

Differentiating Instruction

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Exceptional Learners Class
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Every child comes to school as a unique individual. Each child has different learning characteristics, different abilities, different backgrounds, different likes, different dislikes, and different needs. When Jordan Shipley (name changed) started Kindergarten in the fall of 1999 he was just as unique as every child in his class. He was five, he was a growing boy, he was excited, and he was eager to learn. One of the characteristics that set Jordan apart from his classmates, though, was he had been diagnosed with a learning disability called autism. Thankfully, Jordan was fortunate. Jordan's family really cared about what he was learning in school, they really cared about how he was feeling in general, and they really cared about giving him every opportunity they could to grow up in a normal world. Five years have passed since Jordan started Kindergarten. Jordan is now in fifth grade and growing more and more every day. Jordan probably would not have been able to grow as much without the help of his teachers and his family. Jordan's teacher's have looked at Jordan as an individual and adapted their teaching styles to help Jordan reach his fullest potential.

Currently, Jordan is in fifth grade at C. Elementary School in Mr. Z's classroom. Mr. Z has nineteen students in his classroom and four of those students have exceptionalities. Mr. Z is Jordan's kind of teacher. Jordan gets very frustrated when he is not treated like a normal kid. As I watched Mr. Z give a vocabulary lesson, I was amazed at how he incorporated several adaptations into the lesson without pointing out the difficulties some of his students, like Jordan, might have had. Mr. Z helped prepare his students for their vocabulary test on Tuesday by discussing a vocabulary paragraph he had created. Not only was the paragraph projected on the overhead, but the vocabulary words were in bold type to help make them stand out for the students. Mr. Z allowed different students to volunteer to read a sentence of the paragraph while Mr. Z pointed to the words they were reading on the overhead projector with a pencil. This adaptation helped the students concentrate on what was being read by their peers. After the sentence was read Mr. Z highlighted the vocabulary word so the students would be able to pick out the vocabulary word easily. To help the students remember the meaning of the vocabulary word, he discussed with the class again that the word meant by asking them comprehension questions. Mr. Z pointed out the prefixes and suffixes in the word by underlining them in a different color marker so the students could differentiate the base word from the prefixes and suffixes. This happened for every sentence. The repetition helped the students catch on quicker to what they were learning and helped them to retain

more information. At the end of the paragraph Mr. Z gave the class a specific amount of time to finish a worksheet that was almost a mirror image of what the overhead had been so he made sure the class had understood exactly what they had learned. Mr. Z incorporated all of these adaptations in his classroom to help Jordan and his classmates learn to their fullest potential. Without these adaptations Jordan and the rest of his classmates might have been able to learn. But, because of these adaptations, Jordan and the rest of his classmates were given a better chance to learn. I was very impressed by the simple adaptations Mr. Z added to his lesson to help his student's learn. I was also very impressed how he was able to meet several of the academic standards, assessed where the students were in their learning process, connected his lesson to the PL 221, connected his lesson to the No Child Left Behind procedures, and adapted his lesson so everyone in his class was interested in what they were learning. I really hope I am able to teach as effectively as Mr. Z taught his students.

When I met with Mrs. K, C. Elementary School's principal, I found out that at the end of every school year she meets with the teachers in each grade and discusses where to place the students for the coming year. During this time Mrs. K tries very hard to put students with "challenging" exceptionalities in the same classroom so it will be easier for the support staff to come in to that classroom and help the exceptional students, instead of being stretched thin and trying to fit a time to visit every classroom into their day. Every year Mrs. K does try to switch which teacher's classroom she puts a majority of students with "challenging" exceptionalities in. This means every teacher in the building eventually has children with exceptionalities in their classroom. There are 20.97% of the students at C, Elementary School who have a learning disability and 8% of the students at C. Elementary School who have a communication disorder. Cr Elementary School also houses the R. I. S. E. (Recognizing Individual Student's Excellence – Gifted and Talented) Program for the entire school system. While Mrs. K brings in workshop leaders to talk about adaptations teachers could use in their classroom, she does not check on each teacher to see how effectively they are implementing the adaptations into their classroom.

The fact that Mrs. K did not check on each teacher to see how effectively they were implementing adaptations into the classroom was very evident when I walked into the other fifth grade classroom. Mrs. J. was also teaching an English lesson to her class. There were twenty-one students in her class and two of the students had some sort of exceptionality. Before the lesson started, Mrs. J. called the two students

with exceptionalities to her desk and gave them a separate worksheet to do while she taught the class the English lesson. The two students with exceptionalities were totally isolated from the rest of the class and not given any help. If Mrs. J. had added a few things to her lesson, she would have been able to teach both the students with exceptionalities and the rest of the students in her classroom the same material at the same time.

