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Parents who have several children know only too well that each one is different. Now apply that to the classroom. Most teachers will agree that all students have particular learning styles and skills, but strangely our schools operate more readily on similarities than differences.

In times when our schools strive to deliver inclusive education, in which all students have equal access and opportunities to learning, this emphasis on similarities over differences seems contradictory.

This issue is most apparent when students struggle to “fit in” at school. This can present itself as behaviours such as falling behind, disrupting the class, not following teacher instruction, poor peer...
relationships, or truancy.

Usually the school first tries to deal with the issue in-school. Teachers and other school staff bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to meet the needs of their students but, as would be expected, their ability to “fix” a student is limited.

Limitations include time pressures, imposed performance indicators (such as NAPLAN results) and the availability of in-school but out-of-classroom support staff such as the principal or year-level co-ordinators.

I was a school psychologist in Queensland for almost a decade and witnessed this firsthand. Few schools have the resources to employ a psychologist of their own. Instead, psychologists are frequently stretched across a number of schools and called on when in-school options have been exhausted, or when a psychologist’s expertise in testing or assessment is required.

Because our schools are more comfortable accommodating similarities, when principals and teachers do come face to face with difference the focus is on “fixing” this difference, and the onus is put on the student.

The views of school staff can quickly move from seeing something different about a student to seeing something “wrong” with him or her. This perspective shift may occur alongside punitive actions like suspension. The majority of students I saw were those the school was looking to exclude permanently simply because they didn’t “fit in”.

I was once called in to visit a Grade 5 student named Kevin. Despite being only ten years old, Kevin was already on the path to being permanently expelled from his school after several suspensions.

His teachers reported concern about his behaviour, saying he always seemed distracted in class, was unable to focus on his work and had difficulty keeping up. It took several weeks before Kevin revealed to me that he was preoccupied with wanting to spend more time with his dad, a truck driver who delivered freight interstate and was often away for weeks at a time.

Kevin devised specific plans to be closer to his dad. This included making strong instant coffees with lots of sugar in the afternoon so he could stay awake when his dad was home. On these nights, while his parents watched TV, he would position himself silently behind the couch until well past midnight as his way of being close to his father.

Kevin became one of those students who didn’t “fit in”. His teacher struggled to engage him in classwork and couldn’t find a way around Kevin’s non-conforming in-class behaviour. Making matters worse, Kevin’s mum thought the reason it was difficult to get him out of bed in the morning was his lack of interest in school.

No one is suggesting that teachers should take on the role of social workers or psychologists – although there were occasions when teachers I spoke to thought that was what I was asking of them.
Instead, the question I repeatedly put to teachers was this: did their actions in the classroom and schoolyard reflect the kind of relationship they wanted with students?

This probe directly asked staff to consider what value they placed on relationships with students. At the least, this question helped them determine how next steps could be taken.

Kevin’s situation provides an example of what educators, parents and school support staff (including psychologists) are fortunately coming to realise – that “difference” might require a response, but it doesn’t necessarily need “fixing”.

The idea that a student should need “fixing” to help them “fit in” says as much about a school’s inability to respond to difference as it does about the school’s capacity to sustain an inclusive community.

Many teachers report that they are motivated in their jobs because they want to make a difference in people’s lives. But are making a difference and recognising and accepting difference mutually exclusive? They shouldn’t be.

Teachers around the world are increasingly rejecting demands to make students “fit in” by questioning the increased use of standardised testing or the failure to recognise how important education is as a social determinant of health.

Students – or anyone for that matter – are more likely to experience exclusion when they don’t “fit in”. Rather than seeing struggles with teachers, school, family or classwork as symptomatic of personal deficits, it is far more hopeful for all involved to shift perception and recognise difference as an invitation to create more inclusive communities.

Victoria University will be hosting one-day workshops in late March in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth for teachers, school counsellors, psychologists and student support staff to explore the impact of psychology in education.

Editor’s note: Tim will be answering questions between 2 and 3pm AEDT on Wednesday March 11. You can ask your questions about the article in the comments below.