

# **Ensuring Equity and Balance between Teacher Expectations and Student Ability in Special Education**

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# Community Inquiry...

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We asked SPED teachers, Curriculum Coaches, and District Student Services coordinators the following question:

**Question?** How do teachers, specifically Special Education teachers, ensure that they are adequately challenging their students and that the students are working to their maximum potential?

Regardless of pre-conceived levels of students, as a teacher, Mr. Hall approaches teaching with high expectations regardless of student label. While being cognizant of accommodations listed on students IEPs he ensures to make curriculum accessible for each student, teaching to the individual student's strengths, while helping them traverse their exceptionalities, the small class size makes this accommodation possible for Mr. Hall.

Michael Hall,  
7<sup>th</sup> grade  
English  
Resource  
Teacher:

Mr. Hall's goal is to have all of his students working at grade level by the end of the school year. Many times he will receive students who are 1-2 grade labels behind, he strives to overcome obstacles himself, as well as teach his students how to overcome obstacles themselves. Mr. Hall's preferred method of teaching is to allow students to practice "voice and choice" allowing students to have a say in how the classroom rules/procedures work and a choice in the selection of texts in which they use to complete summative assignments and demonstrate mastery of standards.

In this way, Mr. Hall is providing a safe, culturally responsive learning environment to his students. (M. Hall, personal communications, October 8, 2018).

All teachers gen ed and SPED need to be aware and understand grade level expectations for all students. In doing so, it helps to ensure that our SPED students are working toward the same targets as the gen ed students. SPED teachers also need to be aware of the quality of work that all students at the current grade level are expected to produce. By understanding this it builds accountability across the school to ensure that all teachers are aware of grade level standards. The relationship between the student and the special education teacher is critical, SPED teachers must have a strong understanding of individual student abilities, more so than gen ed teachers. The SPED population has diverse and unique needs and challenges. By providing these students with teachers whose job it is to know these students and their needs at a higher level allows the teacher to be able to better predict the student's academic performance. SPED teachers will always have a greater responsibility to know each individual's student's current level of abilities and how to appropriately challenge the student so they continue to grow academically. Students have a "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) and challenging students within this zone will help ensure teachers to have high expectations. SPED students ZPD's vary, as long as teachers understand and believe that all students can grow, regardless of their starting point, and then students will succeed. SPED teachers provide appropriate differentiation for each student in order to challenge each student within their perspective ZPD. The goal is to promote growth and ultimately close the gap between SPED student performance and that of their gen ed peers. (J. Wagner, personal communications, October 10, 2018).

**Joe Wagner**

Curriculum Coach,  
Wheeler Middle School:  
Education: Vanderbilt  
University Bachelor of  
Arts in Biological  
Sciences in May 2013,  
Johns Hopkins  
University Master of  
Science in Educational  
Studies (with a focus in  
Secondary Education)  
in May 2015

By providing SPED students individualized education program to meet them where they are at while challenging them to grow, we are providing these students with opportunities to succeed.

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Instead of focusing on grades that are subjective, we should focus on outcomes that reflect relevance to real life and build skills that will empower students to attain their dreams.

Understanding that every student learns differently, regardless of what label they are given is necessary to provide avenues for students to achieve their full potential. (Anonymous, personal communications, October 10, 2018).

Anonymous. Individual's background consists of:  
teaching 6th grade Special Education, Curriculum  
Coordinator, Student Support Resource Teacher

## **Sean Telles**

Media Teacher at Ilima Intermediate. BA from Claremont McKenna College in theater, an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University. Licensed in teach English, Social Studies, and Special Education 6-12.

As a teacher, Mr. Telles tries to find the balance between making students feel capable as well as challenging them is difficult to achieve. This may mean giving students a variety of work; some of it may prove to be above their current ability level. For students that do not show measurable growth, it is necessary for the teacher to try to understand what obstacles are preventing the student from achieving the desired growth and how to overcome those obstacles. Sometimes the answers are not clear and it will take a longer period of time to find them. (S. Telles, personal communications, October 2, 2018).

