

# Differentiation

## Chapter Eight

- I. Differentiating Instruction
- II. Supporting Students with Special Needs
- III. Supporting English Language Learners

### Introduction

*The biggest mistake of the past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual, and thus to feel justified in teaching them the same subjects in the same ways.*<sup>38</sup>

**-Howard Gardner, multiple intelligences theorist**

As you know from the last chapter, teachers should consider “student needs and interests” as a significant factor in choosing how to group and instruct their students. Included under that umbrella are students’ developmental levels, learning styles and interests. In that last chapter, we discussed how those variables affect instructional choices as a teacher plans for introducing new material and for practicing new material. In this chapter, however, we encounter the same concept in a slightly different context. While we were discussing how we plan to teach an entire class in the last chapter (and the ramifications of varied learning styles or developmental levels for the day’s general lesson plan), you might encounter students whose developmental or learning style differences are so profound that you need to differentiate your instruction for them more drastically.

When you begin teaching, you may be surprised to discover the diversity of academic proficiency and learning needs in one classroom of students. Some of your students might be struggling with language development. Some may have already mastered the math skills you planned to teach. Some might seem proficient in spoken English, yet are three grade levels below where they should be in reading comprehension. And some may not seem to understand your verbal explanation of material. As teacher-educator Lilian Katz once said, “when a teacher tries to teach something to the entire class at the same time, chances are, one-third of the kids already know it; one-third will get it; and the remaining third won’t. So two-thirds of the children are wasting their time.”<sup>39</sup>

Many corps members will tell you that the range of achievement levels and learning needs in their rooms was one of the most surprising—and perhaps most intimidating—aspects of their first days and weeks of teaching. All corps members will tell you that such a range is a fact of teaching, and it only increases in the upper grades. At the beginning of the year, Maya Buseman-Williams’ students ranged from just below grade level in reading to dramatically below grade level, and she had one student who didn’t speak English. Karen Fierst taught Special Education in New York City. Four of the students in her class were reading on a beginning first-grade level, seven had splinter skills from kindergarten, and five were non-readers. Students presented a variety of other issues beside their academic performance, including four students with speech and language disabilities. One child exhibited many characteristics typically associated with autism, and another exhibited characteristics of an undiagnosed behavioral disability.

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<sup>38</sup> Siegel, J., and M. Shaughnessy. (March 1994). “An Interview with Howard Gardner: Educating for Understanding.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 75, 7: 563–566.

<sup>39</sup> Willis, Scott. “Teaching Young Children: Educators Seek ‘Developmental Appropriateness.’” *Curriculum Update*, November 1993, pp. 1-8.

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The fact that you are not the first teacher to face a group of students with many achievement levels and learning needs is probably not reassuring. You've got your long-term plan, your unit plan, and your lesson plan, but now you are facing thirty individual students (or perhaps five sets of 30), each with different academic strengths and weaknesses. How do you simultaneously teach the class and address the needs of each of the individual students in your room?

In a nutshell, the answer is...with hard work, careful organization, and smart planning. This chapter is last for a reason. While it is easy to *say* that differentiating your instruction to meet your students' various needs is your responsibility (which it is), it is much harder to do. We acknowledge this upfront because it would be difficult—and in some cases unwise—to implement all of these strategies we will outline in this chapter at once. Creating a truly “differentiated” classroom is a process of adding layers of high-quality, customized instruction to your teaching repertoire.

*The results that came back from my first assessment of my 2<sup>nd</sup> graders were intimidating. Six students didn't know the alphabet, three were above grade level, and the others ranged widely in-between. It was then that I realized that I needed to do everything I could—to completely differentiate my program—so that I could meet all those needs every day with my instruction.*

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By implementing the techniques we identify here and further explain in your institute sessions, by constantly reflecting on your instruction, and by observing other teachers who have mastered the skill of differentiated instruction, you will be on your way to raising the achievement of each student in your classroom.

In this chapter, you will consider specific strategies to modify your instruction to meet the diversity of achievement levels and learning needs in your classroom. First, we will consider means of handling diverse skill levels and needs (Section One). In Section Two and Section Three of this chapter, we will turn to specialized schools of individualized instruction, addressing students with special needs and students who are English Language Learners.

It is important to recognize that “differentiated instruction” is *not* a euphemism for lowered expectations. On the contrary, differentiated instruction comes with the realization that to meet your high expectations for your students, you must recognize their individual instructional needs. We aim for all students to reach the standards mandated for their grade level. But we recognize that it may take some students more time, or different methods, to get there. For some, it will take less time. By beginning our instruction where students are, we are inviting them to reach high goals with us. Otherwise, we will be striving alone.

### I. Differentiating Instruction

Differentiated instruction is the approach that supports the success of all students given the different achievement levels, developmental levels, and learning needs within one classroom. It would be pointless to ask a child measuring four feet tall to dunk a basketball in a hoop at regulation height (10 feet), or at four feet for that matter. The point is not to make tasks easy for the child. It is to make tasks possible. You would teach the skill of dunking at the intersection of challenge and ability for that individual child, what educational theorist Lev Vygotsky would call the “zone of proximal development.” Similarly, teachers make modifications and accommodations to a lesson in order to meet students where they are – and stimulate growth. Carol Ann Tomlinson, an expert in the field of differentiation, shows how

teachers can differentiate content, process and product according to students' readiness, interest and learning profile.

### Basis for Adjustments

Tomlinson highlights three reasons why a child needs a differentiated assignment:

- The first is **readiness**, referring to a child's current performance level (lack of basic arithmetic skills, for example). Motivation is the product of expectancy ("Can I do it?") and value ("Is this worth doing?"). If something is way beyond your reach, you will not have much motivation to try.
- Another is **interest**, or the level to which the student is motivated or engaged by a particular topic. If the objective is to write a persuasive essay but the standards do not specify a topic, then students would be more likely to work hard on an assignment if they had some choice in choosing their subject matter. Sometimes, student interest cannot be the first and foremost concern of teaching when state standards dictate certain content; however, Tomlinson notes that teachers can coordinate individual student "sidebar studies," tapping into student interests (music, sports, or fashion, for example) and having students look out for their special topic within the context of the classroom's subject matter.
- Finally, teachers may need to make modifications based on a student's **learning profile** – which includes their developmental level, learning modality, cultural difference and special needs status.

### Using Your Progress Tracking System to Help Identify Needs

Back in Chapter Four of this course, you learned that part of the Unit Planning Process is creating a progress tracking system that allows you to know which objectives your students have mastered. For teachers who differentiate their instruction to help students at different performance levels make significant progress, such a record-keeping system is as critical as rules and consequences are to classroom management.

Remember that a tracking system is **different than keeping a list of test grades**. If you just kept a list of grades, you might know that Jack got a 25 on your unit test and Jill got an 89. But you would not know that Jack completely mastered one of the objectives assessed on the test, or that Jill completely missed one. And unless your tests were extremely well labeled, they wouldn't know that either.

When you track your students' progress, you're making a chart or spreadsheet with the objectives you teach along one axis and your students' names along the other. When you create your assessments, you plan questions that test each objective. By analyzing your students' assessment results for each question, you can chart which objectives your students have mastered and which ones they still need to develop. So can they.

As an example of one way this system could work in your classroom: let's imagine that, on your first assessment, questions 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9 measure mastery of Objective A. Ernie gets all five questions correct. Both you and he mark your respective progress tracking sheets with a check in the appropriate box, indicating that Ernie is a pro at objective A. Meanwhile, on the same group of questions, Bert gets only one correct. You and he mark his box for Objective A with a 1, indicating his score and signaling that he needs more assistance or a different method of instruction. As a result, you might choose to group Bert with other students who missed objective A and work with them on strengthening their skills, or you might ask Ernie to explain

Objective A			
Name	9/16	9/23	9/30
Ernie	√	√	√
Bert	1	3	√

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objective A to Bert in a new way. On each subsequent assessment, you might include new questions about Objective A (or you might offer Bert a chance to earn his checkmark after school). After a few attempts, Bert gets four out of five questions right, enough to be considered proficient. Bert has earned a check.

Justin Meli, Houston '03, has provided a description of the system he uses in his third grade classroom:

Each student in my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom has a **binder**. This binder stays on a shelf at the front of the room when not in use and may not be removed from the classroom. This binder serves as a working portfolio for each student as well as a mechanism for allowing them to track their own progress. I exhaustively modeled the procedures for using a binder (i.e. we practiced opening and closing the rings, gently turning pages, and putting things away in the right place), and I dictate the exact organization of the binder, down to the order of each page. Each student keeps his or her tracking sheet in a plastic sheet protector at the very front of the binder.

