

Opinion: When classrooms include those with disabilities, all kids benefit

By Paras Shah, Human Rights Watch, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.20.16

Word Count **823**



Members of the White Hands Choir practice at a music school in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, March 10, 2011. The deaf members of the White Hands Choir are part of an unusual program in Venezuela that brings together students with a wide range of disabilities and immerses them in music. Photo: AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos

The absence of color angered me. On the plastic desk, my book selfishly claimed all the space, stretching out to lop off the edge and hang in the 2-foot space above my lap. The white page showed a fruit bowl created from gray and black ink on paper.

Next to me, Sam's book covered only half the desk. His pencils, an eraser and a juice box — Welch's grape, never fruit punch — stood in a neat lineup. His fruit bowl burst with the bright colors found in nature. The apple was so red that it looked like you could pluck it from the page and eat it.

My enlarged books, without color and nearly double the size of standard textbooks, were what I received because I was a legally blind child who attended a public school in Waltham, Massachusetts. The books were hefty, and I hated them. Although larger text helped me to read and keep up with the subject matter, I saw only the difference between myself and my classmates. Face an inch away from the page, I wanted to read just like everyone else, to learn as they did, to see as they did.

Legally Blind But Others Had Challenges, Too

As a legally blind third-grader, I was fortunate to learn in a standard classroom. Although I was a child with a disability, I learned alongside students who did not have disabilities. My teachers adjusted some of their lesson plans and practices. For example, when they wrote a “b” on the chalkboard, they described it at the same time: “straight line down, pencil halfway back up, and loop to the right.” As for my classmates, they were eager to help me. They held my hand and traced along the paper. They read me problems off the board. They told me when to kick the ball at recess. After all, we all faced challenges. Some students had parents who fought a lot at home. Some kids arrived at school early for reduced-fee breakfast. Others had trouble with math or reading. We all ate and played together; we learned about and accepted our differences.

The adjustments made for me also benefited those around me. Children who preferred verbal stimulation heard how to draw the letter “b” while they saw it being written. The girl playing goalkeeper and not paying attention appreciated a heads-up that the soccer ball was headed her way as much as I did. For me, having a disability and learning in a classroom like everyone else was important. It allowed me to make friends and resolve arguments. It prepared me to go to the University of California (UC) at Berkeley, where I graduated with honors, and then on to law school at UC Irvine this fall.

Students With Disabilities Lucky In U.S.

I was lucky to grow up in the United States. I attended schools with teachers, staff and parents who believed in me. Regretfully, this is not the case for many of the estimated 93 million children with disabilities around the world. The real figure is most likely higher. As the Human Rights Watch group has documented, students with disabilities often attend segregated schools, isolated from their peers and the community. Many students with disabilities do not attend school at all.

In South Africa, this number reaches nearly half a million as children with disabilities face discriminatory physical barriers and attitudes. These often begin early in their lives when government officials separate them based of their disabilities.

Students with disabilities often attend different schools than children who do not have disabilities and many students with disabilities do not attend school at all. For example, some school officials in Russia think children with disabilities are unable to learn, and are unsafe or disruptive. It is difficult for people with disabilities to enroll in universities or learn professional skills to get jobs.

Nations Agree To Educate All Children

International treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, require all children to receive an education. More than 150 nations ratified these treaties, which means they agreed to follow them.

Every child, regardless of disability, has the right to attend school with others. Until that right is realized, we continue to fail inside and outside the classroom. The opportunity to learn in my neighborhood school, to be exposed to viewpoints, situations and abilities that differed from my own, made me a more tolerant and compassionate person. It challenged me to stretch my notion of what I could achieve, and it provided me the support system and confidence to make those ambitions come true.

Yes, I hated those enlarged books. But, the important fact was that I read them next to Sam, in front of Mark and behind Joanne. For me, that made all the difference as I sipped from my juice box and went outside to play another round of soccer.