Mrs. Balogh ensures that her students are being challenged because she is teaching them the grade level curriculum. She states she has routinely seen SPED students that are below grade level and her goal is to teach them the curriculum without making them feel overwhelmed. She encourages students to express to her when they do not understand something and provides a safe environment for them to do so. She believes that it is crucial to allow students to be transparent about their understanding or confusion in order to succeed. She uses her knowledge of the students to predict what may be confusing to students and to break down the concepts into smaller chunks from the beginning.

The grades earned by the SPED student are based on the same criteria as the gen ed student, however the way the material is presented may be different. This is based on the individualized educational plan the student has in place. The content of material is the same however, the differences in presentation does not alter the manner in which the student's knowledge about the topic is measured. Accommodations may include reading tests aloud, limiting the number of multiple-choice answers, etc. Mrs. Balogh believes that a SPED grade is of the same value as the gen ed grade. When assigning a grade to a specific assessment, she always considers what it is she is grading for, does the student have the right answer? If so, she will award the student credit even if the answer is not presented in the form that the gen ed student may present it in (i.e. complete sentences).

With the exception of students with severe needs, she does not believe that any indication is needed on a student's report card because the modifications that the student has received should not affect the level of curriculum being taught. She feels that if a student is receiving modified grades then the student is not receiving the proper accommodations, because if they were, the grade they would be earning would be equal to that of the gen ed students. The accommodations are to make the curriculum attainable to the student, not less. (M. Balogh, personal communications, October 8, 2018).

Magdeline Balogh, Special Education Department Head, 6th grade math/science special education teacher.  
BA in Special Education K-12 and General Ed k-6 all subjects.

## **How do you ensure the grade earned by the sped student is equitable to the gen ed students grade of the same value?**

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## How do some students proceed to the next year if they have not “mastered” skills in previous grade levels?

Students with specific learning disabilities or other health impairments may cause them to not “master” a skill prior to moving onto the next grade level. In fact, a student in sped that does master the skills would most likely not qualify for sped in the future due to the student being able to find ways to support themselves, thus not needing the specialized education. She feels that holding a student back due to not mastering skills would create a negative impact on the student and that holding a student back who is not able to master the skill will not cause them to master that skill in the future. She has found the best way to help these students is by continually circling back to skills the students have not mastered, providing repetition and practice of the skills so they continue to move forward learning new skills. This is a keep student from falling further behind, which they would do if they were required to master a skill prior to learning a new one.

For students who may struggle with previous skills it is important for the focus of teaching to shift from playing catch up to teaching students alternative ways to be successful. Students can use these alternatives to overcome obstacles and prepare them for the future. Students who learn how to access alternative ways of obtaining information, can be in a less restrictive environment and should be able to be successful adults. Students who have significant disabilities restricting in receiving modified grades may graduate with a certificate of completion and may choose to participate in programs that continue them to work on life-skills. The larger population of SPED students who are taught in the inclusion or resource setting can graduate with a diploma and attend college or vocational skills. Students who had IEPs in high school can receive accommodations at the college level as well. Normally the focus for high school SPED teachers includes teaching a variety of life-skills and coping strategies for them to use as tools to help ensure successful futures. (M. Balough, personal communications, October 8, 2018).

Special Education students need to have access to well-defined academic standards just as the general education population has.

Teachers and schools need to ensure their are incentives in place to ensure SPED students are at or near grade-level standards.

In March, 2017 the Supreme Court ruled in Endrew F. vs. Douglas County School District that students with disabilities should be provided challenging objectives in order to establish consistent progress stating “every child should have a chance to meet challenging objectives”

Teachers must couple creative teaching methods with research-based programs to provide students with consistent and credible expectations to advance academically regardless of learner type.