Students have multiple chances to earn **mastery stickers** for each objective. The first opportunity is on the **unit test**. This helps students view testing as more than just an opportunity to pass and please the teacher: it is a vehicle for demonstrating his or her own abilities and success. My **criteria for awarding mastery** is an 85 percent. If a test covers several objectives, I will disaggregate the scores and award mastery stickers accordingly.

If students do not earn a mastery sticker through performance on a test, they have an opportunity to do so through **mastery quizzes** taken at their own pace. Every Friday, during "center time," students are scheduled for two fifteen-minute "**achievement blocks**" during their six center rotations. They may take a mastery quiz of their choice during each of these blocks. The quizzes are labeled in hanging folders and easily accessible during this time. If a student does not achieve mastery on a quiz, they must **schedule an appointment** with me during lunch, ancillary, or after-school tutorials (a.k.a. "Math Club") to relearn a skill before they are permitted to retake the quiz. As soon as students demonstrate mastery, they are ceremoniously awarded a mastery sticker.

A large, public **mastery grid** on the wall of the room echoes their individual achievement, provides additional incentive to obtain mastery, and allows me to keep track, at a glance, of where each student falls on mastering individual objectives.

Your system may change depending on your subject area; in a language arts classroom, you might be regularly assessing your students' writing against a rubric and measuring growth in particular skill areas. The gist of the system, however, remains the same: by maintaining regular records of your students' progress based on the objectives you teach, you can be well informed about the adjustments you may need to make in order to help each of your students move forward.

## Strategies for Adjustments

Your tracking system allows you to pinpoint some of the areas of improvement in which your students need increased practice or a different instructional approach. Tomlinson cites three ways for differentiating assignments for individual students:

- Recognizing that there is more than one way to meet an objective, a teacher can adjust the **product**, or tool, that demonstrates a student's attainment of a given object. For example, if an objective states that a student will be able to identify the climax of a story, a student could choose to write a description or draw a picture. Teachers often provide "menus" of products so that students can select the way in which they can exhibit mastery of the objective.
- A teacher can also modify the **process** of learning, allowing students struggling with basic arithmetic to use a calculator when attempting to demonstrate the relationship between distance, rate and time. If a student should be able to explain the causes of the French Revolution, that child could first learn those causes from a text, an audio or video recording or a detailed comic of the event, based on their literacy readiness, their interest, or their learning profile.
- Finally, effective differentiation could include a change in the **content** itself. In one elementary classroom, the teacher may set up three centers: in one, students are practicing repeated addition, using manipulatives; in another, students are performing one-by-one digit multiplication on their own and two-by-two digit multiplication with a calculator; a third group is performing two-by-two digit multiplication through strict computation. In a middle school English classroom, if a child has already read *The Outsiders*, you might challenge her with *Lord of the Flies* instead of asking her to repeat what she's already accomplished.

Ultimately, the spirit of these adjustments lies in the importance of all students meeting objectives – with the recognition that some children will simply need extra support or use different routes when getting there. For those who say differentiation is not fair, it is true that not every student is treated the same in this approach. But that's because kids are at different levels and have different needs. It would be unfair to withhold glasses from someone who cannot see. It is unfair to expect students performing at very low or very high levels to do the same activities.

In the following chart, you'll notice the ways in which a differentiated classroom differs from a traditional classroom. You may find that some aspects of a truly differentiated classroom may be unrealistic to implement in your classroom or your school. For example, you may not be able to change a district grading scale to define success as student growth and improvement. This chart simply aims to convey the *intent* of differentiation and encourage you, when possible, to create policies and assignments that recognize where individual students begin and how individual students learn.

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### ***What makes a traditional classroom different from a differentiated classroom?***

<b>Traditional Classroom</b>	<b>Differentiated Classroom</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student differences ignored or acted upon when problematic</li><li>• Assessment only at the end of learning to see “who got it”</li><li>• One definition of excellence exists (100 percent achievement, on objectives tested once)</li><li>• Student interest infrequently tapped</li><li>• Whole-class instruction dominates</li><li>• Coverage of texts and curriculum drives instruction</li><li>• Single option assignments</li><li>• A single text prevails</li><li>• Time is relatively inflexible</li><li>• Students assessed in one way</li><li>• The teacher directs student behavior</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student differences studied as a basis for planning</li><li>• Assessment on-going and diagnostic to be responsive to learning needs</li><li>• Excellence defined in large measure by individual growth for a starting point</li><li>• Students frequently make interest-based learning choices</li><li>• Many instructional arrangements (groupings, partner work, centers)</li><li>• Multi-option assignments</li><li>• Multiple materials provided (visuals, manipulatives)</li><li>• Time is flexible, based on student need</li><li>• Students assessed in multiple ways</li><li>• Teachers facilitate student self-reliance</li></ul>

Here are some of the methods that Tomlinson’s research has shown to advance the academic achievement of students who represent a range of skill levels and learning needs:<sup>40</sup>

### **Tiered Assignments**

In some situations, you may find that you can actually use varied levels of student practice and activities to ensure that students explore ideas at a level that builds on their prior knowledge and prompts continued growth. For example, a teacher might strategically choose each student’s book for a book report assignment to be sure that each student reads a book that reasonably challenges his or her ability. Clearly, this strategy requires some degree of caution by the teacher to ensure that a different assignment does not become a stigma among students. However, with careful planning and implementation, tiered assignments can be an excellent means of simultaneously promoting students’ confidence and challenging students’ intellect and skills.

### **Varying Questions**

A somewhat different version of the “tiered assignments” idea above is to vary the sorts of questions posed to different students based on their ability to handle them. While all students need to be accountable for the objectives you have set for a particular lesson, students will master that objective at different speeds. Varying questions is an excellent way to build the confidence (and motivation) of students who are reluctant to contribute to class discourse. Note: Most teachers would probably admit that without even thinking about it they tend to address particular types of questions to particular students. In some cases, such tendencies may need to be corrected. (For example, a teacher may be unknowingly addressing all of the more challenging questions to one student, thereby inhibiting other students’ learning and fostering class resentment of that student.) Question variation based on achievement should be a well-considered decision designed to facilitate the academic advancement of each student by addressing individual needs.

### **Learning Centers**

As discussed in Chapter Six, a “learning center” is a station or collection of materials that students might use independently to explore topics or practice skills. Because students are essentially working independently, centers allow students to work at their own pace. And, with careful planning, you can

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<sup>40</sup> The above chart and the following techniques have been adapted from Tomlinson, Carol Ann. *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001.

subtly modify the work for individual students. Teachers will constantly reassess their students to determine which centers are appropriate for students at a particular time, and to plan activities at those centers to build the most pressing skills.

### Independent Projects

Perhaps you have a student who is able to finish her student practice in half the time it takes other students. Or perhaps you have a student who has a specific deficit in his prerequisite knowledge. In some cases, you may decide to give an individual student an independent project that will address that student's needs so that you can preserve the bulk of your time with the rest of the class. For example, perhaps you have a student for whom your measurement unit is simply a waste of time. You might consider designing an independent project that would culminate with that student presenting a more sophisticated measurement concept or process to the rest of the class.

As you may already realize, the hardest part about differentiated instruction is preparation; developing assignments that are tailored to the different needs in your classroom is time and energy consuming. Experts including Tomlinson encourage educators to start small – with low-investment techniques like allowing students to choose from a **menu of products** when demonstrating their knowledge of objectives. If your objective was for students to describe the effects of the Civil War, you could allow students to write a ballad as a Confederate soldier or widow, write an essay or draft a skit, as long as the end product effectively described the effects of the Civil War according to your criteria.

If you were trying to reach the learning objective with students of different literacy levels, you could create a **jigsaw** activity. This involves grouping students based on their reading proficiency, dividing a given topic into pieces (the economic, political and social impact of the Civil War, for example), and finding an appropriate text for each group to learn about one of the areas of study. Students later get into heterogeneous groups to share their findings with their peers, who have read about different areas of study from source texts on their own reading levels. The jigsaw technique allows you to tackle the same subject with all of your students while discreetly providing them the different tools they need to get there.

If some of your math students score a 100 percent on your fractions diagnostic test while others are clearly struggling, prepare an **independent study project** (one idea: compare the ratio of ads to news in different newspapers and figure out which paper is a better deal) for your advanced learners while providing direct instruction for those who need more guidance. This approach does not suggest precluding the latter group of students from hands-on learning or discouraging them from pursuing engaging projects, but it does mean tailoring instruction to move them forward. Similarly, an elementary teacher attempting to meet spelling standards might develop a **tiered assignment** of target words for different levels of proficiency, assigning weekly lists to everyone based on their starting level.

