

COMMUNITY VOICES

IS CHANGE POSSIBLE? A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Sahar Khazani

My name is Sahar Khazani and I am a Teach For America Alumni. Teach for America recruits recent college graduates to serve as teachers in low-income communities with the hopes of closing the education gap, a chasm in academic knowledge and opportunity that exists based on socioeconomic disparity. Because of this gap, students who attend low-income schools are less likely to graduate from high school and perform at lower levels in both math and English.

I served for three years (2007-2010) as a high school special education, RSP (resource specialist program) teacher in south Los Angeles. When I began working for the Los Angeles Unified School District, the student dropout rate was at 54 percent, with more students dropping out than graduating. The high school in which I was placed had reading and math scores well below the state average and our API score was a 1 out of a possible 10. Moreover, more than 90 percent of students at my high school were considered to have a socioeconomic disadvantage. How, then, were these students expected to perform on a national and global level?

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On my first day of school, I learned that my school recently implemented a “full inclusion model” in which math and English teachers co-teach general education classes made up of both general and special education students. Therefore, I would be teaching general education classes and directing a learning center for my special education students. When I started my learning center, we had no books, no curriculum, and no support from the administration. Keep in mind that these were high school students who were reading at about a third-grade level and failing an average of two classes a year. Despite this high disadvantage, many administrators did not want RSP teachers to have learning centers for struggling special education students. I had to fight for a learning center and once I got one, I had to figure out how I was going to get books and educational materials for my students. In the end, I used my own resources to obtain all of my classroom materials.

The learning center was where we played “catch up.” It was where I planned to teach all of the basic skill that my students had missed in their education thus far. After a few tests for knowledge and understanding, we were ready to go. Some students, like Maria and Carlos, had very low math skills, while others, like Brenda, Brianna, and Jose, had deficits in reading comprehension. The learning center focused on multiplication tables, reading comprehension, and study skills including note taking, underlining, and even how to organize a notebook, backpack and agenda. Everyday the students practiced these skills and I checked them so that eventually a habit would form. For me, study skills were equally important to math and English because they are transferable to any job, to any class, and can lead to an independence and confidence that I did not see in the students before. But like anything, these skills had to be learned.

The class was very challenging for the students because their coping mechanisms (such as acting out, avoidance, and learned helplessness) could no longer be applied. They had to face their shortcomings and challenges head on, and this was often emotionally draining for the students. I made sure to choose material that matched their maturity level (even when their reading scores were low) so that the students would not feel demoralized. Reading included: President Obama’s speech on race in America, Siddhartha, excerpts from *The Omnivores’ Dilemma*, a collection of Rumi

poetry, and Transcendentalist readings. Consequently, the students never felt that the readings I was providing were childish or silly.

As I began co-teaching my general education classes, I quickly learned that a lack of materials was not the only shortage that the students were dealing with. Classes were oversized and there was only one fulltime psychologist for all of the students in the school, many of whom had fractured and unstable home lives. The students were dealing with issues of poverty, illiteracy, teen pregnancy (my school had one of the highest rates in the country), gang violence, and neglect. I realized that if my students were going to make any significant gains, we would need to take step-by-step interventions catered to the specific needs of each student.

I began working on specific long-term and short-term goals that were individualized for each student. Not only did each student know exactly what his or her goal was, but each student would also meet with me at least once a week to strategize. By the end of my first year, I began to see sizable growth in the academic abilities of my students. Through focus and perseverance, 100 percent of eligible students had made significant gains and reached both their long-term and short-term goals by the end of my second year. Some students jumped multiple reading levels, while others made huge gains in mathematics. And at a school where the average student fails two core classes a year, I did not have a single special education student with a “D” (a passing grade at LAUSD) or an “F.”

In fact, my students were performing so well that instead of teachers complaining about having too many special education children, they were asking me to place my students into their classes. My students were not just organized and well-behaved, they understood the value of a good education and therefore were highly invested in their schooling. With the hard work of students like Maria, Brenda, Jose, and Carlos, the stigma of special education began to disappear amongst both teachers and students. I knew that the stigma had all but disappeared when general education students began asking to be placed into my Learning Center the next year. Instead of choosing an elective course, students were actually requesting the challenging learning center to improve their personal academic deficits.

The students have shown that they want to learn; if they do not succeed, it is not their failure—it is ours. Our schools are failing our

children and without the proper attention, support, and resources, they will continue to be failed by the American school system. The success that my students had was not a fluke. Change is still possible within the system but it takes teachers who are capable and have the proper resources to make it happen.