

*Observe in a classroom that has exceptional students. What steps does the teacher take to meet the needs of these students? Interview the teacher to determine what he/she sees as the challenges and rewards of teaching exceptional students.*



The students I observe are members of Ms. T.'s fifth grade class at Cragin Elementary School in Tucson, AZ. All nineteen of them are exceptional students, but only three are exceptional in the sense of Section 504 (of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973), IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), or related guidelines: they have learning disabilities. At least two more are exceptional in other ways: their language background and medical condition. Different steps are taken to meet the needs of each.

Student 1 has a learning disability that primarily affects processing of written language (i.e., decoding receptive, written language). Accuracy and fluency are low and lead to comprehension problems. Math is influenced as well, perhaps because much of it is written. She receives instruction in language arts and math at the fifth grade level with the class, but does schoolwork and homework at the third grade level as stipulated by her IEP (Individualized Education Plan). Ms. T. takes time to familiarize herself with third grade standards and finds appropriate materials for the student based on them. The student is assigned fewer exercises or more time to complete work in reading, spelling, and math. The student is medicated, but the effect often wears off by evening so that she becomes hyperactive and has difficulty completing her homework. Whenever possible, she is encouraged and helped to complete work in class, sometimes with personal attention.

Student 2 is far enough behind that she is pulled out for multiple subjects. A special education teacher takes care of her most serious needs. When in the classroom, she tends to get very distracted by the commotion, and she has arranged with the teacher to have a desk away from the others so that she can concentrate. Student 3, on the other hand, does not get pulled out and is presently close enough in ability to other classmates that he can join the lesser advanced reading group and, with help, keep up. Ms. T. assigns him less homework, but he often forgets to complete it. The teacher and he have agreed on an Individualized Homework Plan (IHP) whereby the teacher double checks that the student takes the proper materials home and the parent signs for its arrival and encourages its completion. Families are involved in a collaborative effort with the teacher.

Students 1-3 are all allotted extra time in taking tests, are allowed to complete them in a small group setting with fewer distractions, and are read test questions out loud. The teacher is also sure to both write information like homework assignments on the board and to read the information aloud so that students, especially those with reading difficulties, know what to do.

One of these exceptional students is also included in each of the three groups of six or seven into which the class is divided. The groups have the widest possible range of ability represented with great opportunity for informal transfer of learning skills, peer assistance or tutoring, and social interaction. These three students seem to need more reminders to stay on task than do other group members, and Ms. T. monitors them closely.

Student 4 is an ESL (English as a Second Language) student or ELL (English Language Learner), natively speaking a rare Pacific island language. She now understands English well enough that she is expected by the school to complete the normal amount of homework. Unfortunately, she has not been expecting it of herself and her parents have not been aware of the discontinuity. There are signs of learned helplessness by which she continues to attribute her problems to language difficulties rather than lack of effort. She now has an IHP which encourages parental awareness, involvement, and encouragement to try hard.

Student 5 was recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. He needs to be allowed to visit the nurse to measure his blood sugar at nearly any moment, especially while his medication schedule is being tuned. He uses a special hand signal to indicate this need. The teacher also monitors for signs of lethargy indicating a dangerous drop in blood sugar. The condition is not presently serious enough to significantly affect learning. Student 5 led an impressive question and answer period in front of the entire class about diabetes and his experiences. The class schedule was adjusted to accommodate this valuable lesson.

Teaching these five students and fourteen more has its challenges and rewards. The obvious challenge is to find the time (both class time and preparation time) and resources required for the many accommodations, and to keep everyone's needs satisfied simultaneously. Ms. T. has a student teacher and has also arranged for a practicum student, me. Both a parent and a counselor have also spoken in the classroom. The "natural support systems" of the school is well used. Although it requires significant effort to bring in extra people, collaboration is highly effective in delivering individualized attention to exceptional students. Less obvious to me, but very important for Ms. T., is the challenge to find appropriate praises and rewards for exceptional students whose successes might seem unworthy to other students (or to themselves). Students can distinguish between commendation for good work and for good effort. It's important to find and point out good work while always encouraging good effort, even when the effort isn't always effective because of the disability. Finally, exceptional students create a diverse classroom which students do not always appreciate (e.g., when someone is slow to come up with a correct answer). Supporting diversity, teaching respect, and finding role models is challenging. Whenever possible, diversity is turned into a learning experience. The presentation on diabetes was a very effective example of this strategy. It successfully addressed the challenge straight on.

Meeting an educational challenge successfully results in a significant feeling of accomplishment for teachers, including Ms. T. Teaching exceptional students poses difficult challenges, but the resulting sense of accomplishment is greater for the more difficult task. Ms. T. appreciates being able to work in a diverse environment and finds great reward when her students succeed.