Some classrooms are almost completely student-paced, with children working on assignments that target their individual needs and the teacher presenting mini-lessons on the standards that do not require prerequisite skills. Obviously, this kind of classroom would require exemplary student discipline and elaborate planning. You should integrate differentiation into your classroom at a pace you can

*My biggest success in differentiation is in the choice assignments I give my students. Along with written tests, I give my students a choice of four options in order to show me what they have learned. These choices may be writing an essay, creating a diagram, making a prediction, designing an experiment, authoring a story, making up a board game, or even writing a song. Each student understands things a little bit differently and expresses knowledge of a subject in a different way. My students love choice assignments; they are always excited to know that is how I will be testing their knowledge.*

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handle, and your efforts will yield a gradual indication that you are meeting more and more of the individual needs of your students. To find more ideas for adapting your lessons, as well as additional resources to access, peruse the “Differentiated Strategies Glossary” in the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (pp. 77-79); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

### Assessment and Differentiation

An inherent tension that you will no doubt encounter as the instructional leader of your classroom is the difficult balance between criterion-referenced assessment (which measures student performance relative to an established set of standards) and improvement-referenced assessment (which would highlight a particular student’s improvement over time). This tension is particularly stark for a teacher who is assigning grades to students. Should grades be based solely on mastery of your objectives? If all students achieve the objectives, will my principal question the high percentages of A’s? How do I consider the amount of progress each student has made?

There is no easy or correct answer to these questions. As noted in the Grading Supplement, most teachers develop some means of considering both achievement and growth in their grading systems, by maintaining and sharing progress charts that demonstrate student improvement and by seizing opportunities to write qualitative comments that accompany a numerical grade. While not every teacher gets to determine how progress reports are constructed in their district, Tomlinson suggests the following grading systems for teachers who wish to differentiate their instruction completely:

If much of the time I give a student work appropriate for his or her current needs, I must then grade the student’s work on the basis of clearly delineated criteria for quality work on that task. It makes little sense to assign an appropriately challenging task and then grade a student on something else...When I grade those assignments, I note in my grade book the differentiated assignment and the student grade on that assignment. When I give all students the same task (for diagnostic purposes, for purposes of benchmarking student standing relative to common goals, or because I simply could not find the time and energy to differentiate the work), I’ll make a note in my grade book and enter the more normative grade....

On report cards, I need to find a way to show individual growth and relative standing to students and parents. I can accomplish this by working with colleagues to develop report cards that...note, for example, that an A means excellent growth, a B means very good growth... and an F means no observable growth – coupled with a notation that a 1 means the student is working above grade level in the subject, a 2 means the student is working at grade level in the subject, and a 3 means the student is working below grade level in the subject. A student might then, for example, earn an A1 or B2...I can accomplish the same end by attaching a note to the report card or conducting parent-student conferences. Doing so allows me to explain that the student’s grade takes into account both differentiated and common tasks, to show how the grade reflects both, and to interpret what the grade means for the particular student’s learning.<sup>41</sup>

Tomlinson acknowledges that many differentiated strategies seem to chafe against the traditional structures and notions of school, but that common sense teaches us that to expect every child to act, perform and learn the same ways is folly. She concludes many of her publications and lectures by explaining that creating a differentiated classroom is not a snap-your-fingers task – but is something you work at day-by-day, child-by-child.

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<sup>41</sup> Tomlinson, Carol Ann. “Grading for Success.” *Educational Leadership*, March 2001: 14.



## II. Supporting Students with Special Needs

On one hand, the special education system is a straightforward extension of the notion of differentiation that we have already explored. Special education programs are designed to meet the individual needs of all students by requiring individualized instructional plans for them. On the other hand, it is a wildly complex and dynamic bureaucratic system of forms, laws, and meetings. New general education teachers and new special education teachers alike are often surprised to learn the weight of the administrative responsibilities that the special education system may put upon them.

In this section, we will explore instructional modifications and support systems developed for students with formally identified special needs. We have purposefully included this information in our general Instructional Planning & Delivery course, intending it to reach all new corps members, not just those who expect to have a “special education placement.”

### Special Education Across the Curriculum

You will notice that special education-related issues are discussed in each of the various course texts that you are reading in preparation for institute. A chapter in the *Learning Theory* text, for example, will give you an overview of the legal categories of disabilities. Keep in mind that you will also be receiving a Special Education Supplement and Toolkit this summer to further support your instruction of students with special needs.

With very few exceptions, all teachers interact with the special education system. Even if you have not been assigned to teach special education, you should expect to teach students enrolled in special education programs. You will need to know who those students are and what instructional modifications they require. In fact, it will be your legal responsibility to meet those students’ needs appropriately.

### Introduction: A Brief History and Introduction of Terms

While the special education system is ultimately designed to benefit individual students with special needs, most new teachers would probably say that their initial exposure to the system had less to do with a particular student than it did with a swirling collection of acronyms, laws, and forms. The special education system is actually a federally designed set of requirements imposed on state education systems. These federal requirements create a paper-intensive accountability system intended to ensure that every student in the system receives the particular instruction that he or she needs. That instruction is memorialized for each student in a document with which you will, in all likelihood, become quite familiar—the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Before we explore the ins and outs of the IEP, it may be helpful to have some of the historical context from which the IEP and other requirements have evolved.

### Federal Legislation: “Section 504,” IDEA and NCLB

Unlike many other areas of education policy, the notion of special education for students with disabilities has been largely driven by the federal government. In response to intensive parent advocacy both in Congress and in courts across the country, the legislature passed laws that impose on states certain standards of treatment and support for students with disabilities. Thus, the evolution of special education in this country is framed by several pivotal acts of Congress—most notably Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990.<sup>42</sup>

A cursory glance at these two laws will provide a valuable overview of the special education system in this country. (Key phrases—that you will undoubtedly hear again—are bolded.)

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<sup>42</sup> Text of IDEA available at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/Policy/IDEA/index.html>, accessed 1/31/07.

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**Section 504.** The first significant nationalization of special education occurred with Congress' passage in 1975 of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This law was passed pursuant to an earlier, more general civil rights law protecting the rights of persons with disabilities known as "Section 504" of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and was the most sweeping statement the United States had ever made about rights of children with disabilities. This law assured a **"free and appropriate public education"** (often referred to as "FAPE") to all children with disabilities between the ages of 3 to 21.<sup>43</sup>

This 1975 legislation contained four provisions that continue to provide important parameters for programs that serve students with disabilities:

- (1) Schools and districts must follow **due process** when referring a student for special education services to ensure that the student's parents have an important role. Essentially, this requirement means that the timing, confidentiality, and special services requirements under the law are taken very seriously, and often lead to legal or quasi-legal hearings.
- (2) The **rights of the student and his or her family** must be protected throughout the evaluation procedures. Closely related to the due process principle, teachers and schools must involve students' families in the decision process.
- (3) Students are to be educated in the **"least restrictive environment (LRE)."** That is, a student has a right to be taught in whatever setting can provide for his or her needs that is the closest to a typical general education setting (see the graphic below).
- (4) Each student must have an **Individual Education Program**, also known as an **IEP** (much more on this below).

**IDEA.** After some additional tweaking of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in the 1980s, in 1990 Congress re-worked, re-authorized and re-named that law, thereby passing the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**. (These changes were made in the course of passing the sweeping civil rights legislation, the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).) Congress shifted the law's emphasis from providing services for categories of handicapping conditions to providing services for individuals. IDEA remains the governing law regarding students with special needs.

In 1997, Congress amended the IDEA to require students with special needs to participate in the standard statewide assessments, with appropriate accommodations. The intent of that newer version of the law is to ensure that educators of students with special needs are held accountable for their students' learning through existing testing programs. Many states and school districts are just beginning to develop and implement assessment models that accommodate all students.

This 1997 version of the IDEA further establishes an emphasis on the participation of students with special needs in the general education curriculum. The **inclusion movement**, which places students with special

### Children, Laws, and Acronyms

Sometimes new teachers are overwhelmed or intimidated by the law-intense structure and vocabulary of the special education system. Veteran teachers would tell you that while the system can be frustratingly bureaucratic, you do not have to be a lawyer to navigate it. And, more importantly, knowing the names of various laws that require a "free and appropriate education" is not nearly as important as understanding that you have a student with special needs who requires certain modifications/accommodations, and that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is where those modifications/accommodations are listed.

