

From Disability **to Possibility**



The Power of Inclusive Classrooms

Patrick Schwarz

Foreword by **Kylene Beers**

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Be forewarned: This book grabs you, keeps you, and takes you in directions you had not expected. If you've ever taught a child with a disability, one direction this book will take you is right back to that child. You will finish a chapter and walk away to do something else, think of something else, attend to something else, but you won't be able to do it because Patrick Schwarz's descriptions of Sam or Gavin or Zach or Elizabeth will nudge at you. The Sam you'll meet in this book was my Ben, and I hadn't thought of Ben in years. This book brought him back to me.

* * *

I met Ben's mom before I met Ben. She showed up in my seventh-grade classroom a few days before school was to begin. Small, quiet, and determined, she was relentless in her expectations for what I would do for Ben. "He'll need all printed material, whether from the textbook or novels, reprinted in larger font and double-spaced. He'll need all worksheets redone in large font. Plus, all worksheets need to be in black ink," she said, unfazed that the school ran on purple ditto and there was only one copy machine in the entire school and that was only for the principal. "And if you put anything on the overhead projector," she continued, pointing to my main instructional tool, "you'll need to provide that for him on paper, also in large font, black ink, double-spaced."

I stopped her there and asked her to explain what she meant by anything. I couldn't begin to imagine how to get the stories in our literature anthology or the novels we would be reading retyped in

large font, double-spaced, so I decided to skip that and focus on what she wanted done with transparencies for the overhead projector. I was thinking how often I turned students' essays into transparencies so we could look at what they had written. I was thinking of how often I used blank transparencies to record what students were saying during discussions, so we'd have a visible record of the talk as it emerged. I was thinking of how many times during a single class I would scribble notes in the margins of transparencies. I was thinking this woman was expecting the impossible. I politely tried to explain how this would be difficult.

"For whom?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" I replied.

"For whom will it be difficult?" she said. I didn't like the direction this was going so I was silent, giving her the opportunity to answer for me. "I presume you mean it will be difficult for you. Well every day is difficult for Ben. Every single day, every single moment. Perhaps I could impose on you to face some difficulty for forty-five minutes out of your day?" And with that, she handed me documents that outlined Ben's exact needs and gave me a time to meet with the team of folks who were in place to help Ben have a successful year. And, then, thankfully, she left.

Ben and I stumbled through the year. I got better at remembering early to give the one teacher's assistant we had for the entire seventh grade the texts that we'd be reading the next week, so she could get them copied and enlarged. I spent weekends retyping mimeographed worksheets that we'd be using the following week. I finally figured out that when I was going to transcribe what students were saying during discussions onto a blank transparency, I could appoint a scribe for Ben who would copy what I was writing on large sheets of paper with a fat-tipped marker. Ben got better at speaking up when I would write something on the blackboard that I hadn't already written out for him. ("Large font, black ink, remember?" he'd ask. "Right," I'd say, frustrated at having forgotten once again.) But we got through the year and on the last day of class, when he signed my yearbook in that large loopy scrawl of his, I knew I did not deserve the thanks he offered: "Thanks for being my teacher. You did a good job and I learned a lot. Ben. PS: You did a good job of helping me. Thank you." Ben might have

been the student with the disability, but he was the one who taught me about possibility. He was the one who first showed me the true power of an inclusive classroom.

* * *

Ben had become a memory along with Mike, who had Tourette's Syndrome; Jeff, with deafness; Megan, who had cerebral palsy; and Kim, an undergraduate student who sat in my office one day crying because she was not going to be able to pass her college algebra course and no one at the university seemed to care about the documented learning differences she had in math. But this book brought them all back, because this book is not only about how we teach students with disabilities, it's about how we see past the disability to the heart of the student, to the possibilities inherent in that student. As I started to read this book, I looked at the title and presumed that the "power of inclusive classrooms" that the subtitle references was intended for students with disabilities. But this book quickly makes clear that the power of inclusion is as much for us, teachers, as it is for the student.

It was apparent to me that Patrick understands something we all need to understand. From the first pages of *From Disability to Possibility*, Patrick takes us into the lives of students with disabilities and reminds us all of the possibilities of inclusion—not just for students with special education needs, but for ourselves as well. He provides the concrete, specific information we need to make inclusion doable, and he provides the inspiration we need to make it desirable. He tells us the stories of what happens to kids when inclusion is truly inclusive, and he gives us the tips that make inclusion nonintrusive. He makes me—and he will, I anticipate, make you—rethink, in fact *re-vision*, the students with disabilities who come haltingly into our classrooms.

As I read this book, I thought often of my new favorite quote: "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." This has become my mantra in the past few months. I say it when I look at my fifteen-year-old son's bedroom; I say it when I look at his haircut (or lack of); I say it when I step inside a classroom and see twenty-eight adolescents who don't want to be in sixth period remedial reading class. And, I said it over and over again as I read this book.

