

Students at Risk

2nd Edition

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Observing Students

The Process of Working with Students at Risk

Whether students have identified or not-yet-identified disabilities, behavior problems, or gifts, follow this basic process:

1. **Observe students.**
2. Formulate goals.
3. Develop strategies.
4. Implement the plan.
5. Review the action plan.

A Formal Assessment and Plan

A student who is identified as having an exceptionality has undergone a formal assessment consisting of standardized tests that measure intelligence and achievement, and other tests related to the area of the suspected disability, disorder, impairment, or gift. A committee reviews the results of the tests and decides whether the child has an exceptionality and what special accommodations are required.

An individual education plan (IEP) is then prepared. An IEP is a legal document that states the strengths, needs, and ways to accommodate the student's special needs. It is based on the results of the assessment and is written by the classroom teacher, the special education teacher, and sometimes the parent and child. The student's progress is noted and reviewed at least once a year; the IEP is updated accordingly.

We have all been in the situation where a student's performance or behavior caused us some concern. Perhaps a student seems to understand things orally, but can't express himself on paper. Maybe a student's behaviors disrupt the learning of the other children. Or you wonder what you might do about a student in your classroom who grasps new concepts quickly, is among the first in the class to complete her work, and usually has the work done correctly. You may suspect that these students have a learning disability, a behavioral disorder, or a gift. But because the referral process usually takes months, even if the child is identified as having an exceptionality, he or she might no longer be in your class by the time an individual education plan (IEP) is written. Nevertheless, you want to have high expectations for all of your students and do your best for them while they are with you.

While you may have some ideas about how to work with these students, what you need is a framework or process to help them. One that works well consists of the following steps: (1) observing, (2) formulating goals, (3) developing strategies, (4) implementing the action plan, and (5) reviewing the action plan. This framework is based on the classic process of problem solving, which is widely used in administration. It is also similar to the process used in action research by teachers who want to improve their practice.

In this chapter we will examine how to observe students, especially those who have not yet been identified as having an exceptionality.

Know Your Students

One of the most important things to do as a teacher is to know your students: their strengths, weaknesses, preferred learning modalities, and interests. You may do this in several ways. Simply observe their classroom work and behaviors, and keep formal and informal records. Examine the files in which are kept report cards, records of achievement testing, and so on. Pay particular attention to the comments made by previous teachers on the report cards. These will give you a sense about earlier achievement levels, work habits, and behaviors. The results of any psychological testing or medical examination will tell you about the child's intelligence, specific learning disabilities, and the presence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or other exceptionalities.

You might be surprised by what you discover. Perhaps a particular student tested as gifted, which may explain why she is finished the work before everyone else and is filling in time by talking to others. Or, another student proves to have a hearing impairment, which may explain why he rarely seems to participate in group discussions or follow oral instructions. Another student may not be

wearing her glasses, and you may realize why she is constantly talking when copying work from the board.

Speak to the student, the parents, and previous teachers, as well. I have found that by about Grade 4, a child will be able to tell you why work is not being completed (e.g., *can't see the board, don't want to do the work and prefer to play with my pencil, don't understand the work, can't write what's in my head, can't copy very quickly, it's too easy*). Parents can also provide information about the child's previous progress, abilities, and home life, effective teaching techniques, and so on. Previous teachers will likely be able to tell you about academic levels, interpersonal skills, classroom behaviors, and teaching techniques that worked for them.

You need to make observations and gather information about a student in order to determine the child's academic strengths and weaknesses, as well as learning style preferences, extracurricular interests, and activities. The strengths, interests, and learning style preferences may be used to plan lessons and weaknesses then translate into the goals for improvement.

You may be able to use a student's strengths to achieve the goals. For example, I once taught a Grade 7 student who knew *everything* about 18-wheelers. That year, almost all of his creative writing was on the one subject he knew: trucks. Because the student felt confident about the subject matter, he was able to accept my spelling and grammar corrections. Through the corrections and individual conferencing, we were able to improve his skill levels in those two areas.

Academic Performance in Elementary Students

The observations you make at the beginning of the process serve as the baseline of academic performance or behaviors so that you may measure improvement. Below are some ways to observe students.

Observe over time

Record keeping is extremely important in making observations about a child's academic performance. Generally, you can use published checklists and anecdotal reports recorded in a private journal. In the primary grades, keep track of whether the work is completed and handed in. This may be done by checking off the child's name on a class list. You may also want to make some informal notes in a private journal about whether the child seems to understand the concepts. You will notice this through the written work that you correct every day, during class time as you teach the material, and when you circulate around the classroom as the students work on an assignment. While you circulate, you will observe who seems to be struggling to understand the instructions or concepts. You will also see who grasps the ideas easily and finishes the work well ahead of the others. As you make your observations over time — for example, two to four weeks — notice how often work is incomplete, not understood, or completed accurately and quickly.

Note, as well, in which subject areas such work trends are occurring. For example, you may have a student whose oral reading and comprehension are not at grade level and who has difficulty with spelling and written expression. In this case, you would note the performance of the child in these three subject areas over a few weeks.