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<sup>43</sup> Text of Section 504 available at <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/regstatutes/sec504.htm>, accessed 1/31/07.

needs in general education classrooms with support and which has gained significant momentum in recent years, is a key approach to addressing the requirements of the 1997 version of IDEA. Another key provision of this most recent legislation is that parents are now full members of the teams that make eligibility and placement decisions. The 1997 revisions also addressed behavioral disabilities in a new way. Behavior plans, documents that are developed in addition to an IEP, became mandatory for students with behavioral disabilities and manifestation determination meetings became required for students with disabilities who were in danger of expulsion from school. Sample IEPs are provided in the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (pp. 80-86); sample Behavior Plans are provided in the **Classroom Management & Culture Toolkit**; both Toolkits can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖

**NCLB.** In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed the **No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** Act into law, requiring that states develop standards and test students annually to determine that school districts are making “adequate yearly progress.” NCLB holds states accountable for the progress of all students, including those with special needs; identified students may be given “accommodations” mandated by their Individual Education Program (e.g. more time, larger print) to be successful on the test. Students with the “most significant cognitive disabilities” may be held to different achievement standards, but their performance is also calculated into a school’s “adequate yearly progress” report. This new system is significant for two reasons. First, since the tests for students with special needs are aligned with grade-level standards, schools will need to ensure that students with special needs are taught on grade-level. In addition, NCLB may help alleviate the problem of schools over-referring students to special education in order to exempt them from state requirements.

While new legislation is constantly fine-tuning this system, this cursory history provides a good summary of the special education landscape as it exists today. You will also find that these key terms and phrases are used through out the special education system. (Keep in mind that in many states, additional state laws supplement these federal laws, so you may need to familiarize yourself with the phrases and acronyms used in your district.)

### **The Basic Structures and Settings of the Special Education System**

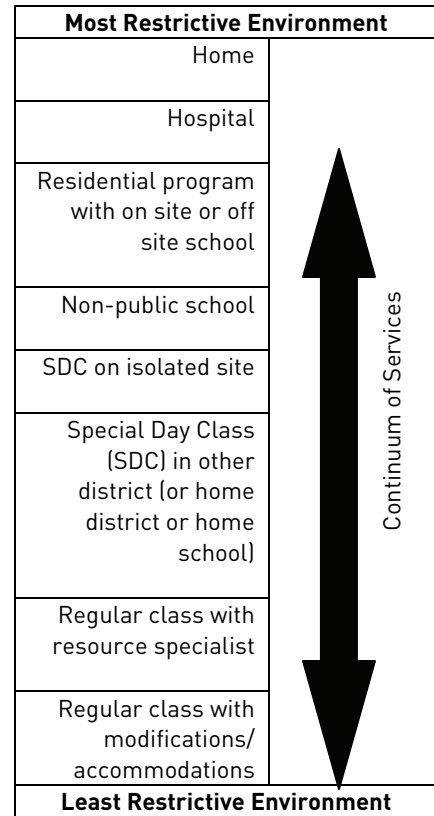
While the grand history of special education is driven by federal legislation, from a student’s (and many teachers’) perspective the special education system is actually all about individualized instruction to meet a student’s individual needs. In simplest terms, a student who qualifies for special education receives an individualized education program (an IEP) that is developed by a team of adults including the student’s parent or guardian. (The student may be involved as well, when appropriate.) This team is ultimately accountable for the student’s mastery of the goals set in the IEP, and the students’ teachers are responsible for modifying and/or accommodating instruction for the student pursuant to that IEP.

A good deal of the complexity of the special education system relates to the vast range of special education “settings” that have been developed (to meet the needs of the vastly diverse group of students with special needs). Some students in the special education system might attend all of their classes in the “general” education system, having little more involvement with the special education system than subtle accommodations by one or more of their teachers, or an occasional visit to a “resource room” where they receive special tutoring in some area. At the other end of the continuum, other students are taught in “self-contained” special education classrooms where all of the students in the room have relatively demanding special needs.

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As you prepare to enter the classroom, you need to be aware of the many varieties of special education settings that schools use to ensure that each student is being taught in the “least restrictive environment” (LRE). That provision requires that each student with special needs be educated in a setting as close as possible to a regular classroom environment in which his or her needs can be met. Schools’ attempts to meet this requirement have generated various special education placements:

**Mainstreaming** (*represented by the lower two boxes on the graphic*)—In the 1970s, schools began to “mainstream” students with disabilities by placing them in the same schools and classrooms as peers without disabilities (as opposed to students with disabilities being kept entirely separate from other students, which was the former practice). Mainstreaming became more common with the realization that some students with disabilities learn better in regular rather than special education classes. (Mainstreaming can be controversial, however, in the cases of students who have severe emotional or behavioral disabilities that may prove disruptive to the entire class.) Typically, mainstreaming involves students with disabilities participating in *some* regular academic or non-academic activities with their typically developing peers (e.g., reading, math, lunch, recess, music) but not in the entire day’s instruction and activities. The students may attend these classes on their own or with an instructional assistant.



**Inclusion**—A relatively new model, “inclusion” continues to be the trend in special education placements today and is considered by many educators to be the ultimate manifestation of our commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom that he or she would otherwise attend. The philosophy underlying the inclusion movement is that schools should bring services to the students rather than bring the student to the services. Typically, in an inclusion model, the special education teacher goes into the general education class to support their students in the general education setting. (By contrast, in the mainstreaming model, the general education teacher may be solely responsible for the students’ accommodations.) Less common is a consultative model where by the special education teacher advises the general education teacher on supporting the student instead of working directly with the student. Under that typical collaborative model, however, the special education teacher may co-teach with the general education teacher, work with a small group of both special education and general education students, or focus on the students who are receiving special education services. Ideally, the special education and general education teacher collaborate closely to ensure that students receiving special education services are engaged in the same curriculum and activities as their classmates. Opponents of inclusion assert that teachers either end up devoting a disproportionate amount of energy to assisting

*One of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had as a teacher is including children from special education classes in my general education class and later having them mainstreamed into my class for the whole day. There are so many students in special education who have been misplaced. Once they find the right setting, they can flourish, and the progress they make is amazing.*

**Serapha Cruz, New York ‘95  
Principal  
NYC Department of Education**

students with special needs to the detriment of other children, or end up ignoring their special populations due to lack of insight on how to make the curriculum accessible to a wide range of needs. But supporters argue that, when done well, inclusion benefits all parties involved—children with special needs, students in general education, the teacher, and ultimately society, since students with exceptionalities are provided with a stimulating environment in which to learn along with peers of their own age. Proponents believe that these students’ classmates and their teachers develop sensitivity and respect towards people of all abilities and limitations. The general and special education teachers have the opportunity to collaborate to provide individualized instruction for all students.

**Resource (aka, “pull out”)**—Resource programs are those in which students who qualify for special services are “pulled out” of their regular classrooms for a designated period of time that is less than 50% of the student’s academic school day. These programs can look very different at the elementary and secondary level, given the difference in schedule structures. A “Resource Teacher,” then, would have a class of students with special needs from across the campus in which they are given more individualized instruction around the same objectives that are being taught in the regular education classrooms.

**Self-contained**—There are various permutations to the self-contained classroom: self-contained mild/moderate, self-contained severe and profound, or self-contained behavior modification, to name a few. Typically, self-contained classrooms are composed of a small group of students whose needs could not be met appropriately in the regular education setting. Students in self-contained classrooms may have significant learning disabilities, their emotional needs may inhibit their ability to function within regular classes, their mental functioning may require close care and support, or they may have multiple disabilities that require coordinated intervention from a variety of sources. The relatively low teacher-to-student ratio usually found in self-contained classrooms (and additional support service providers) allows each student to get the support he or she requires.

While these three special education models—mainstreaming, inclusion, and self-contained—do not represent the entire range of models used by schools today, they do represent three of the more common settings.

### **The Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

An IEP is the all-important document that outlines a student’s learning goals and the accommodations and modifications that the student’s teachers will use to reach those goals. As a new teacher, you will undoubtedly encounter your first IEP soon after stepping foot on campus. You will be well-served to invest some time before that initial encounter learning to navigate this key component of special education instruction.