From Disability to Possibility will change the way you look at your students with disabilities. And when you make that shift, the way those students look to you *will* change. You will see the possibilities and in that vision, you *will* see the power of the inclusive classroom.

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Introduction

Not long ago I was walking with my three-year-old niece Haley near her home. A man in a wheelchair passed by us, and Haley clung to my leg in fear. I was surprised, to say the least. I have dedicated my whole career to the field of special education, yet my own flesh and blood was scared of a person with a disability! What should I do?

Since I've been a public school and college teacher for fifteen years, the obvious solution presented itself. The natural way to address this predicament was to educate Haley. Prejudice is learned, and the way to combat it is through education and experience. But just talking to Haley would not be enough. I needed to find educational materials meaningful to a three-year-old. Perusing teacher stores and toy stores, I found "Becky," a Mattel doll who uses a wheelchair for mobility. I like Becky, because she has a cool red wheelchair, red sunglasses, and red hi-top sneakers. The box she comes in proclaims, "I am the school photographer," and displays pictures of Becky with lots of ambulatory friends from a variety of cultures.

(I did wonder why Becky wasn't just Barbie in a wheelchair. Why did she have a different name? Why couldn't a real Barbie have a physical challenge or a disability? But Barbie is all about *perfection*: young girls are taught these unrealizable expectations at a very early age. The body proportions of a Barbie doll are not achievable in real human beings except by extreme plastic surgery. Promoting such an unrealistic body image certainly holds psychological impact for girls and women of all ages!)

When I gave Haley the Becky doll, she opened the box, took Becky out, removed her from the wheelchair, and immediately undressed her (which I thought was pretty normal, since all her

Barbie dolls are typically naked and in a pile in her bedroom). Haley was treating Becky just the same as her other dolls. Next, she put naked Becky back in the wheelchair and asked me if I would play with her. We soon discovered that the wheelchair did not fit through the door of the Barbie Dream House and certainly did not fit into the Barbie Pink Corvette. Also, since the two-story dream house didn't have an elevator, the doll had to become "naked Becky in a flying wheelchair" in order to get to the upper floor!

The inaccessibility Haley and I experienced in Barbieworld is the reality people with disabilities face every day.

The inaccessibility Haley and I experienced in Barbieworld is the reality people with disabilities face every day. Haley and I talked about these obstacles, and we also put an actual Barbie in the wheelchair. Next, wanting to introduce

Haley to what I call person-first language, I taught her to say *people with disabilities* rather than *disabled people*. She had a hard time pronouncing the word *disabilities*—it kept coming out *possibilities*. Laughing, I told Haley I liked her word much better. My three-year-old niece had inspired me to reimagine special education in the United States as *possibility studies*.

Let's Get Special Education Right

Thirty years ago, special education as we know it today barely existed. It was a smattering of uncoordinated, hard-to-find, disparate programs mainly serving students with significant physical and cognitive challenges. The most common disabilities we now encounter in schools (learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder) were just being described and barely addressed. Today, there has been a revolution of recognition, legislation, and advocacy. Millions of students are now receiving special education assistance. Billions of dollars are spent each year for special education services.

But the huge institution that has grown up in connection with special education over the past few decades has been badly designed. The field is troubled, confused, struggling, and not producing acceptable results. Basic legislation designed to protect the rights of kids is often ignored or circumvented. An outdated but still

prevalent medical and behavioral model deprives students of fair, effective, and personally empowering school experiences. We are trapped in a kid-unfriendly orthodoxy. The current state of affairs for students with disabilities in our schools is this:

- There are millions of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Many of these students with specialized learning needs simply go unserved by special educators. Just as worrisome, only one quarter of classroom teachers or general educators say that they feel prepared to serve these young people. The training, preparation, philosophical base, techniques, and strategies are not there to serve students effectively.
- The 78.3 billion dollars spent in America on special education at the local, state, and federal levels accounts for 21.4 percent of the 360.2 billion dollars spent annually on elementary and secondary education (American Institutes for Research 2004). Yet when we look at the ultimate outcomes, over 75 percent of public school graduates with disabilities are unemployed.
- The number of students identified as having learning disabilities grew 242 percent between 1979 and 1997 (American Institutes for Research 2004).
- The federal No Child Left Behind act requires that schools disaggregate test score data for students with special education needs. Often, these students have the lowest annual gains and, as a result, are blamed and stigmatized for low school performance.
- Most special education programs are not following the laws that established them.
- In too many cases, special education services simply do not work by any meaningful definition of the term. There are lower grades, lack of academic progress, more dropouts, alienation created by segregation, and stigmatization of students by adults with little or no background with educating diverse learners.

