Special Education: A Service, Not a Sentence
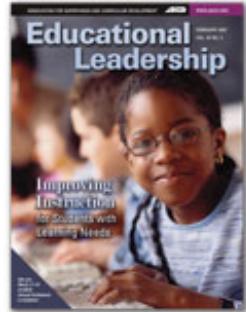
Patrick A. Schwarz

The general classroom is the right place to support students with disabilities—even when their behavior presents significant challenges.

Oscar is an inquisitive, charming 5th grader who loves baseball, music, and computers. He has dark hair, a quick smile, and an engaging wit. He lives with his mother, father, and brother in a blue-collar Chicago suburb. His parents are supportive and involved with his schooling.

Because he has significant auditory processing problems and is an English language learner, Oscar receives both special education services and English as a Second Language (ESL) support. Oscar's education team—which includes his parents, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, an ESL teacher, a speech therapist, and a social worker—is hardworking and believes in him.

During 1st through 3rd grades, Oscar attended a self-contained classroom for students labeled as having learning disabilities. His individualized education program (IEP) also provided for speech/language and social work services to support his learning.

When Oscar started 4th grade, his school adopted an inclusive education model. His special education, ESL, and speech/language services were now delivered primarily in the general education classroom through adaptations, differentiated instruction, and universal design strategies. His team planned together weekly, with the general educator e-mailing electronic lesson plans in advance to all team members (a school requirement). His teacher provided a range of supports to help with his significant auditory processing challenges, including graphic organizers, condensed versions of books, extra review of major concepts, and opportunities to work in collaborative peer groups. In this inclusive education model, Oscar did reasonably well academically and developed positive relationships with his teachers.

Unfortunately, Oscar's situation suddenly changed for the worse.

Oscar's IEP team noted falling grades and increased misbehavior, including fights and outbursts of anger. The school social worker discovered that Oscar had joined a gang. The team immediately investigated the causes of Oscar's deteriorating behavior and learned

that his maternal grandfather, to whom he had been close, had recently passed away. Apparently, Oscar was expressing his grief at this significant loss by acting out.

As the team struggled to develop interventions to get Oscar back on track, Oscar brought matters to a head: He and two other boys started a fire in a classroom trash can. The team knew that Oscar tended to be a follower in such behavior rather than an initiator. They believed that the boys acted on impulse, never thinking about the potential danger of the fire spreading. When asked why he had helped light the fire, Oscar said he thought it would be "interesting and cool to do this with his friends." As required by school policies, all three boys were expelled from the school.

What could Oscar's team do now?

Students' Right to the Least Restrictive Environment

Because Oscar's school district operates under an inclusive education model, his education team's goal is to get him back into his neighborhood school and to include him in the general education classroom. In adopting this model, the district has recognized that special education is a service, not a sentence. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, special education services must provide the supports that will enable all learners to achieve success in the general curriculum whenever possible.

Further, educators in Oscar's school believe that inclusion is a better social and education policy for everyone. When we include students with special learning needs through a supportive model, everyone learns about diversity—and about themselves. As time goes on, our commitment to inclusive education helps us create better communities where everyone belongs.

In working with schools across the United States and internationally, however, I have observed that many schools still place students with special learning needs in separate programs—for convenience and because "that's what is offered." This practice is astonishing given that special education law mandates individualization. Grouping a wide variety of students in the same self-contained classroom just because they share the label "learning disabled" defeats the whole idea of individualization. All students with learning disabilities do not need the same supports. Further, referral and assessment procedures often place students in segregated environments before an attempt is made to serve them in a general education classroom.

To fulfill the requirements of education law, schools must assume that students with disabilities belong in the general education classroom with appropriate supports. Students should never have to earn their way into a general education environment.

Of course, students sometimes earn their way *out*—and Oscar did. For everyone's benefit, Oscar needed to leave the general education classroom for a while to get special help in an alternate setting. All too often, after an infraction like Oscar's, the education team is tempted to throw away the key to the general education classroom and not attempt to bring the student back in again. It would have been easy (yet illegal) for Oscar's team to wash their hands of him, considering how disturbing his offense was.

But Oscar's team members not only believed in him—they also believed in inclusive education. So before changing his placement, his team created a written reintegration plan to bring him back to the least restrictive environment—the general education classroom in his home school.

The Reintegration Plan

Oscar's reintegration plan specified that for one academic quarter he would attend an alternative day school for students whose actions have caused harm to themselves or others, where he would receive increased social services and therapeutic supports. Such schools exist in many U.S. urban and suburban areas and sometimes operate under joint agreements, serving more than one school district. Oscar's alternative school practiced the Native American concept of a *circle of courage*, stressing generosity, caring, belonging, and mastery to "reclaim youth at risk" (Bendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). The plan indicated that Oscar would receive individual and group therapy sessions during the day to help him examine his current relationships, decide which ones were healthy, and create and maintain a more productive friendship circle. For the rest of the day, his alternative school would teach Oscar using the same curriculum and instructional materials that he would have experienced in his home school. This use of identical materials would make it easier for him to go back to his neighborhood school.

If Oscar did well in his alternative school and had no incidents of misbehavior for one quarter, he would be integrated for part of the day into his neighborhood school with continued social work and therapeutic supports for two months. After two months, the team would meet to review Oscar's situation. If he had demonstrated an understanding of why lighting the fire was wrong, made reparation for the infraction, and formed healthier social relationships, Oscar would be returned to his general education homeroom with the special education and related services supports he had previously received, as well as additional therapeutic supports outside school.