#### **What is an IEP?**

The IEP is usually a several-paged document that lists any special services a child is to receive, goals the child is expected to achieve in one year, and objectives or benchmarks to note progress. Take a few moments to examine the sample IEPs provided in the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (pp. 80-86), which can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. Also included in this Toolkit are some sample IEP Goals to acquaint you with the phrasing (pp. 87-92). ✖ You’ll notice that while the formats are somewhat different, the basic components of each are the same. According to law, the IEP must include the following:

*Many new, as well as experienced, teachers are not even aware of their students’ IEPs. An IEP lets the teacher know what accommodations they should be making for a student each day. The IEP should direct instruction.*

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Principal, NYC Department of  
Education**

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- A statement of the student’s present levels of performance, including the student’s strengths and needs
- A brief description of the student’s disability and special needs and how that disability affects the child’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum
- A statement of measurable annual goals and short-term instructional objectives for the student
- A statement of the specific educational services needed by the student, including related services, and the extent of his or her regular (or mainstream) classroom participation
- The projected start date and anticipated duration of educational services for the student
- Criteria, evaluation procedures, and schedules for determining the student’s progress (which must be reported at least as often as the progress of student’s non-disabled peers)

Once the IEP has been developed for a student, some individual is responsible for maintaining and implementing it. In some elementary settings, the special educator who teaches the student for all or part of the day is generally responsible for ensuring that the student receives the program outlined in the IEP. In a secondary setting, schools often have special education administrators (who may also be special education teachers) who maintain and manage the IEP process.

It is important to note, however, that while an “official” special educator is responsible for ensuring that students receive services, the general educator—who must be familiar with the IEP and its goals—is also responsible for teaching IEP goals and objectives and for modifying and accommodating according to the IEP. (This division of responsibilities may be outlined in the IEP.) If the student requires particular support services (such as speech therapy, for example), but can be completely mainstreamed into a general education class, sometimes the support service provider manages the IEP.

*One of the best things a teacher can do for a student who is awaiting referral for an IEP is to monitor carefully, and document, document, document. School support personnel need proof of all the strategies that are used prior to being able to make decisions about giving a student a modified school program. It is critical to keep track of everything from individualized assignments to peer mentoring or even a seat change.*

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**Managing Director of Alumni Support – Los Angeles Region**  
**Teach For America**

### How is an IEP created and by whom?

IEPs are developed and maintained by a multi-disciplinary “IEP Team” that meets at least once per year. That team includes:

- (1) Representatives of the local school district (other than the student’s teacher) who are qualified to provide or supervise special education and who are qualified to allocate the services of the school and/or district
- (2) Professionals in relevant support services (e.g., speech or occupational therapy)
- (3) The student’s teacher (including both the student’s general education teacher and any present or future special education teachers)
- (4) The student’s parents or legal guardians
- (5) Any individuals invited by the student’s parents (e.g., a lawyer or other advocate)
- (6) The student, when appropriate

For students whose exceptionality has been identified for the first time, a member of the evaluation team or an individual knowledgeable about the evaluation procedures and who is qualified to interpret testing results must attend this meeting. A school district administrator may be responsible for coordinating and managing the initial meetings to develop the IEP, or that responsibility may fall to the special education teacher him or herself. In most cases, the student’s special education teacher assumes

responsibility for actually writing the IEP. The student's parents and specialized professionals remain involved throughout the process of creating the IEP and may propose particular goals for the students or specific strategies for reaching these goals.

A child will continue to receive special education services if the team agrees that the services are needed. A re-evaluation is completed at least once every three years to determine whether or not the child continues to be eligible for special education services, and what services he or she needs.

For more details about the IEP and the various regulations governing IEPs, see the "Guide to Special Education Paperwork" in the *Special Education Supplement and Toolkit*.

#### **To Refer or Not to Refer**

The decision of whether to refer a student for formal evaluation is not always an easy one. A teacher may be torn between his feeling that a student needs special help to learn and his concern that the school's special education system may not actually be the best answer to the problem. Or, a teacher may have full confidence that the school's special education program could dramatically improve a student's achievement, but the student's parents vehemently object to formally labeling their child "special ed." Unfortunately, special education placement may carry a severe stigma among students, and a student himself or herself might resist the referral. These are difficult questions that we could not begin to answer here in the abstract. Each teacher must do his or her best to consider all of these various factors in determining what is in the student's best academic interests.

#### **How does a student enter the special education system in the first place?**

Although different districts may use somewhat different procedures for bringing students into the special education system, the details in the federal mandates described above created some consistency across the nation. Generally speaking, parents, school personnel, students or others may make a request for evaluation to a school counselor or special education coordinator. (If a parent requests an evaluation to determine whether their child has a disability and needs special education, the school district *must* complete a full and individual evaluation to determine the students' special needs, if any.) The school district completes an evaluation. **Note:** New laws also require that teachers provide evidence of what they have done to help a student to be successful prior to referral. A team of qualified

professionals and parents will review the results of the evaluation, including an examination of student work samples provided by the teacher, and determine if the child is eligible for special education services.

According to IDEA, there are thirteen categories of disability that will qualify a student for special education services, if the disability affects the child's performance in school. Those are autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment, including blindness. Students with Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD and AD/HD) may qualify for special education services under the "other health impairment" category. (For a closer look at these categories and accommodations appropriate to each, see the Learning Theory course text.)

#### **How does a student leave the special education system?**

There are several ways that students might exit a school's special education program. First, based on a whole host of factors, if the IEP team determines that the student no longer needs the special education services, and the students' parent or guardian agrees, then the student can exit the system. Second, students might "test out" of a program. That is, the student might perform at a high enough level that the discrepancy between his IQ (as a measure of potential) and his performance is no longer great enough to qualify for special education. (This "discrepancy definition" is a common component of definitions of learning disabilities.) For many students, such an exit from the special education system is in fact the

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ultimate goal. Finally, some students exit the special education system because parent or guardian refuses services for the student.

### Accommodations and Modifications

In the most literal sense, the changes you have to make to adjust to a student's special needs are simply examples of the principles of "differentiation" discussed in the previous chapters. Your job as a teacher of a student with special needs is to design your instruction to meet those needs.

Not surprisingly, the task of developing modifications and accommodations for a student begins with the IEP. In theory (see below), the IEP will contain helpful instructions for adjusting your instruction or curriculum to best accelerate the student's learning. In some cases, you will find it necessary to develop modifications beyond those listed in the IEP. In that situation, you should first and foremost consult your school's special education consultants. Your school will likely have excellent resources to help you develop a strategy for instructing students with all ranges of disabilities.

Before we explore a small number of the infinite number of accommodations and modifications that a teacher might consider making to more effectively teach a student who qualifies for special services, we should clarify our terms. Like so many education terms, it is difficult to draw precise definitions of "modifications" and "accommodations," given the varying ways these terms are used in different districts. However, these two terms do have different meanings.

- **Accommodations.** Generally speaking, "accommodations" do not alter the substance of the curriculum but instead include adjustments to structures and delivery methods (such as seating arrangements, using graphic organizers, etc.) that assist the student to engage in the curriculum. Simply put, accommodations provide an alternative way of accessing the same curriculum.
- **Modifications.** "Modifications" is a term usually reserved for changes made to the curriculum itself (such as when a student is assigned a different book or exercise, for example). Modifications should be used only sparingly, and only if accommodations do not meet the needs of the students.

Thus, note that whether an adjustment to instruction would be an "accommodation" or a "modification" could actually depend on the language of the objective being taught. For example, if the objective was "The SWBAT describe Newton's three laws," then an instructional adjustment that allows a student to listen to a tape on that information is an accommodation; it is an alternative means to get to the same information. However, if the objective was instead, "The SWBAT discern Newton's three laws from a reading of Newton's notes," then introducing the tape adjustment would be a "modification"—a change to the objective itself.

### General Types of Accommodations and Modifications

The accommodations or modifications that you make for particular students will ultimately be purposeful responses to a particular learning difference experienced by the child. As a result, it is difficult to create general protocols for adjusting your instruction that will apply to every situation.