An outdated but still prevalent medical and behavioral model deprives students of fair, effective, and personally empowering school experiences. We are trapped in a kid-unfriendly orthodoxy.

- American society includes a significant number of capable people with disabilities who wish to work but remain unemployed. As noted, 75 percent of people with disabilities who graduate from the public school system (a system that ostensibly prepares students for a successful life, to include employment) cannot find jobs (Walker 2004). And this unemployment rate continues to increase.
- Many people with disabilities who have been educated in our public school systems are not only unemployed but have empty social lives and remain living at home with their families until their parents die (Roessler 2002).

Three decades after the landmark special education legislation that held so much promise, special education is still just that—a *promise*. Our American school system and society have earned a failing grade for educating and supporting people with disabilities to live, work, and play in the community.

The good news is, there *is* a path forward and a way out. But we must adopt a whole new model, a new paradigm—one that grows out of contemporary cognitive science, not the discredited, blame-the-victim behaviorism of the 1950s. We need to honor the learning opportunities that students with diverse educational needs bring forward, not just label, berate, and isolate them.

This book introduces the specific kinds of teaching, classroom practices, and management approaches that bring this new model to life. It also explores the broader implications for providing better postschool outcomes for individuals with disabilities and their nondisabled counterparts. Specifically:

- This book is for classroom teachers and the special educators who partner with them. Really, it's for anyone who works with kids with disabilities, from the least intense learning challenges to the most significant, from preschoolers to adults.
- This book is mostly made up of stories about real kids and teachers and how they have struggled, solved problems, and succeeded.
- This book is practical. It shows how knowing teachers, parents, peers, and administrators are making special education services *work* for kids.

- This book is about *thinking* and *believing*. In those places where special services are especially effective, the adults have particular attitudes and strategies.

This book is about *thinking* and *believing*.

The current field of “disability studies” tells the stories of individuals with disabilities in their own, authentic voices: “I am a learning disabled person. I own this label, and I have something to say regarding what I liked and did not like about the educational system!” My own *possibility studies*, like disability studies, uses the life stories of people with disabilities to inform the field. But rather than emphasize a critical approach, I search, examine, and review these personal life stories for attributes and possibilities that can be used to plan and work toward outcomes that improve the quality of life at school, at home, and in the community.

These personal stories have led me to some ah-ha’s; some conclusions that have become guiding principles for me have turned into tenets of my possibility studies. I share them with you here.

1. Diversity is good.
2. Special education is a service, not a sentence.
3. No double standards.
4. A general education shouldn’t need to be earned.
5. Inclusion may not be easier, but it’s better.
6. The dignity of risk applies to all people.
7. Parents are the gold standard.
8. Get rid of labels.
9. Make education real.
10. Disability is normal.

These tenets form the structure for this book as each becomes a chapter and each is illustrated with the student stories that show us how disabilities are best viewed as possibilities. You’ll discover the stories to be thinking points; and somewhere on this journey you will find your own tenets that will help you create the inclusive classroom that indeed does turn disability into possibility.

And speaking of that classroom, if you’re the kind of teacher I’m thinking about, you probably have a classroom of between

twenty and thirty kids or a series of departmentalized classes. Within that student population is an increasing percentage of kids with diverse needs, with identified learning issues, whom you must educate along with everyone else. You may have quite a bit of assistance (paraeducators, special education coteachers, specially adapted materials and equipment) or may feel pretty much alone with few resources to help you. Whatever support you do have, you probably don't feel prepared to serve kids with LD, ADHD, BD, ED, or a dozen other labels. And you're right to feel ill-equipped: most of you have taken a single special education survey course in your teacher certification program. How could that have prepared you enough to address effectively the needs of the students in your classes? But though stretched thin, you're working hard and doing the best you can. Welcome, colleague, as we explore the possibilities of disabilities together.

Gavin: Creating a Support Plan around a Student Without Prerequisites

Gavin, energetic and spry, has quite different learning needs from Susan—he has autism as an attribute. He was in first grade at the time of this story. The year before, he had been placed in a self-contained classroom for students with autism and—a catch-all term—“pervasive developmental challenges.” But during that year his family decided that they would move into a new school district, a fully inclusive one for which I was a consultant. I visited Gavin in his self-contained classroom, bringing along the principal and the special education director with whom I

worked. The day we visited, Gavin was running and bouncing around the classroom, making noise, carrying a big Tinkertoy® stick, and receiving goldfish cracker reinforcements every few minutes. I wondered what his teachers were trying to reinforce.

At different points during that day both the principal and special education director asked me, “Patrick, can we include this one?” I said, “Yes” (without a plan), but added, “We’ll need to build a careful set of supports around his individual educational needs.” I also realized that the layout of Gavin’s new school would be quite different from the current one. The classroom we were observing in had four walls and a door. His new school didn’t have walls between classrooms; bookshelves and cabinets loosely defined the grade-level boundaries as an open environment. One could see the whole school (primary and intermediate grades) from any point in the large room.

