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# Face-to-face with special needs

## What the pandemic taught me that I didn't expect to learn



BY **DAKOTA PROSCH, M. ED, NBCT**

"I love school! I don't ever want to leave!" said Robin in the middle of October. I had never heard him say anything like that before.

Denver Public Schools, where I teach upper elementary at Academia Ana Marie Sandoval, a school serving 420 children from ages three through sixth grade, opened remotely in August, then opened up in September, and then closed again in October. At that time, my principal agreed that we could invite a few of our highest-needs students to stay. Robin, for example, had struggled with online learning, and was now one of a handful of students with me in person. These students had never achieved anything like "normalization" before COVID-19, and during remote learning, they were practically absent. Besides, the schools were open, using the building to provide child care and free meals. It was worth a try.

### My Montessori journey

I had started teaching in 2000, the same year No Child Left Behind was signed into law. I quickly understood that this was a euphemism for a strict testing regime—all stick and no carrot. But the phrase did capture the essence of the teaching heart. Drawn in by this essence, I had joined Teach For America (TFA) in my hometown of Chicago. I had always wanted to teach and really wanted to "make a difference.".

After two years in TFA, I moved to a public charter for seven more, lured by the promise of more autonomy and child-centered learning. But I was disappointed to find out that, as our CEO said every fall, "We live and die by the test scores." By 2008, I felt I had become part of the school-to-prison pipeline. I was told to enforce more and more authoritarian rules about hallway behavior, uniforms and a student's personal expression. I wanted education to offer students economic mobility, but our methods were creating followers not leaders.

When I finally found Montessori, I felt like a partner with students and families all working together towards opening future possibilities. I worked in public Montessori in Chicago for six years at Richard J. Oglesby Elementary School (a conventional elementary school housing three Montessori classrooms) and Suder Montessori Magnet School (a magnet school serving more than 400 children from three years old through eighth grade) before moving to Denver to teach at Sandoval, a dual-language public school.

## Today, they are concentrating and working with pride and vigor

### Montessori in a pandemic

Back in March of 2020, when we started teaching remotely, children with high academic and social needs had become the students I kept worrying about after I shut down the computer for the day. This fall, teaching these very students in person, while the other twenty-one come to class online, has taught me a valuable lesson that I needed to learn.

The children I've been seeing in person this fall all receive "minutes" from the school counselor, speech therapist, occupational therapist, or special education teacher. They are all in our school's Multi-Tiered Support Structure (MTSS) and I often struggled to get to know them and meet their needs in the hustle and bustle of a Montessori classroom. In a method where independent practice is often required in order to master a skill and short lessons are the norm, my students who needed multiple reviews or constant reminders would often engage in many disruptive or avoidance behaviors because they simply needed more of me.

Since 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act has mandated that "students with disabilities should be placed in least restrictive environments (LRE) in order to allow the maximum possible opportunity to interact with non-disabled peers." In implementing this mandate, we wanted to raise expectations and allow most students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom.

However, in my 20+ years teaching, as more students with disabilities were included, I did not receive more training on how to help them. Students received an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) but did not receive an individualized educational environment.

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Caseworkers and special education teachers with huge caseloads offered their 20 to 45 minutes per day of intervention, but my students still got less attention than they needed and experienced painful rejection from their peers. As a Montessorian, I hoped that my classroom—with its de-emphasis on comparison, freedom of movement, and individualized teaching—could meet their needs. But it didn't.

Before COVID-19, in my busy face-to-face classroom of 28, my students with ADHD rarely stayed focused without being distracted by the myriad other activities vying for their attention. Today, in our small group, they are concentrating and working with pride and vigor. We have mask breaks at least two or three times per morning where they run races, play games, and have snacks. For those with social issues, those breaks allow them to strengthen social ties and showcase other talents.

In the past, students far below grade level in reading and math rarely enjoyed or willingly attended remedial lessons. Now, I see those same kids relieved to finally learn basic skills, as well as being willing to try harder grade level work, unhampered by comparisons to peers. This has buoyed me in a year that has often threatened to drag me down.

But what will happen next year? For the first time, I have received the message from the district that teachers should focus on the emotional well-being of students, on the social aspect of school, and not on tests. This is what we *always* knew we needed to do for our students with high needs...if not for all of our students. However, I know how public school systems crave and feast on the data we keep on our children, and while the beast may currently be sleeping, it will awaken after COVID-19 and become ravenous for that data.



*Masked and concentrating*

It is ironic that such a tragic year has become an educational and learning opportunity for my most at-risk students. I am currently considering ways to keep this experience alive in post-COVID-19 life. I don't want to let this progress be gobbled up by business as usual schooling. I feel like I finally have a chance to make good on that promise from 2000 to actually leave no child behind.

*Dakota Prosch, M. Ed, NBCT, teaches in Denver, Colorado where she and her son love Academia Ana Marie Sandoval. Her school is hiring for all levels.*

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