We can, however, think generally about the various characteristics of instruction that can be adjusted to accommodate a student's needs or modify a curricular objective. That is, your objectives, lesson plans, instructional methods, and assignments can be differentiated on each of the following axes:



- **Size.** A common method of differentiating instruction is to adapt the number of items that the learner is expected to learn or complete, or to adapt the amount of information that a student is provided at one time. (Of course, in some instances, an appropriate adjustment might be to provide *more* opportunities to practice some skill.)
- **Time.** Another common approach is to extend the time that a student has to complete some task or learn some material. You may find it helpful to individualize the timeline upon which a project is expected to be completed, for example.
- **Input.** A teacher can adapt the way instruction is delivered to students, by using a variety of visual aides, concrete examples, or hands-on activities, for example.
- **Output.** Similarly, you can also adjust the types of output that the students are producing. Perhaps projects, tasks, presentations might be an appropriate adjustment for a student whose disability makes written expression very difficult.
- **Level of support.** Consider increasing the amount of personal assistance the learner is receiving during a given task. That assistance could come from the teacher or from a peer, for example.
- **Difficulty.** Sometimes, an IEP will indicate that the core difficulty of a skill or problem type should be adjusted for a particular student. Note that this is not “watering down,” your expectations, but is instead a combination of adjustments to the “size” and “time” provided to learn the more complex task. For example, you may have one student continue to practice multiplying two-digit numbers for some period of time while you are moving the bulk of the class on to three-digit numbers.
- **Participation.** Students’ disabilities can sometimes be inextricably intertwined with self-esteem issues. In some cases, too public a form of participation can inhibit a student’s learning. You may want to consider adapting the extent to which, or ways that, a certain learner is expected to participate in a particular lesson.
- **Alternate goal.** This form of instructional adjustment is most likely a “modification” rather than an accommodation. In some cases, pursuant to the IEP it may be appropriate to modify the very objectives or goals that you have set for the class.
- **Substitute curriculum.** Perhaps the most drastic (and rare) of adaptations, there may be some situations where an entirely different curriculum is appropriate in order to meet a learner’s individual goals laid out in the IEP. This is a decision that is made by the committee of persons responsible for the IEP.

*I provide different rubrics for different students depending on their abilities, shorten assignments, allow projects instead of written exams, distribute graphic organizers, reteach reteach reteach, and use flashcards created at the beginning of the unit all the way to the present so that my students are not allowed to forget what we have covered.*

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### **Specific Examples of Accommodations and Modifications**

Quite often, IEPs include long lists of potential accommodations and modifications. For example, the IEP itself might require the IEP team to check whether each of some number of alterations or adaptations are being implemented for the student (e.g., reduced assignments, taped assignments, extra time, opportunity to leave class for resource assistance, short instructions, written instructions, visual aids, oral exams, etc.).

We have collected a very small list of sample accommodations and modifications that follow, which could be used with students depending on the type of special needs they have. While such accommodations and modifications are often presented in lists such as this, it is critically important to remember that one does not select a method of accommodation or modification in a vacuum—you should only use one or

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more of these modifications and accommodations as a well-considered and purposeful response to a student's special needs. For a much longer list of modifications and accommodations, see the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (p. 92: "Accommodations and Modifications Form"); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

Also remember that while these approaches are designed to be effective with students with identified special needs, all students may benefit from individualized or modified instructions, regardless of whether they have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

### The physical arrangement of the room

- Place an easily distracted student near the "front" of the room (or wherever you are most frequently) so that you can provide non-verbal cues before giving instructions.
- Stand near the student when giving instructions to the entire class and quietly repeat them to the student afterwards.
- Have the daily routine in writing where it is easy to see.
- Allow time and space for movement between activities.

### Your instruction

- Allow a child with delayed reading skills to listen to an audiotape of the book (one that you get from the library or make yourself).
- Record your lectures on tape and allow students to review the tape at home.
- Provide a written outline or graphic organizer of material covered in a lecture.
- Combine visual and oral instruction (e.g., use an overhead while lecturing).
- Individualize assignments for students by changing the length, due date, topic, etc. and break assignments into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Teach specific study skills such as organization and note taking along with content-area instruction.

### Assessments

- Allow students to give an oral rather than written report.
- Choose only the most essential objectives on which to assess them (e.g., assess students on the 10 most important spelling words, rather than all 20, or ask them to answer the most important essay question rather than all three). Essentially, strive for quality rather than quantity.
- Provide practice questions for study before a quiz or test, and examples of completed performance tasks.
- Give open book tests or allow one page of notes to be used during testing.
- Vary the format of the test (e.g., include more diagrams to label rather than long lists of matching or large paragraphs of fill in the blank).
- Format tests so that they are clear, readable, and uncluttered. Leave more spaces between lines of text and draw lines on which students can write their answers.
- Read the questions aloud and/or allow the student to respond to the questions orally.
- Provide extra time to complete the test, or give parts of the test in more than one sitting.
- Allow students to retake the test.

### Homework assignments

- Modify the length (e.g., require students to only complete the first 15 math problems rather than all 20).
- Allow students to begin homework in school under your supervision, or provide a written explanation of the homework assignment, with an example that they can take home with them, perhaps to work on with parents or guardians.
- Select another student to be a “study buddy” who can clarify the homework assignment by phone.

As mentioned earlier, this list of accommodations and modifications is by no means exhaustive. And, it is important that these adaptations be implemented purposefully, not randomly. In the third chapter of the Learning Theory course, we will consider one cohesive philosophy for when and how to choose accommodations and modifications when we discuss specific learning differences that you may encounter in the classroom.

### Theory Versus Reality in the Special Education System

For the most part, we have painted a picture here of the special education system as it is designed to work. And, some of you will no doubt work in schools with efficient and effective special education programs. Many teachers, however, have found that the reality of their school’s special education programs do not always match the expectations created by the legal structures discussed in this chapter.

While the special education system is designed to admit students with identified needs in an efficient manner, the reality is that it can take months (or more) for students to be integrated into the system. The referral process can be delayed by an inefficient system of paperwork and red tape, a long list of other students waiting to be evaluated, or a legal oversight. The IEP itself can, in some cases, be problematic as well. While IEPs are supposed to provide specific guidance for modifying instruction, sometimes the guidance is frustratingly general and not very helpful, or based on low expectations. In fact, it may fall to you to correct and improve students’ IEPs so that they can receive the modifications that they need in their classes. (You will practice that process this summer.)

### Systemic Concerns about Special Education

Few teachers interact with or work in the special education system without recognizing that in addition to the logistical implementation challenges the system faces, there are massive, sometimes disturbing, political forces at work shaping the special education system and affecting students’ lives. Although this chapter is intended to be an introduction to instructional methods for serving special education students, we would be remiss not to flag several of the difficult and problematic issues that you will likely encounter as you lead all of your students to academic achievement.

### Special Needs and Student Behavior

Student misbehavior can have its roots in a student’s exceptionality. For example, some children who have trouble paying attention for long periods of time suffer from clinical disorders known as **Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)** and/or **Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**. In some cases these conditions are treated with medication. However, not all students with short attention spans have ADD or ADHD, and teachers need to develop strategies beyond medication for accommodating these students in the class. Sometimes a teacher and student can brainstorm things for the student to do when he or she needs to move (e.g., squeezing clay, standing up for a little while, walking around the classroom quietly). You should also modify your instruction to help students with special needs meet your high expectations for behavior. You might adapt lessons so that there are frequent changes of activities (for the student with ADD) or incorporate math manipulatives (for students with learning disabilities who have trouble understanding abstract concepts). Sometimes your entire classroom environment may need to be modified to help students maintain on-task behavior. See the *Classroom Management & Culture* course for more on this topic.

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*Many students were “labeled” Special Education at an early age. This label has hindered their possibilities and allowed teachers to use it as an excuse for low expectations. Get to know your students and raise the bar for achievement. They will look very different in person from the documentation you receive in their folders. Do not be afraid to ask them to do more than they have ever been asked to do. My students were going to receive a Certificate of Attendance and a pat on the back when they graduated. Do not be afraid to question the status quo, as you are in charge of the academic future of your students.*

**Molly Stauffer, South Louisiana '96**  
**Chapter Relations Director**  
**Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi**

First, while you should be actively aware that many students are not identified for the services they need, there is a disturbing over-representation of students of color in the special education system. Although African-American students represent 16 percent of the total student population in this country, they represent 32% of students in programs for mild intellectual disability and 24% of students in programs for serious emotional disturbance. A number of states have recently been investigating the disparate numbers of minorities in their special education systems.<sup>44</sup> While there may be many factors contributing to these numbers, it seems irrefutable that race places a role in the placement of children in special education.

