as things were done incorrectly today. Maybe in the 21st century, less attention should have been given to those with labels in order to even out the individualized attention given to every child. Today, we should also work on giving individualized attention to every child.

Our children haven't changed, only the labels have. In the past, everyone had special needs, just like everyone does today. We just don't have the same vocabulary for it. Everyone is an individual with his or her own needs. We should learn from the past, from the voices of the children who lived then, in order to help our children now.

Stella Nova was an interesting preschool in Stockholm, Sweden, that defied the idea in the past of labeling and then giving special attention to those with labels. One teacher wrote:

"We had a boy come here once. We were supposed to give him coca cola every time he did something right. I couldn't do this. I wasn't giving any other kid coca cola when he cleaned up after playing or when he used the bathroom. Why should this kid get coca cola?"

They did not believe in seeing certain kids with special needs. All of their kids were seen as having special needs and each one was treated as an individual. A five-year-old child, graduating from the preschool, wrote to an incoming two-year-old child:

"One day I told my teacher that I liked birds and really wanted one as a pet. I thought it was funny how they talked like people. The other kids in my class agreed, so we did a whole project on birds. And we didn't just read about birds and facts all about them. We drew pictures of them, made bird puppets, went on walks outside to see birds, and we even got to go to the zoo! They listened to me and what I wanted! They taught me about things so that I could understand We are all stars, that's what my teacher says. This school made me feel special, and no matter what you like, or what you're like, it will make you feel special too."