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Introduction

'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.'

– Henry David Thoreau

It wasn't until I started school that I realised just how different the drummer I heard was. I vividly remember my very first day of school. Mrs Castleberry, my teacher, asked us six-year-olds to colour a worksheet picture of an apple. I dutifully pulled out my two favourite crayons, green and blue, and laboriously tried to get large chunks of coloured wax to stay within the confines of the fruit outline centred on the paper. Not being blessed with fine motor skills, my strokes made their way beyond the boundaries of the paper itself.

I was quite pleased with my final product – until a dismayed Mrs C. held up my paper for everyone to see and pronounced: 'Boys and girls, look at this. First of all, apples are NOT blue and green. But more importantly, I said to 'colour in the apple', and look what Debbie did ... she went outside the lines!' With a grand show of dismay she wadded up my paper and tossed it in the rubbish bin. I can still remember the collective 'uh-oh's' as other students quickly tried to conform their masterpieces to her expectations.

We soon learned that there was to be no ‘going outside the lines’ that year! We were led through a tedious nine-month term of being quiet, sitting still and repeating exactly what we were told to do. It was not a good year. As one who never made it out of the ‘Slug Group’ (or whatever insipid name she used for the low readers) I found myself constantly feeling like something was wrong with me. While some of the students were able to satisfy Mrs Castleberry’s every directive, I was just thankful that I remembered to change my pajama bottoms for real clothes before I showed up at school. I knew the drum I heard was indeed ‘distant and far away’, but rather than learning to cherish my ‘outside the lines’ thinking, I felt ashamed and frustrated. I remember sitting on the back row thinking, ‘But I’m smart, too!’.

The good news is that there have always been some teachers, and later I had some of them, who have the perception, the imagination and the courage it takes to go beyond the traditional teacher-centred model. They are able to look inside children and see not only their unique gifts, but also to use those gifts for engaging, for motivating and for challenging. Instead of having us march to their personal, inflexible beats, they encourage us to find our own ways, our own rhythms, our own strengths. They are able to teach us by recognising and utilising the gifts we already have. This book is dedicated to all those teachers who do indeed drum to the beat of their different marchers and it is written for all those who wish they could.

‘Beat of a Different Marcher’

By Debbie Silver & Monte Selby

Bobby marches to the beat of his different drummers
Jeffrey does his reading, but he can't do numbers
Shawna's up and talkin' 90 miles an hour, again
Can't find the book or pencil, that would be Ben
Hyperactive, dyslexic, class clown, non-reader
Upper class, no class, off-task, bottom feeder
Little Arty's a challenge; Martin's a dream
We've seen them all, they all need to be seen.

All children in reach when we find their rhythm –
The step, the dance, the song within them
That's a better journey, but so much harder
Too extraordinary, but so much smarter
To drum to the beat of each different marcher.

Sandy's in the slow group, a proven low achiever
She's the small quiet one, not a class leader
Crayons in her hand, she can draw what she knows best
But no room for pictures on the standardised test.
Ballerina, bricklayer, biochemist, football player
Diesel driver, drum major, diva-destined, dragon slayer –
Some kids have a chance, with a different choice
To show what they know, they must have a voice.

All children in reach when we find their rhythm –
The step, the dance, the song within them
That's a better journey, but so much harder
Too extraordinary, but so much smarter
To drum to the beat of each different marcher.

Introspective, oversized, minimised, criticised
Round holes, square lives, not much room for compromise.
There's a new song not yet written
For each and every child, will we listen?

All children in reach when we find their rhythm –
The step, the dance, the song within them
That's a better journey, but so much harder
Too extraordinary, but so much smarter
To drum to the beat of each different marcher.
Let's all dance to the beat of each different marcher!