A second disturbing pattern in the special education system that you may encounter relates to the influence of and incentives created by the large amounts of money that fund these services. (On average, \$6,800 is spent per year per special education student in addition to the \$6,200 that is being spent on all students. Source: U.S. Department of Education.) Unfortunately, such monetary incentives are compounded in the under-resourced schools where you will be teaching. Consider, for example, the following observation regarding potential monetary incentives to place children in special education:

The incentive to over-identify low-achieving children as disabled may be especially powerful in schools serving low-income populations. In cases where a child is under-achieving at school because of economic disadvantage, compensatory educational programs are supposed to be funded through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), not through the IDEA. . . . However, because IDEA funds do not substitute for funding under Title I, students in low-income school districts who are also identified as disabled are effectively “double counted”—once for purposes of drawing down funds under Title I and a second time for purposes of reimbursement for special education services under the IDEA.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, while less of a problem than it once was, the standards-based and accountability reform movement itself has created perverse incentives and pressures on schools that, in some cases, may lead to decisions to over-refer students for special education. The same scholars made the following point:

Until recently, students identified as receiving services under special education were not generally required to participate in statewide assessments. Given that merit raises, promotions, and bonuses for both principals and teachers often ride on the results of statewide exams, the temptation exists for local school districts to raise their scores artificially by excluding the participation of low-achieving special education students in statewide assessments. Although the 1997 amendments to the IDEA were intended to prohibit this practice, three states that recently enjoyed large gains on national reading

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Education; Ladner and Hammons. “Special but Unequal: Race and Special Education.” In Finn, C.E. *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*. Washington: Fordham Foundation, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Horn, Wade F. and Douglas Tynan. “Time to Make Special Education ‘Special’ Again.” *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*, Progressive Policy Institute and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, May 2001, p. 30.

tests (Kentucky, Louisiana, and South Carolina) also evidence large increases in the percentage of special education students excluded from taking the tests.<sup>46</sup>

Not all teachers encounter these insidious pressures, but many do. We raise these issues not to imply that you should set out to solve these problems on a grand scale, but rather to alert you to some of the complex political concerns that you will probably find yourself navigating on a daily basis for sake of your students.

### **The Promise of Special Education**

Perhaps most important, new teachers should recognize the intentions of the special education system and should work hard to make a less-than-perfect system work to the advantage of students who need special services. While the gaps between how the system is supposed to work and the reality of its implementation can be extremely frustrating to teachers and administrators alike, many students depend on the special differentiation provided by the system. And, if you are like most teachers, you will depend on the system for help in serving your special needs students.

Without a doubt, teaching special education presents special challenges. Those of you assigned to teach special education this fall obviously have a lot to learn. However, as the many corps members who have done so before you would attest, you can succeed. You can bring your students academic success that they may not have known before. For special education teachers—as for all new teachers—it is especially important that you access and take advantage of all of the resources at your disposal, from books to people. You should be able to find the resources you need to serve your students, even if you have to look beyond the walls of your school.

*I saw the dangers of low expectations so clearly in the special education system in my school—there literally were **no** expectations, just because the students weren't expected to pass the test the way others were. It was clear that the students saw it as well—and were frustrated to the point where they just didn't care anymore.*

**Crystal Brakke, North Carolina '99**  
**Vice President, Institutes**  
**Teach For America**

As we mentioned at the beginning of this section on special education, those of you not assigned to special education must remember that *all* teachers interact in some way or another with the special education system. Even if you have not been assigned to teach special education, you should expect to have students with special needs in your classroom, and it will be your legal responsibility to meet those students' needs appropriately. More importantly, your students—all of your students—deserve an excellent education. For some of your students who have special needs (whether those needs are officially recognized or not), that will mean adjusting your planning and instruction to ensure that they are meeting their ambitious learning goals. For additional resources for serving students with special needs, see the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (p. 93), which can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

## **III. Supporting English Language Learners**

In light of our responsibility to ensure that *all* students are successful in reaching learning objectives, we have considered the fact that students learn differently and that teachers need to modify instruction to account for those differences. In the last section, we considered this question in relation to students who qualify for special education services. In this section, we will introduce instructional modifications and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

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support systems for students who are English Language Learners (ELL). (Keep in mind that when you arrive at the institute this summer, you will receive a “ESL/Bilingual Supplement and Toolkit” packet that will elaborate on the material presented here.)

Although not all corps members are assigned to teach in an English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual setting, all teachers must prepare for the fact that they will very likely have at least some English Language Learners in their classroom. Moreover, the instructional strategies highlighted here are effective for a broad range of students, regardless of their language facility or needs.

### Education for English-Language Learners—A Primer

Given the public and legal debate over how students of limited or no English-speaking skills should receive instruction, it is not surprising that there are a variety of bilingual and English language programs used throughout the country. In some schools, a “bilingual education” approach is used, which means that students are instructed in both their first language and in English. The theory behind those programs is that students will ultimately have enhanced literacy and learning skills if they first obtain some reasonable level of proficiency in their first language. In a recent study, the National Research Council’s Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties explained that novice English-speaking readers have some basis for recognizing the fruits of their labor. That is, they associate the revealing of meaning with the reading process. Non-English speakers have much less basis for knowing whether their reading is correct because the critical meaning-making process is short circuited by lack of language knowledge. Giving a child reading instruction in a language that he or she does not speak can thereby undermine the child’s opportunity to appreciate reading as an exciting and powerful form of communication. The National Research Council recommended, therefore, that wherever possible students be provided initial reading instruction in their first language.

Of course, not all schools have the resources or the critical mass (or the political will) to have full-blown “bilingual education” programs. And many older students arrive at school with some basic proficiency in their first language. Thus, there is another approach for English language learners called English as a Second Language (ESL). ESL programs, unlike bilingual programs, focus primarily on teaching students English. In fact, under traditional ESL modes, the students’ native language is largely irrelevant to the teacher and the classroom. An ESL teacher should be able to teach a room full of students who speak a number of different languages. Many corps members encounter just such a situation. Stephen Ready, RGV ‘92, for example, teaches ESL in the Bay Area, and at various times he has had as many seven languages represented in his classroom.

In the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit** (found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet), we have compiled a table that describes the different types of bilingual and English as a Second Language programs, the linguistic goal for students in the program (i.e., in what languages they should gain proficiency), and the language of instruction used in the program. See “Various Programs for English Language Learners” in the Toolkit (p. 94). ✖ You might also want to check out the “Brief History of ESL and Bilingual Education” in the Toolkit (pp. 95-96). ✖

## Instructional Modifications for English Language Learners

As mentioned earlier, whether you are assigned to a bilingual or ESL classroom or not, you are likely to have students who are English language learners. In the most literal sense, modifying instruction for ELL students is simply an extension of the principles of “differentiation” discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Your responsibility is to modify your teaching strategies to accommodate your students’ language development. That may include helping them build their speaking, writing, and reading skills in English while also increasing their learning in various content areas.

While you will explore in more detail various techniques for instructing ELL students this summer, here we have compiled a quick survey of some of the basic approaches that teachers find effective. These techniques fall generally under three over-arching principles of ELL instruction:

- (1) Maximize the accessibility of your lesson
- (2) Respectfully and strategically encourage, correct, and assess English language learners
- (3) Proactively value and embrace your students’ language and culture in your classroom

### (1) Maximizing the Accessibility of Your Lessons

**Constantly build context for new terms and ideas.** Good ESL teachers can hear their lesson the way their students hear it. These teachers are constantly modifying their instruction so that someone learning English can understand the concepts being discussed. Simplifying concepts, expanding on new ideas, and providing students with clear definitions and comparisons may make it easier for students with limited English proficiency to understand what you are teaching. As an example, consider the following implementations of these strategies for a history class, all of which highlight for the ELL student the definition or context of unknown terms.

- **Simplification** - “The government’s funds were depleted. It was almost out of money.”
- **Expansion of ideas** - “The government’s funds were depleted. It had spent a lot of money on many things: guns, equipment, help for the homeless. It did not have any more money to do anything else.”
- **Direct definition** - “The government’s funds were depleted. This means that the government had spent most of its money.”
- **Comparison** - “The government’s funds were depleted. If you had five dollars and you went to the store and spent your money on candy then your funds would be depleted, too.”

**Use strategies to maximize students’ comprehension.** Good ESL teachers will employ a range of techniques to increase their students’ comprehension. Some of these include:

- **Clarification checks** – Checking for understanding is important for all students including ELLs. Some of your students may be shy or wary of letting you know when they are lost. If you continuously check for comprehension you are less likely to leave students behind. An example of a comprehension check might be a quick quiz at the end of class allowing you to calibrate where your students are. Also try to look for nonverbal responses from your students to gain a sense of the level of comprehension or confusion.
- **Pacing** – Vary both the speed and of your speech. Recognize that for ELL students, comprehension can increase if you speak more slowly. Be aware of the speed with which you and other students are speaking.