Be specific

The more specific your observations, the easier it will be to develop a plan for the child. For example, if the child struggles with oral reading, try to note the specific areas of difficulty, such as phonological awareness, phonics, decoding skills, omission of words, or insertion of words. Be discreet about making the observations. Note them during the oral reading sessions and record them using the published checklist that may accompany your reading series or that is distributed by your district. You might also consider recording observations in a private journal when the children are not in the classroom and keeping the journal in a locked cabinet or as a secure electronic file.

You should also note the student's academic achievement. One way to do it is through teacher-made tests and assignments. Subject-based skill-development checklists that have been developed by your board of education are another option. For oral reading, you may use word lists for a specific grade that are prepared by the publisher of the language texts. The child would read these words, and you would note those that were read correctly and those that were read incorrectly. For the words read incorrectly, note whether they were guesses or whether the child tried to sound them out. In the latter case, write what the child pronounced. For example, if the word was *mate* and the child pronounced /mat/, write what was said beside the word that was pronounced incorrectly. When the child has finished reading the words, examine the words that were pronounced correctly and incorrectly to determine specific patterns. After examining the list, you may notice that the child knows short vowels, but not long vowels, for example. Be sure to make many observations over time to determine whether or not the child really does know the long vowel sounds. A single observation is insufficient because the child may not have been feeling well or may just have been inattentive. Track the child's performance in daily work and on tests and assignments for a few weeks.

Note clusters of strengths and weaknesses

Be aware of *clusters* of difficulties, such as those in the language area: reading, spelling, and written expression. Note the child's speech and language development. Listen to pronunciation, vocabulary used, and sentence structure. You may notice difficulties in math, too, particularly in remembering the facts and procedures about how to do the operations involved in adding (such as carrying), subtracting (such as borrowing), multiplying, and dividing. Consider that a child who has difficulties with problem solving may also have problems with reading comprehension. Note, too, the motor skills of the child: fine motor, as shown in printing or writing; and gross motor, as in running, jumping, or climbing. Observe whether the child can organize his or her work, how long an attention span the child has developed, and how well the child collaborates with others in groups. You should also make observations about the child's preferred learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile — VAKT), ability to think critically (analyze text or statements and evaluate them), creativity (ability to develop new ideas or solutions), and social skill development. Beyond that, if the child's first language is not English, make notes about his or her English language development and cultural background. You may want to use a Screening Checklist, such as appears on page 12, to record your observations. It provides a general guide for observing a student's development and skill levels. A reproducible version appears as an appendix.

Screening Checklist

Name: Tyler Grade: 4 Date of Birth: June 25, 2004

Language

- Oral Reading — *some hesitancy, doesn't pay attention to punctuation, slow pace, little intonation, reads a rehearsed passage better*
- Reading Comprehension — *can answer most fact and detail questions, some difficulty with main idea and inference, seems to understand more when listens to a tape and reads*
- Spelling — *weekly spelling tests are well done, everyday spelling is weaker, has trouble sounding out words, sequence of letters in middle and end of words is sometimes a problem*
- Written Expression — *can express sequential thought, ideas are usually expressed logically, does not put much effort into creative writing, applies punctuation and capitalization rules most of the time*
- Oral Expression — *extensive vocabulary, no articulation problems, expresses ideas logically and sequentially, volunteers answers regularly*
- Oral Comprehension — *follows directions, understands passages better when read orally*

Math

- Concepts — *good understanding: numbers, operations, measurements, patterns, geometry*
- Facts — *knows +, -, ×, and ÷ to 12*
- Problem Solving — *better understanding of what is asked when problem is read orally*

Motor Skills

- Fine Motor — *handwriting is slower, well formed (cursive and manuscript), stays within lines*
- Gross Motor — *able to throw and catch, maneuver a ball with right and left feet*

Work Skills

- Ability to Organize Time and Resources — *locates materials when required, organizes own homework, able to anticipate time limits*
- Ability to Focus on Task — *can usually focus on work until completion, not easily distracted except when reading*
- Ability to Work Collaboratively — *works well with others, plays with a small group of same-sex friends, accepting of authority*

Other

- Learning Style Preference (VAKT) — *mostly oral with some kinesthetic/tactile and visual (pictures)*
- Critical Thinking — *is beginning to be able to analyze statements and texts and to support an evaluation*
- Creativity — *occasionally comes up with novel ideas*
- Social Skills — *fairly well developed*
- English Language Development/Cultural Background — *English is his first language*
- Interests — *was on the school soccer and cross-country running teams; doesn't seem to do much reading for pleasure*

Summary

Math, motor skills, work skills, oral skills (receptive and expressive), and writing are average to above average. He is able to collaborate with others.

Reading and spelling need reinforcement: review phonics and segmenting words and suggest books that may be of interest.

Seems to be primarily an auditory learner, who also needs some kinesthetic/tactile components.