**Assessment in Special Education Instruction**

*Daniel began to struggle with reading in kindergarten. He received help from his classroom teachers and the reading specialist, but his progress was slow. He had trouble decoding and remembering words when he saw them a second or third time. His comprehension was poor since all of his energy went into sounding out unfamiliar words. At the end of his third grade year, Daniel was identified as having a learning disability in the area of reading. His teachers and parents developed an Individual Education Program to address his reading weaknesses.*

*In fourth grade, Daniel went to the resource room every morning for 2 ½ hours. Students from three grade levels came and went on different schedules, and sometimes there were as many as 12 students in the room. Daniel and his fourth grade friend Roger worked with Mrs. Rockville, the special education teacher, on reading and vocabulary in a second grade book for about 20 minutes each day, and during the rest of the morning they independently completed workbook pages and worksheets on a first grade level. Daniel liked the resource room. Mrs. Rockville was positive and energetic, and everyone worked hard.*

*Daniel’s ability to read words on a first grade level was tested at the beginning and end of the year. His baseline level at the beginning of the year was 40 correct words per minute. At the end of the year, he read 39 correct words per minute. He made no progress in reading. While he was in the resource room each week for the number of minutes described in his IEP, Daniel received direct reading instruction for only a short period of that time. During the rest of the morning, he had to teach himself.*

*In fifth grade, Daniel was placed in an inclusion classroom. The general education and special education teachers were trained and excited about working together. Most of the time the general fifth grade teacher conducted whole group instruction. There were two reading groups in the class, and his special education teacher came in to teach Daniel’s group, which consisted of eight students. They worked from the fifth grade reading book reviewing vocabulary, practicing sequencing activities, and reading aloud. Accommodations were provided to Daniel His tests were read aloud to him, he received extra time on tests when he needed it, and all notes were provided to him. Daniel liked the regular fifth grade class. He had good friends and liked his teachers, who were always ready to help him.*

*He was again tested individually in first grade reading material. At the beginning of fifth grade, he could read 45 words per minute and his ending score was 47. Although he had made progress over the summer, his reading progress in fifth grade was minimal. In neither setting did the teachers use the test information to change the way they were teaching Daniel. After two years of special education, he remained barely fluent on a first grade level. Daniel got a very good general education in this setting. He got what most fifth grade students need, but not what he needed. He did not get a “special” education (adapted from Zigmond & Baker, 1994).*

So what was missing from Daniel’s education? What are some aspects of “special” education that would have insured that he was making the progress necessary to catch up with his peers?

Assessment is a cornerstone of special education. In order for real improvement to take place, you need constant feedback regarding the current level of functioning. Without this feedback, the lessons are built on conjecture and hope rather than solid information. This may not be necessary in general education. You may be able to wait until the end of a unit to assess a student who learns in an average way. This student understands your lectures, knows how to take notes and review them daily, can incorporate information from the textbook into the framework you provide, and studies well for tests. He proceeds along the average path.

But the student with disabilities may not be able to process the lecture, take notes, or read the textbook. He may have an extremely difficult time sitting long enough to watch a movie in class. Overwhelming anxiety may prevent him from performing well on a test even if he does know the information. For these students, daily assessment is essential. While weekly lesson plans can be formulated, they need to be adjusted based on the assessment from the previous day (Jenkins, Graff & Miglioretti, 2009).

Daily assessment is very possible when good measurable objectives are written. Here are some examples of measurable goals:

1. The students will read Chapter 2 in the history textbook and compare two Native American tribes through the completion of a Venn diagram that contains 85% of the essential elements listed at the end of the lesson plan.
2. The students will listen to *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* read aloud and complete a worksheet sequencing the actions in the book with 100% accuracy.
3. After listening to a lecture on determining square roots, the students will work problems 1-10 on page 55 in the math textbook with 90% accuracy.
4. After making flash cards for five new vocabulary words from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and practicing with a partner, the students will act out the meanings of the words with 100% accuracy.

The student in number 1 achieved the objective if his Venn diagram contained 80% of the important elements, Student 2 if his worksheet grade was 100%, Student 3 if his math work grade was at least 90%, and Student 4 if his skits indicated that he knew the meanings of all the new words. If these objectives were not achieved, the teacher needs to take note and return to work on the skill until mastery is reached. This is different from general education, in which mastery is often assumed until the end of the unit. Special education teachers cannot wait until the end of the unit. They need information on progress every day.

The type of assessment used in special education and in other types of instruction is Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM). Teachers ask students to perform discrete tasks usually in a timed situation (Hosp, 2007). The assessment method used in the case of Daniel at the beginning of this chapter was CBM. His teachers were correct in using this means of assessing his progress; they just did it too seldom. CBM is designed to inform instruction, a fact that was missed by Daniel’s teachers. If they had been measuring his “correct words per minute” each week, they would have seen that his progress was minimal. They would have increased the amount of time that he received individual, focused reading instruction and insured that he made progress. Daniel’s case is an excellent example of good intentions, and perhaps even good instruction, without one of the key components of special education – frequent progress monitoring.

CBM probes often take the form of timed sessions. Daniel was reading passages for one minute while his teacher counted the number of correct words he read. This can also be done with math, spelling, written expression, and even content areas (Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1999). Pages with sets of questions or problems to work are developed, and students are timed as they complete the task. CBM makes the assumption that an increase in rate equates with an increase in skill.

Another important aspect of CBM is that each session’s results are transferred to a graph. This visual representation serves several functions: it gives a clear indication of the trend of the student’s development so that instructional changes can be made as necessary, it provides valuable data to document progress at IEP meetings, and it is a source of motivation for both teachers and students. Several online resources allow computer plotting which students can do themselves (see list below). A trend line is computed, enabling the teachers to make sure that the student is likely to achieve his goal if it continues on the same progress schedule. The graph below shows the progress Daniel might have made if he received the appropriate instruction.

Curriculum Based Measurement Graph



Imagine Daniel and his special education teacher plotting this data regarding his reading fluency each week. They would all be motivated by his progress (especially Daniel), and they could see whether or not he was on track to achieve his goal by the end of the year. If the scores began to deviate from the expected trend line, adjustments in instruction could be made before it was too late. Daniel would have had an even better year in fifth grade, since his reading competency would have made a significant leap.

**Useful Websites**

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| Curriculum Based Measurement | http://www.interventioncentral.org |
|  | http://www.studentprogress.org/families.asp |
|  | http://research.aboutkidshealth.ca/teachadhd/resources/CBM\_Toronto\_1\_4\_07.pdf |
| Graphing Help | http://www.jimwrightonline.com/php/chartdog\_2\_0/chartdog.php |
|  | http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmdocs/interventions/cbmwarehouse.php |

References

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Zigmond, N., & Baker, J. M. (1994). Is the mainstream a more appropriate educational setting for Randy? A case study of one student with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 9*(2), 108-117.