When Gavin arrived at his new school the following year, he wanted to engage in the activities he’d “learned” in his previous school—running around, making noise, and seeking food—which he proceeded to do as the teachers shot daggers at me. (If looks could kill!)

I addressed an emergency faculty meeting at the end of the day. I started out by saying, “I realize you have all met Gavin today.” The faculty nodded, arms crossed, furious looks on their faces. “You no doubt think Gavin is a student with behavior issues.” Heads nodded even more vigorously. “There is something that you all need to know about Gavin. He has autism, and something we know about people with autism is that they can handle only a little change at a time. Gavin has a brand new home and also a new school. I don’t see him as a student with behavior issues, I see him as a scared little boy.” The faces of my audience began to soften. “We need to make some changes to help Gavin acclimate to the school. Starting tomorrow, Gavin will be delivering your mail to you, and if you need to send any mail to the school office, he will also provide that service.” (By designating Gavin as school courier, I made it okay for him to be in every room of the school—we had to start somewhere.) “Also, during each class period, he will be expected to do some work related to what is being taught in his general education classroom.”

The school's team of educators met with Gavin's mom in order to understand more deeply the best ways and means to support Gavin. During the meeting, his mom asked where the net swing was going to be placed. (A net swing provides rhythmic motion that helps learners with Gavin's needs handle their day better. Use of such supports is termed *sensory integration*. [Kluth 2003]) General education classrooms don't have net swings, so I asked the school's occupational therapist, who was at the meeting, "Carla, are there any other means to achieve this that work well in a general education classroom?" Carla suggested a rocking chair, and after the meeting I went to a local department store and purchased two little rocking chairs for the classroom. That way other students would be able to use one as well (another way to make difference ordinary). I initially put both rocking chairs in the reading area, and later moved one next to Gavin's desk so he could use it whenever he wanted. Since Gavin arrived at school early, I also made sure he got in a good session on the playground swings before school started. And at recess, Gavin was always the first one on the swings.

Carla introduced some additional sensory integration experiences that helped Gavin feel more internally organized and learn more effectively. She had a little stiff-bristled brush that she stroked along his arms. When several students in the classroom asked if they could help "brush" Gavin, Carla agreed. Soon students began to fight over who got to brush Gavin, making him feel very popular.

When Gavin was completing his messenger rounds, he liked to lie down in between some tumbling mats outside the gym and have his paraeducator put pressure on the mats. (Dr. Temple Grandin, a brilliant animal science professor who also happens to be an adult with autism, designed something similar called a "squeeze-box.") However, when the other students saw this, they were worried: "We realize he runs around and makes noise in the school, but do they have to crush him in between those mats?" Obviously we needed to educate everyone in the school about autism, sensory integration, and what they could do as Gavin's classmates to best support him. Gavin's mother and Paula, his special education teacher, made presentations to each class.

Communication was also an essential goal for Gavin. For the most part, Gavin was nonverbal, but he made specific vocalizations

to convey things only he knew. His teachers started to use pictures in connection with words, so Gavin could make choices and be more empowered, have more control over his environment.

Gradually, the number of stops on Gavin's mail run were reduced, thus decreasing the number of places it was acceptable for him to be. His teachers also increased the amount of time he spent engaging with the first-grade curriculum, adapting assignments and providing support as necessary. Eventually, Gavin was able to say particular words. He also became better at making his needs known, and his interfering actions (running around, making noise, seeking food) for the most part ceased.

Gavin's story is still very much in progress. However, he has lunched with the superintendent of the school district, and he walked (he didn't run) across the auditorium stage for his eighth-grade graduation. My fear is that if we had not started supporting the first-grade Gavin by understanding the communicative intent of his behavior and by meeting his sensory needs—if we had tried to make him sit in his desk all day—we would now have a much larger “kid” running around and making noise. With a support plan, his learning gains have been significant, and he is a testament to the success of inclusion.

With a support plan, his learning gains have been significant, and he is a testament to the success of inclusion.

Fairness Is Not Sameness

Some may ask, why is all this time being spent helping one student? Is this fair to the others? Richard Lavoie (1998) replies, “Fair does not mean that each student gets the same thing, but each student gets what he or she needs.” Putting these support strategies in place for Susan and Gavin provides individualization for them as learners and takes steps toward making the classroom more differentiated for all students. Learning in general improves as teachers use more of the tools and techniques in their bag of educational tricks. The gains of even one learner are worth the effort! Often, meeting the learning needs of students on either end of the learning spectrum (students with gifts and students with challenges) improves the quality of education in the entire classroom. Once



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