On the other hand, there is a group of classes geared towards students with exceptionalities. Mrs. S's fifth grade class is part of the R. I. S. E. (Recognizing Individual Student's Excellence) program for gifted and talented students. I was very interested in observing this classroom because all of her nineteen students were gifted and talented and she had to accommodate for a whole group of students, not just a few individuals. While she taught the class at an advanced level and at a faster pace, I did not see her make an effort to go out of her way to accommodate her students. It really surprised me that I saw many things that she could have done that she did not do. She did give the students a time limit on their English worksheet that they did, so they could prepare for their assessment tomorrow. Then she went over the worksheet on the overhead and asked different students questions about the worksheet. I thought her lesson could have been more hands on or interactive, or something more than a worksheet. She has gifted and talented students and I would hope they would have more fun and be able to learn through something more than just a worksheet. Perhaps, she could have even allowed them to take turns teaching each other the work. Or, perhaps, she could have made a game for the students to play. But, she did not do anything of these things and the lesson just seemed like a lackluster assignment done at a much faster pace.

Another classroom I was eager to see was the fourth grade classroom I went to. In Mrs. V class of eighteen students, two of her students have exceptionalities. However, Mrs. V was not teaching her class the day I was observing. Mrs. V has a student teacher named Miss M and I was able to observe her teaching the class social studies the day I came. Since Miss M is still in college, it was very interesting to see Miss M trying out techniques that we are learning in our classroom right now. She did a wonderful job at accommodating the students with exceptionalities. Miss M went through the worksheet she gave the students about the Bill of Rights by putting it on a transparency. While they worked through each problem of the worksheet, Miss M discussed and wrote down with the class possible real life situa-

tions that could occur given the problems they were presented. She also discussed with the class and wrote down what the “right” actually meant. They went through the entire worksheet like this so they were prepared for the quiz they were going to take the next day. It was very repetitious and really helped the students catch on to how the Bill of Rights worked. She then passed back the summary they had written about the Bill of Rights and told them they could use this summary on their quiz tomorrow. Finally, she went through questions that might possibly be on the quiz tomorrow to help get the student to think about the Bill of Rights. I was very impressed at how hard Miss M tried to give the students every opportunity she could to learn about the Bill of Rights. But, I felt like Miss M was just going through each of the academic standards, checking them off as she covered them, and then did not cover the standard again. Hopefully Miss M is able to figure out how to use multiple academic standards and still be as effective at the same time.

Mrs. F was the final effective teacher I observed at Crisman Elementary School. In her class of twenty-two student, Mrs. F has four students with some kind of exceptionality. To teach her students about how their bones function, Mrs. F read a book with her class about bones. Before she passed out the books for each student, she got the children thinking about their bones by asking them questions about their own experiences with their own bones. Many children were excited to share their stories about breaking their bones or someone in their family breaking a bone. After many students had a chance to share their stories Mrs. F asked the students to look at the pictures of the books and try to predict what would happen. She then had the children read a page to themselves and then had a student read that page out loud when most of the students were done. So, the students had three opportunities to obtain the information on the page. They heard the class talk about the picture, then they read the book to themselves, and finally a student read the page out loud to the class. Mrs. F also discussed with the class what was happening in the story. The lesson continued in this manner for every page in the book, so it was very repetitious so the students could catch onto what was going on. To assess what the students had learned, Mrs. F created a worksheet for the students to do. She allowed the students to use their books to answer the worksheet and she put the page number where they would find the answer next to the question she asked. This was particularly helpful to all of the students because they were able to go back to their book and see the connection between the worksheet and the book. When the students

were finished with their worksheet they were able to get out of their set and come up to Mrs. F's desk to get their work checked. This gave the students an opportunity to get out of their desk and it gave both the student and Mrs. F immediate feedback about how much they had learned from the lesson. She was also able to use her adaptations to help the whole class, instead of pointing out the few students with exceptionalities. I was very impressed how Mrs. F cared and knew how each student was doing in her class. As a teacher, I hope I am able to be just as effective as Mrs. F.

Lately, in our Exceptional Learners class, we have talked about creating a list of adaptations that could be used in many situations within any classroom. I believe if every teacher created a list like this, and tried to implement at least one tactic from their list into their classroom every day, they could become a much more effective teacher. I was able to look on the Internet and I found several websites that helped me create a list of my own. Hopefully, I will be able to use this list to help many of the students that walk into my classroom learn more effectively.

Teachers make such a gigantic impact on the world. Because they make such a huge impact on the world, teachers should really think about how they are going to approach teaching their students. They have a lot to accomplish in just a year, but if they are able to accomplish it all, their students will be changed for the better. Hopefully, every teacher takes their job seriously and they are able to put accommodations into their day. I hope I will be able to be just as effective as many of the teachers I was able to observe and some day I will be able to change a small part of the world.