

# Under One Roof

*Educators make case for classes  
with mixed learning abilities*

**By Bob Evancho**

**T**he nine adults — two parents and seven Boise educators — gathered in the elementary school classroom, forming a circle as they sat at undersized desks. For the sake of a single child — a fourth-grader with learning problems — they had assembled on this winter afternoon.

The parents were at the end of their rope. When their son was in kindergarten and first grade, he had difficulty sounding out letters and confused words that sounded similar. In grades two through four his difficulties mounted. No matter how hard he tried, the child struggled to read and write. School was torture. As a result, his self-esteem was battered and his confidence was shot. His frustration manifested itself regularly in bursts of anger, frustration and tears — especially while doing homework.

In addition to IQ and aptitude testing, the parents and the child's school had him undergo a battery of diagnostic exams: psychological, hearing, vision, fine motor skills. Finally, at the start of fourth grade, he was diagnosed with dyslexia and auditory processing difficulties.

This child is among an estimated 20 percent of America's population that suffers from some type of learning disability — a neurological disorder that hampers one's ability to store, process or produce information (dyslexia is just one form).

Now, the nine adults convened to assess the child's problems and discuss strategies to help him. The afternoon gave way to early evening; all of the educators — the child's teacher, his principal, a school district administrator, and four special services providers — had already put in a full day's work. But they remained, sharing their expertise with the parents and each other.

According to Joan Bigelow, a special education teacher at Mountain View Elementary in Boise, such meetings are now commonplace.

"In order to provide the best program for a student with learning difficulties, you need that collaborative effort," says the Boise State graduate who is now working on a master's in education at the university.

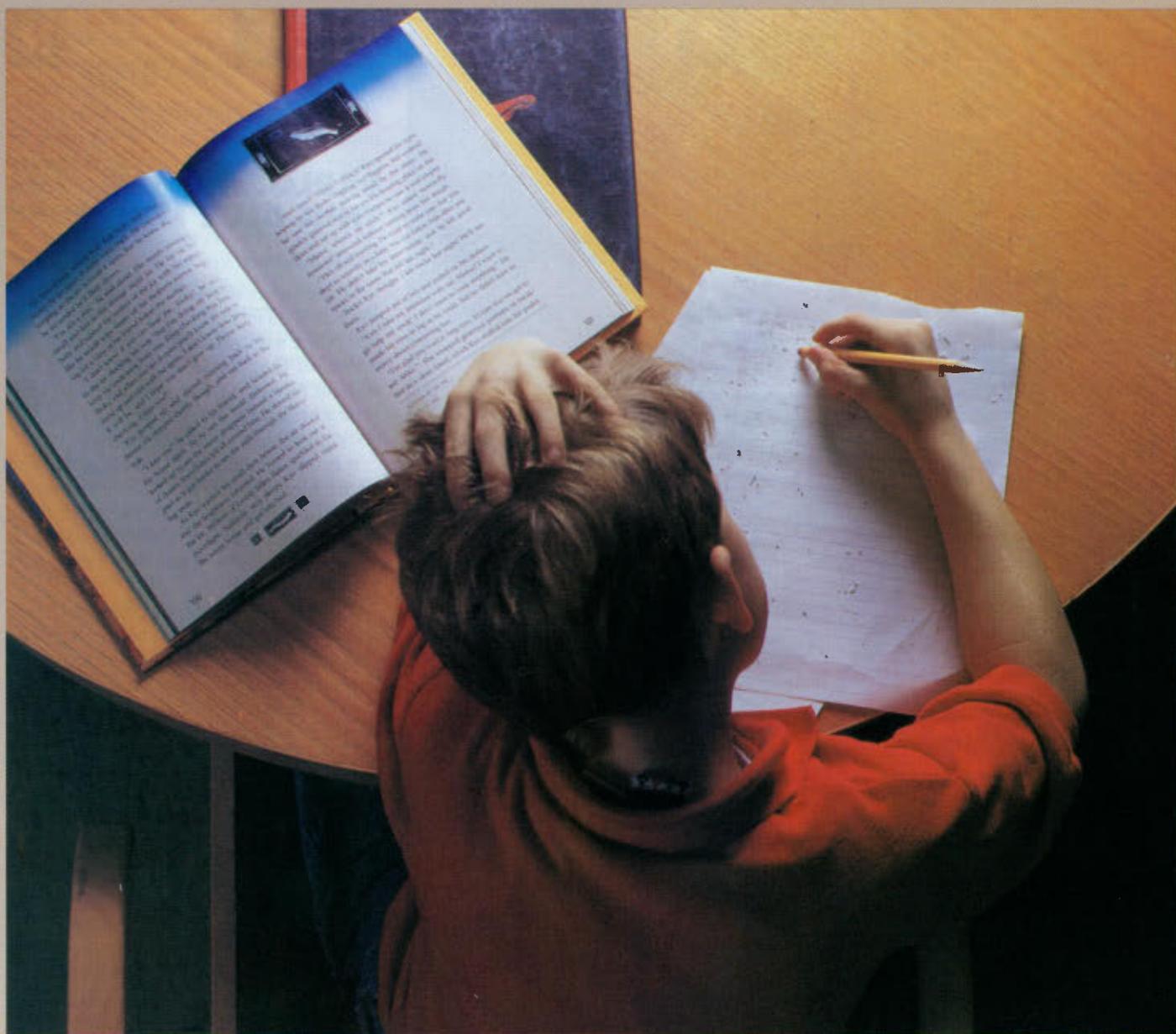
"Depending on the student's needs and the situation, a number of people, in addition to the parents, can be involved. It's like a puzzle. The various players — the regular teacher, principal, speech therapist, occupational therapist, school psychologist, special ed teacher — are all pieces to the puzzle."