Although Inclusion is favorable, it only works as long as the educators embrace the idea that all students can be equal participants and should be pushed to reach their full potential (Gilmour, 2018)

# Every Learner Matters Equally!

Although the message is simple, implementing it will mean a change in thinking and practices for all educators and every level (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017)

Expectations are necessary for student achievement, these expectations are the force that drive some students to succeed. Many students are challenged with stereotypical biases due to their racial or ethnic identity, these students are even more vulnerable to low teacher expectations. High teacher expectations are a major factor in creating a culturally responsive environment for students.

(Krasnoff, 2016)

Teacher expectations are linked to students attitudes, motivation, and success. If teachers raise their expectations of students abilities, then students will rise to the occasion. The overreaching thought is “If they think I can, then I must be able to...”

# Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement Model

There are 27 specific behaviors in which the Teacher Expectations Student Achievement Model has identified that will communicate to students the higher expectations that the teacher has.

They are:

1. **Welcoming students by name,**  
ensuring that the teacher pronounces the students name accurately.
2. **Eye Contact**  
Teachers should provide eye contact with both high and low achieving students while being sensitive to students cultural norms regarding the messages that could be perceived through this practice.
3. **Proximity.**  
Use proximity equitably with students of all levels, being conscious of individual biases associated with identifying with students based on like commonalities and working to develop commonalities with every student.
4. **Nonverbal Behavior.**  
Body language, gestures and expressions to convey messages to all students questions and answers. This can create student motivation or discouragement amongst students.

5. **Classroom arrangement.**

Teachers should arrange a classroom to encourage discussion enhancing interpersonal relationships between students and teachers permitting a sense of connection and collaboration.

6. **Culturally Appropriate Classroom Materials**

To including classroom decor, materials and other visuals to reflect the diversity of the student populations. The physical environment of schools is directly related to the expectations the teachers hold regarding students capabilities.

7. **Visual Aids**

Providing a variety of visual aids and props to aid in student support. "An inviting classroom focuses on the use of color, physical arrangement of space, lighting, and sound to attract students to the learning process (Shade et al., 2004).

8. **Language**

Using and/or displaying a variety of language to include language from the student's heritage will provide awareness of the various cultures represented within the classroom and will assist in building a community within the classroom.

9. **Graphic Organizers.**

Using and modeling graphic organizers. This allows students a way to share their insights and knowledge in a way that supports their various learning styles.

10. **Class/Team Building.**

building and team building opportunities to promote peer support for academic achievement. These opportunities will foster social cohesiveness conducive to developing a sense of solidarity amongst group members allowing students to feel comfortable expressing personal viewpoints.

11. **Random Response Strategies.**

Use of random response strategies Using random response strategies creates a caring, inclusive, safe, and linguistically and culturally rich community of learning where students take intellectual risks and work both independently and collaboratively (Trumball & Pachero, 2005).

12. **Cooperative Learning Structures**

Use of cooperative learning structures to gain information about different cultures and heritages that can't be learned through reading books.

13. **Groups.**

Creating heterogeneous and cooperative groups for learning to encourage positive social interactions amongst students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This allows students the opportunity to judge each other on individual merits rather than preconceived stereotypes.

14. **Probing & Clarifying Techniques.**

Use of probing and clarifying techniques to assist students in answering questions that reflect the different levels of cognitive complexity. Techniques vary based on the different levels of cognitive complexity, they can include rephrasing questions, asking related questions, giving hints, clues or prompts and scaffolding questions.

15. **Acknowledge Student Contributions.**  
Acknowledging all students contributions in an affirming, correcting or probing manner equally.
16. **Multiple Perspectives.**  
Seeking multiple perspectives and providing opportunities for students to hear the varying perspectives while validating all perspectives using appropriate responses.
17. **Monitoring.**  
Monitoring student understanding consistently using multiple approaches in order to assess students learning in ways that will match the varied learning styles of the students.
18. **Identifying Current Knowledge.**  
Identifying student's current knowledge prior to instruction. Allowing students to use their experiences, realites and interests to create a meaningful lesson that is relevant to the diverse population of students.