*The first thing to remember is to ask for help. You cannot possibly know everything there is to know about your ELL students.*

**Brandy Nelson, New York ‘97**  
**Managing Director of Program**  
**Teach For America**

## Differentiation

- **Modify your speech** – Speak slowly, enunciate clearly, and be sure to allow wait time before soliciting answers to questions. Break complex sentences down into more simple sentences, and avoid the use of idioms.
- **Use visual aides to clarify key concepts** – Graphic organizers, pictures, graphs, objects, and maps may be a better way to introduce new knowledge or skills to ELL students, as these tools are less language-dependent. The use of media, manipulatives, and other modalities increases the ways your students can follow what you are saying.
- **Record your lessons on tape and make these tapes available to your ELL students.** Students with limited English proficiency may have an easier time following what you say if they can stop a tape, rewind, and listen to your words at their own pace.
- **Use demonstrations or role-plays to show and act out new ideas.** If your ELL students can see the new material in practice or participate in an activity that is less dependent on their English skills, they are more likely to understand the new material. Perhaps your class would act out an historical scene. Perhaps your students would group themselves in numbers to “act out” certain math equations. These sorts of kinesthetic methods are especially important for your ELL students.

### (2) Respectfully and Strategically Encouraging English Language Learners

**Encourage students to speak, but do not force them.** Students with limited English proficiency are often self-conscious about their English speaking skills. Moreover, some research indicates that language learners learn more quickly if they have a period of quiet listening to become familiar with the sounds of the language. (Researchers call this phase the “silent period.”)

You should be sensitive to these students’ discomfort in speaking, even while encouraging them to participate in class and practice their English-speaking skills. More importantly, work to create an environment where ELL students feel comfortable speaking in class and making mistakes. As errors are an essential part of language learning, it is important to create an environment in which students do not feel uncomfortable when they make a mistake in English.

**Correct speaking errors indirectly or by modeling appropriate language.** Although you want students to feel comfortable making mistakes, it is also important that you correct students’ errors so that they can continue to improve. How you correct those errors, however, is critical to students’ success. Model the appropriate language in your response, rather than directly correcting them, and you will help the student identify mistakes without embarrassment. If they mispronounce a word, use that word in your answer to them and emphasize (slightly!) the correct pronunciation. If they make a grammatical mistake in their question or statement, work the correct grammar into your answer.

*I would have individual conversations with my ELL students, and identify one place outside of our classroom where they would speak English – once – that day after school. And we would rehearse what they would say.*

**Allison Ohle, New York ‘98  
Chief of Staff, High Tech High**

**Use cooperative groups.** Cooperative learning has special benefits for students with limited proficiency in the English language. In these groups, ELL students may be able to call on their group members to ask for clarification. In addition, these groups may provide the students with a comfortable setting in which to practice English and contribute their thoughts and ideas. These opportunities may not present themselves in whole-class activities where English speakers may dominate.



**Create an environment where help is readily accessible.** If students are not always working in cooperative groups, you might want to assign “buddies” to ELL students who can repeat directions or answer basic questions. If possible, these students should be proficient in both English and the ELL student’s native language, but that is not necessary.

**Use appropriate assessments.** It is important that you create assessments that reflect your students’ mastery of the material being covered and not only their English skills (unless, of course, the purpose of the assessment is to evaluate their English skills). On traditional assessments such as tests and quizzes, it may be appropriate to read the questions to the student and allow them to respond verbally. You also, for example, might want to have a higher percentage of diagrams to label rather than multiple choice, fill-in-the blank, or essay questions.

### **(3) Proactively Value and Embrace Your Students’ Language and Culture in Your Classroom**

**Show ELL students that you value their native language(s).** Your students’ native languages are important components of their identities and cultures, and it is important to show that you respect and value those languages, cultures, and identities. You can demonstrate your respect for your students’ language by using it yourself when appropriate, and/or making an effort to learn phrases of their languages if you do not already know them. You might place multilingual signs around the room (e.g., “class library,” “homework,” “today is Monday,” “welcome to math class”). You might allow ELL students to teach words from their languages to the native English speakers in your class, or you could assign homework that encourages students to use their native language to interview community members.

**Use rich and varied resources from your students’ cultures.** As the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards stated, “Accomplished teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse learners select, adapt, create, and use rich and varied resources.” You may want to seek out culturally relevant books or literature, or bring in a series of speakers who share a cultural background with your students. Moreover, on a day-to-day basis, you should be aware of and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the students you are teaching.

*The most difficult thing about teaching older ELL students is balancing the fact that the students’ English is so low with the fact that they can’t be treated like four-year olds. I am amazed by how much I judge somebody, as a reflex, by how they speak. The students speak on a third grade level, which can suck you into teaching them like a third grader, but they are nearly adults.*

**Thomas Richards, DC ‘01  
CEO, Organization for Educational Technology  
and Curriculum**

Develop a diverse resource base. Select resources that will expand your students’ awareness and knowledge of other cultures and backgrounds, and show the contributions of individuals of many cultures and languages. One common challenge in this regard is finding diverse materials that are complex and engaging enough conceptually for your students but simple enough linguistically for your students to comprehend.

**Avoid erroneous resources.** Curriculum materials unfortunately often misrepresent students’ backgrounds and history in their portrayals of the social, political, and historical contexts of both indigenous and newly arrived ethnic and cultural groups. Teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms or groups should critically review the curriculum they receive and, if necessary, enrich and supplement the materials to include the perspectives of members of your students’ cultural groups.

## Differentiation

For additional resources on modifying instruction for ELL students, you might want to visit the websites provided in the **Instructional Planning & Delivery Toolkit's** list of "ESL and Bilingual Resources on the Web" (pp. 97-99); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖ As a general matter, your English language learners will need the same intensive instruction that all of your students need. Your success as their instructional leader will rest on your careful planning and purposeful instructional choices as you maintain your high expectations for their academic success.

At the same time, like all students, students in ESL and bilingual programs come to you from unique backgrounds and with unique needs. Aside from the more obvious points that a student learning English as a second language is probably not familiar with many of the idioms and formulaic expressions of the English language, teachers of ELL students need to emphasize the key strategies described in this section. They should maximize the accessibility of lessons, respectfully engage students in their English learning, and draw from a diverse and cultural relevant pool of resources.

## Conclusion and Key Concepts

In this chapter, we first examined the general notion and principles of "differentiation"—the individualization of instruction for various learner profiles. Differentiation is inevitably a formidable challenge for new teachers and veteran teachers alike. And yet, a teacher's responsibility to lead all of his or her students to ambitious academic goals makes the hard work of differentiation absolutely necessary.

As you have seen here, students in special education and students who are learning English represent particular populations that merit unique sets of differentiated strategies. All teachers, no matter what their ultimate teaching assignment, will most certainly encounter students in need of these various instructional strategies.

This summer, you will learn more about these populations and will receive the Special Education and the Bilingual/ESL "Supplement and Toolkit." From this initial look at these areas of differentiated instruction, however, you should be familiar with the following concepts:

- Your classroom will undoubtedly include students on a wide range of academic levels. "Differentiation" refers to a teacher's acknowledgement of those different levels, requiring thoughtful modification of instruction so that all students will master the objective. Among the techniques teachers use to differentiate their instruction are tiered assignments, learning centers, independent projects and varied questions.
- Differentiation is also the foundation for serving students with special needs. All teachers should be familiar with the referral and evaluation process, the means of determining a student's eligibility, and the IEP development process. Most important, all teachers must work to differentiate their instruction to meet each student's needs.
- English Language Learners are one population of students who require special kinds of differentiated instruction. Among the techniques that should be used to differentiate instruction for students learning English as a second language are maximizing the opportunities for context clues, allowing for a "silent period" when students do not have to speak English, modeling appropriate language, valuing students' native language, and using appropriate assessments.

Every child is different, but all children can learn—if only we address their needs. It may take research, patience and “out of the box” thinking, but success is definitely within reach. Molly Eigen, Rio Grande Valley '99 and now a Teach For America Program Director in Phoenix, demonstrates this sense of possibility:

*When I began teaching in a classroom that included students labeled with varied disabilities including learning disabilities, intellectual disability and emotional disabilities, I was told that none of them could retain information or understand higher order thinking. Looking at their testing, I was amazed that I had 17 year old students who could not read, meaning that in 11 years of education they had not retained phonics or any level of reading instruction. I quickly realized that when I approached the students using traditional ways of teaching (lecture, worksheets, independent work), they would not retain what I was teaching, but when I began doing kinesthetic activities, making clear connections for students, having them chant, having them problem solve, and basically approaching every objective from every angle several times, my students began to retain information and their skill levels quickly increased. Once they began this process and realized that they were capable of much more than they and others had thought, their confidence picked up. They became more invested in their learning and therefore their retention increased even more. Ultimately, these students were no less able to learn, but needed to learn in different and more varied ways.*