**Assessment for the Exceptional Student:**

The term exceptional is taken from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This term predominantly refers to students with recognized disabilities both mentally, physical and contextual. Having said this, there is a smaller component of exceptional children who are exceptionally gifted or are gifted and also present with a disabled. The latter are referred to as twice exceptional (<https://www.cec.sped.org/Special-Ed-Topics/Who-Are-Exceptional-Learners>). I chose to reflect on this important component of regular classroom practice because I firmly believe it is my job as a teacher to instruct with a low floor for entrance into the instructional process and a high ceiling of challenges for learners. This reflection will discuss best practice with regards to assessment of learning for students with exceptionalities within the context of inclusive classrooms.

Exceptional student learning is most often supported by IEPs. An IEP is an individual education plan. There are two types of IEPs, adaptive and modified. Adaptive is a when a support is given to a student to facilitate success when navigating grade level curriculum; glasses or a scribe, preferential seating, a quieter work space or additional time to complete assignments. Modified is when a student is engaging in curriculum that has been modified i.e. changed either to a higher or lower set of expectations; higher or lower is deemed from the schoolboard’s infinite wisdom regarding curricular bench marks and temporal cognitive convention.

Modification of curricular objectives can be a double-edged sword. While necessary for some, one must understand the potential for this system to cause harm. If the program for a child is continually modified and the ground is never made up, that student will not graduate with a functional diploma. This will drastically affect their future, visa vi employment, post secondary etc. In cases of modification, the point is not to lower the curricular level for eternity. A teacher should close gaps in learning with the goal of eliminating any necessary modifications. This is a mandate and can be possible. This writer does acknowledge that for some students a cognitive disability exists. For these individuals, an Evergreen certificate acknowledges their achievements. In these cases, formative assessment continues to be vital. Without clear evidence that a student presents in this situation every effort to return the child to curricular expectations must be made. In order to counter-act systemic biases such as lowered expectations, formative assessment need be stringently implemented.

Formative assessment, knowing where your student is functioning, where they can go and how they can get there, is important for every child and paramount for children deemed exceptional. Learning is a fluid enterprise that can manifest in peaks and plateaus over a temporal paradigm. Our charge as teachers is to continue this manifestation, support and address any plateauing or backsliding while constantly extending an individual’s learning. This is our job and anything less is malpractice. To illustrate this function, one may look at the world of video games. As a for profit venture success of their agenda, sales, is principal. While this is not conducive to scholastic models, at present, the video game industry is successful in creating engagement and in honing and furthering one’s skill level. Video games teeter on the wire that is just the right amount of challenge and success that keeps the player learning. Levels are created that incrementally stretch one’s skill affording the player an appropriate amount of extension which leads to endorphin release when accomplishment or success is realized. As such games create and ideal learning protocol in which success is self-rewarded. As teachers, we need realize that incremental support and success should be an ongoing priority. Without this attention students will disengage from the learning process. Through this best practice system, one can motivate and physiologically promote success in furthering student ability. This system is good for all and perhaps more necessary for students deemed exceptional. Often engagement is stagnated by the reality of a student’s context. Gifted students may disengage due to boredom, while others may disengage due to boredom stemming from inappropriate challenging. These are actually both examples of inappropriate incrementation of challenge. In order to effectively challenge, and physiological condition fruition, formative assessment must be paramount in establishing, with a high degree of certainty, where a student is, where they can go and how one can be an agent for realizing goals set.

In my limited experience I have observed times at which the afore mentioned system was not adhered to. In my current practicum placement, I am working with a young individual who has been diagnosed with Down’s Syndrome. As many know there is a vast spectrum of potential ability apropos individuals featuring this exceptionality. It is important to set a low floor for entrance into the instructional process and not to limit expectations. We do not know where this child will go in her educational journey. I must be encouraging the exceptional student to reach as far as is comfortable and successful.

In my practicum work this past week, I was aware of how much intensive planning was involved when creating truly inclusive, highly engaging, and effective instructional and assessment practices. As a beginning teacher, it felt like five hours of preparation for one hour of instruction. Likely this was pretty close to the actual time when I was creating the detailed plans. I had great success with being able to capture each student, provide extended challenges and effectively determine using formative assessment the next steps for learning. Again, this is an extremely time-consuming process because as a teacher, I needed to use my reflections from one day/lesson to help me know what I need to prepare next. The idea that I could make lots of lesson plans over the summer is flawed. I’m really hoping that I get faster with time. Also, I have learned that when very successful lessons take place on a specific learning intention(s), I can file the teaching package as a good reference at least. Collection of resources, high quality lessons, specific pieces of literature, teaching props etc. will build over my career. The inclusion mandate for exceptional learners requires that as a teacher, I plan for low floor entrances and high ceiling challenges in each classroom routine, for every lesson in all subjects and with both in-class and field trip experiences.

Embedded assessment practices including mechanisms for students to reflect on their own progress are good for all learners and essential for exceptional students. This process of learning where a student is functional now, choosing logical next steps for instruction and reflecting back to see how we are doing is a most effective way to prevent an exceptional student from being short-changed by lowered expectations. Just as importantly, students can be supported to reflect personally on learning. Becoming an individual who can look at his or her own progress with a view toward ongoing growth is a continuous journey. Many adults still struggle to do this well. If in our classrooms, students learn this competency we will have helped them gain a life-long skill that will be beneficial emotionally as well as in their career and social context.

I have had a very busy time in my practicum and believe I was successful in building instruction that truly provided inclusion and engagement to all of the Grade children. I had an opportunity to apply what I believed as I planned for instruction, implemented the lessons and activities and assessed learning. I will be taking this learning forward into my future classroom teaching.

Works Cited

(<https://www.cec.sped.org/Special-Ed-Topics/Who-Are-Exceptional-Learners>)