19. **Relia.**  
Use of real life experiences to connect school and learning to the students lives. This strengthens the motivation for students learning by connecting their world outside to the world inside the classroom.
20. **"Wait Time"**  
Providing "wait time" for students to process and respond to questions prior to affirming, correcting or probing to give students time to consider their reactions, responses and extensions.
21. **Student Feedback**  
Asking for feedback from students to gauge the effectiveness of instructions allowing opportunities for teachers to improve or alter their teaching to meet students needs.
22. **Criteria & Standards**  
Providing students with criteria and standards for successful task completion. Providing students with samples of high quality work allows students to understand and visualize the criteria for the learning goal as well as creating a mental model of what success looks like in terms of the learning goal or standard

23. **Teacher Feedback.**  
Providing effective, specific oral, and written feedback to students with the goal of promoting improved performance. Immediate feedback allows students to ask relevant questions, make decisions, and evaluate their work during the process to make necessary changes rather than waiting until after the work is completed.
24. **Revision Opportunities.**  
Provide opportunities to use feedback to revise and resubmit work for evaluation creating an environment of learning that promotes effort and persistence. This allows students to master a skill that they struggled with allowing them to change their perceptions of how they succeed from the belief of it being from an innate ability to the understanding that success is due to persistence and effort.

25. **Self Talk**  
Explaining and modeling self talk. Explaining the importance of positive self talk and sharing examples of how this leads to positive outcomes assists in diminishing the fear that academic difficulties are due to an unattainable limitation.
26. **Higher Order Questioning.**  
Asking higher order questions of both high and low achieving students. Questions during instruction has proven to be an effective way in promoting student achievement. Asking questions orally and receiving answers has shown to be more effective than written questions in fostering student learning.
27. **Individualized Help.**  
Providing individual help to students in a 1:1 manner builds student confidence. The undivided attention the child receives conveys a message of caring and interest from the teacher.

# Interventions to Assist with How to Adapt to Change

1. Using social narratives to introduce new environments allows students to rehearse a new situation. The social narrative then becomes part of the student's prior knowledge and helps to ease transitions.
2. Bibliotherapy can be used to increase awareness of appropriate behaviors that can be applied to new environments. Students with exceptionalities can understand and adopt new skills learned through fictional characters.
3. A personalized Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is used to safely intervene when a student is exhibiting unacceptable behavior. It is developed by an Applied Behavior Analysis therapist and focuses on strategies to help increase positive behaviors, while reducing negative behaviors.

*Taken from: Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs: How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom by Toby Karten.*

# Creating a Safe, Inclusive, Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

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1. Create a safe environment for “courageous” conversations. Having students participate in conversations about differences without judgements, providing emotional safety, which in turn inspires participation.
2. Establish ABC’s: Affirm Identity, Build Community, Cultivating leadership.
3. Providing resources needed for participation, it will be the teacher’s responsibility to “level” the playing field making sure all students have necessary resources or technology in order to participate in the inclusive environment.

*Taken from: Strategies needed to create cultural inclusive learning environments by Jean Haar and Jerry Robicheau, 2007.*

# Which particular audiences would benefit from the information I gathered? How would I present it?

I think all teachers would benefit from the information gathered. Especially at Wheeler Middle School, we have a large inclusion program. Therefore, both general education and special education teachers would be benefiting from better understanding. I also think that our student support staff would benefit from this information as well since they provide counseling and support to all of our student population. I think a great way to present it would be this powerpoint!

# What are the most important things I now understand more deeply about the issue I investigated.

One of the most important things that we now understand more deeply would be the teacher's role in closing the achievement gap. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure the curriculum is on grade level and that they are providing the necessary resources in order to assure student success. Also making sure that although you may be making accommodations you are not "accommodating" or inflating their grades.

# How can I apply the new knowledge I obtained from my research in the real world?

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We can apply the new knowledge we obtained in our classrooms on a daily basis. Holding students to a high standard, while holding ourselves to an even higher standard to ensure the rigor and curriculum is there. I think it is important to be consciously designing and adapting the curriculum with PURPOSE- making sure the education is truly individualized.

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