A decade or so earlier, however, the puzzle was much simpler in many school districts: Students with learning disabilities were often removed from the regular classroom to receive "special" assistance. And while the schools' intentions were good, many educators today believe such an approach was detrimental to those students because they were labeled as slow learners or just plain dumb.

"We know that kids with learning disabilities are not dumb," Bigelow says. "Most of them have average or above average IQs. The best thing is to maximize their strengths and work to remediate their weaknesses."

Fortunately for the learning disabled, the concept of "inclusion" is helping point schools in that direction. While federal law now mandates "free and appropriate education" for the learning disabled, there is a more compelling reason for concerted efforts like the one described above: the belief that most kids with mild learning disabilities are better served in the regular classroom alongside their normal-achieving peers.

Certainly, the need to address a child's learning problems is crucial. But not at the cost of his or her self-esteem, which often occurs when he or she is singled out and removed from the regular classroom, says Manuel Barrera, a BSU professor of



elementary education and specialized studies.

To take a learning-disabled student out of the regular classroom to spend an inordinate amount of time on his or her weaknesses only adds to the frustration, he says.

"Research shows that separated instruction definitely is not helpful to kids with learning disabilities," Barrera says. "Generally speaking, if you put them in self-contained situations, they don't get a chance to learn as much and do work commensurate with what their normally achieving peers are doing."

What needs to be done, he says, is to help the learning disabled develop their own strategies and approaches to being successful in the classroom. "If certain kids have learning difficulties, it makes sense that they are not able to do what other kids are able to do 'naturally' in the regular classroom," Barrera says. "And teachers need to find ways to modify and adapt their teaching to assure that all kids can benefit from instruction, especially those kids who do not historically benefit from regular instruction."

If that's the case, doesn't that mean the onus is on teachers to become more flexible to meet the needs of students of varying learning abilities?

Precisely, says Jeanne Bauwens, also a BSU elementary education and specialized studies professor. And to help learning-

disabled students while trying to meet the demands put on today's teachers, Bauwens and others espouse the collaboration of the regular classroom teacher and the special educator in the same classroom.

"[I]t is no longer practical," said Bauwens in an education journal article she wrote with fellow Boise State professor Jack Hourcade, "to continue pulling out and segregating the students who represent diverse ability levels ... [T]he question is not whether students with diverse backgrounds *should* be included in the general education classroom, but instead how instruction might be provided most effectively for *all* students."

That's easier said than done, Bauwens acknowledges. While inclusion is gaining acceptance in many teacher preparation programs, some teachers and prospective teachers disdain the idea of teaching students other than those considered "normal" learners.

"My response is that 'normal' is an indicator on a washing machine," says Bauwens. "Many teachers have been trained in content. Sure, they know how to teach U.S. history and they know how to teach math, but they don't know how to train a broad base of kids. They say, 'I have to treat all my students equally.' I say you don't treat them all equally, you treat them all fairly." □