Oscar's IEP team implemented the reintegration plan. Happily, he met the criteria and has now returned to his general education classroom at his neighborhood school. His team feels a sense of accomplishment. They realized the seriousness of Oscar's situation, created

a reintegration plan, and put the plan in place. Now Oscar is once again a member of his neighborhood school in the least restrictive environment of the general education classroom.

Even better, as a result of the experience Oscar has been through, some of his supports have increased to ensure that he maintains his success. Oscar attends social work sessions at school twice a week, where he continues to examine his relationships with gang-involved kids and to work on his decision-making skills. In addition, Oscar's family takes him to a therapist once a week. Communication is an essential part of Oscar's new plan. His parents have given written permission for his therapist and social worker to share information. He is coping with the loss of his grandfather much better with these increased supports.

Oscar's classroom teacher stays in close daily touch with his family through both notes and phone calls. Oscar has decreased his involvement with the gang. He has accepted responsibility for attending his team's planning meetings and for making a quarterly report to the team about his progress in building positive activities and relationships. The team is watching closely for any potential lapses of judgment on Oscar's part.

Supporting and Serving All Learners

Oscar's success story reflects his school district's underlying commitment to inclusive education and its related practices. The following key components have enabled school districts like this one to succeed with inclusive education models:

- *Neighborhood school placement*. Students generally benefit from attending the same school in their neighborhood over a period of years, which helps them develop the long-lasting social relationships that are an important component of education. Each school in the district should accept ownership of its neighborhood learners and operate from the premise that all learners belong everywhere in the school community.
- *A general education homeroom*. All students in a school need to feel that they are members of the community rather than outsiders. By placing all students in a general education homeroom, schools create an environment that emphasizes "all of us" rather than "us and them."
- *No segregated spaces*. Many schools call themselves inclusive but still maintain segregated classrooms based on special education identifications and labels. Students who need individualized supports from special educators can receive these services in libraries, study halls, computer labs, and resource rooms that serve everyone.

- *Continual planning.* Schools accomplish little if they put students with IEPs in general education classrooms and then expect teachers to "wing it" without advance planning. Such an approach typically results in special education teachers and paraeducators cobbling together piecemeal adaptations rather than implementing long-term differentiated instructional strategies and adaptations. The inclusive education model must include weekly or biweekly collaborative planning involving all members of the IEP team. Udvari-Solner (1995) recommends a process that takes into account the range of learners in a classroom and honors diversity. Educators should
    - Identify universal and differentiated instruction options for all students within the lesson.
    - Decide which individualized education goals the lesson should emphasize for students with IEPs.
    - Articulate the expectations for each student's performance.
    - Identify the content of the activity, theme, or unit of study.
    - Determine what and how to teach as a team.
    - Determine how students with special education needs can actively participate and achieve the same essential outcomes as their general education peers.
    - Select or design appropriate adaptations for students who cannot achieve the same outcomes.
- *Creative teaching based on best practice*. Effective teachers use a repertoire of curriculum adaptations, differentiated instruction strategies, and universal design approaches. Great practice is great practice! Dialogue journals, simulations, one-to-one conferences, literature circles, thematic instruction, drama and arts integration, and other dynamic teaching and engaged learning strategies support all students (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Moreover, employing cooperative learning, peer-tutoring formats in which everyone has a chance to be a tutor, and other sociable structures prepares young people for the real world, where collaboration is expected and essential.
- *A problem-solving mind-set*. When teachers see all behavior as a form of communication, they move away from viewing misbehavior as an indication that something is wrong with the student. Instead, these teachers examine what the student is trying to communicate through his or her behavior and consider what changes they need to make in environmental, instructional, communication, choice/control, and physiological variables.
- *Access to after-school activities and social relationships*. Everyone needs social relationships to learn and grow. If particular students are unable to find an existing after-school club that interests them, consider creating one that meets their interests and needs. Examples could include a computer games club, a book club, or a movie club.

- *Commitment to making it work*. Educators who are most successful in including students have an ongoing belief that they can make it work. All professional and nonprofessional members of an IEP team must believe in the inclusive education model and view problems as something to work through. The attitude that all students belong everywhere is the backbone philosophy of teams that make inclusion work.

The Best of Both Worlds

Self-contained special education is not the answer. The special education and general education learners whom we separate are future coworkers, employers, neighbors, and friends. The real world contains no self-contained stores, restaurants, hotels, and health clubs. To prepare everyone to live together successfully, we need to educate everyone together.

Yet, to this day, the worlds of general education and special education often remain separate. This does not need to be so. All educators can and should come together and promote the practices of differentiation, curricular adaptations, and universal design for successful learning, support, and education advancement (Villa & Thousand, 2001). When schools put students first and take ownership of all learners in the community, these practices fall into place (Kluth, 2003). When the focus is on learners, inclusiveness, and problem solving, we create successful citizens with strong values who will, in turn, create a better community for all.

All it takes is supporting one learner at a time, as happened in Oscar's case. His school's bedrock commitment to inclusive education made membership in the school community a reality for Oscar and will do so for many other young people in the future.

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Patrick A. Schwarz is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Diversity in Learning and Development Department, National-Louis University, Chicago; PSchwarz@nl.edu. He is the author of *From Disability to Possibility: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms* (Heinemann, 2006).