

# Finding the Will to Individualize Instruction: How My Son Made Me a Better Teacher

*Maintaining high standards, communicating with parents, and giving students a personal connection to literature help this teacher reach more students.*

The beauty of American public education is that we acknowledge the potential of every individual with the clear expectation that each person should receive a high-quality, academically focused education. Our challenge, then, is how to achieve that goal when students come with a variety of backgrounds, talents, interests, limitations, and motivations. Currently, federal mandates tell us that we will know we have left no child behind when all students perform at equally high levels on a formal test, and while I can appreciate the need to quantify evidence of educational equity, it concerns me that homogeneity is the only way we deem fit to measure parity in the current system.

While politicians may score points for declaring that they will not rest until every student reaches proficiency in the major academic disciplines, their standardized method of calculating progress (or lack thereof) fails to recognize that performing well and performing equally are not the same thing. My heart breaks every time we confirm students' suspicions that they are "not good enough," even though they may be making steady progress and performing at their highest level. How many times can we tell children they are novices or rank at the seventh percentile before they embed that failure into their self-concept? For me, this question is no longer academic, but deeply personal.

## A Will to Educate

Two years ago, while administering the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit test to my last section of ninth-

grade English, I went into labor. Four hours later, Brent and I welcomed our second son, William Atticus Merritt, into the world. Two hours after that, Will's pediatrician told us that he suspected Will had Down syndrome. That moment has affected every part of my life since.

While we had decided on Will's name before his rather expeditious birth, I have often thought it appropriate that we named him after one of the great literary advocates of fairness and inclusion. Will has encouraged me to become much more active in my efforts to "climb into [my students'] skin and walk around in it" (Lee 48). Although Will has not yet entered formal schooling, our experiences navigating the Early Intervention program and working with Will's therapists to help him acquire skills that come naturally to many children have allowed me to reexamine the way I view my role as a public educator.

Shortly after leaving the hospital with Will, it became clear that he would need accommodations in place to survive. He was not eating well enough to gain weight and had been diagnosed with failure to thrive. Our lactation consultant taught us how to use a Haberman feeder (Will's first piece of adaptive equipment) that would allow us to help him manage the flow of milk so he could drink a full meal without tiring and eventually transition to nursing. At first, it took him 30–40 minutes to take a four-ounce bottle.

Will's occupational therapist worked on developing his oral motor skills to improve his efficiency with eating by teaching him each discrete skill in the deceptively complex task of drinking.

She taught me how to stimulate his face and mouth before a feeding, how to position him so that he could focus entirely on eating, and noted the development of his suck-swallow sequencing. We tried every nursing position several times with and without adaptive equipment, and although Will could latch and initiate feeding, he could not sustain a nursing session long enough to meet his nutritional needs.

He was, however, making progress with bottle feeding. Within a few months, Will was taking four ounces from the Haberman feeder in 20 minutes and was ready to move to regular bottles. His occupational therapist recommended a brand that would be an easy transition from the Haberman, and Will made the switch without complications before I returned to teaching. We had not achieved the original goal of nursing, but we had removed barriers, used adaptive equipment as a bridge, and focused on purposefully teaching Will the discrete steps of the process to reach the desired outcome of his being able to eat efficiently and gain weight. Seeing Will go through this process to learn something as basic as how to eat made me realize how much more support some students need to master academic skills—and how much such students can master when they are given the appropriate support.

### The Need for Individualized Education

During my 15-year tenure as a high school teacher, I have implemented countless accommodations for my students and participated in many Admission and Release Committee (ARC) meetings to establish goals and accommodations for students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). A few years into my career, I determined that some common accommodations, such as breaking large assignments into smaller steps, would benefit many of my students. As a result, I implemented universal accommodations in my general classes. It seemed that many IEPs included the same basic accommodations, and my monitoring would certainly be easier if I were implementing those practices for all my students.

At first, the structure created some success. Some students who had been struggling, but who did not have an IEP, thrived with the accommodations in place. I liked having a structure to guide

students through complex assignments, so I wrote step-by-step instructions for my more detailed assignments, restated and rephrased major points, used redirection to discourage off-task behaviors, marked my sheets, and considered my job done. A believer in inclusion, I felt I had done my best to make my instruction accessible to all students.

Over time, many students challenged my assumptions about my classroom. Certainly, some students with special needs, especially those who only required structural support, were successful with the more focused instruction. Others were not, for a variety of reasons. As I have gained experience working with a broad range of students, it has become clear to me that many students need more than a step-by-step worksheet and a seat in the front row to be successful in a mainstreamed public school classroom. Just as Will needed specialized instruction to learn to eat successfully, some students need individualized and targeted instruction to master the discrete skills of academic concepts that many of their peers acquire easily.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for students to receive a truly individualized education in the current system. Teachers are bound by rigid definitions of proficiency that all students are supposed to reach at the same rate. We often lack the time, expertise, funding, or inclination to adjust our classroom practices or schedules to meet the needs of students we may think do not belong in a regular classroom because they seem unable to meet our standards of proficiency. Sometimes the IEP is so general and the accommodations so generic that it is difficult to tell what would be beneficial to a student.

While I am a devout believer in mainstreaming, I worry that the focus on homogenous performance discourages many teachers from addressing the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. About seven years ago, I had a student with Asperger's syndrome who was very smart but had difficulty participating in class activities appropriately. As a result, Adam often escalated conflict with teachers and peers because he did not know how to self-edit his responses. That same year, I had my first student with a terminal diagnosis. Over the first semester, I watched Brandon flirt with the girls, joke about his hot-rod wheelchair, and miss weeks of school for hospital stays. I tried to be flexible about his schoolwork, but I found myself torn between wanting to

push Brandon to keep participating in the rituals of life and recognizing that mastering character analysis is somewhat less meaningful to a teenager with six months to live. Last year, I had a native Spanish speaking student who posed a challenge because it was difficult to tell if Silvia's barriers to success were her lack of English proficiency or her disability or both. These students needed an individualized approach to find success in the classroom and a unique understanding of what success would look like for each of them.

### The Need for Advocacy

Often it is a persistent parent, rather than the school's documentation, that results in a teacher understanding a student's needs. But not all parents have the time, resources, or confidence to advocate for their children either in an ARC meeting or directly to the teacher. After two years of navigating our state's early intervention program (a good one compared to those found in some other states), I have much more empathy for the parents I see at the high school level who are sometimes bitter or exhausted from years of battling the system for the free public education that is promised but seldom delivered.

When Will turned one, we had our first lesson in advocacy. Will had been working with a physical therapist in addition to his occupational therapy, and because he was ready to transition to solid foods and begin learning sign language, we wanted to add speech therapy to his schedule. We were at the limit of automatically approved units of service, so we had to appeal to get the additional units for a service Will clearly needed. We have appealed Will's allocation of units at least every six months since then in addition to maximizing our insurance benefit and accessing Medicaid to ensure that Will continues to get the services he needs to reach his potential. We do not always receive what we request, but we always exhaust our lines of appeal until we reach the best possible outcome. How often do families face similar hurdles to access services in our schools?

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the parents who are proactive on their child's behalf. I find I learn a lot more about students' needs from conversations or emails from parents at the beginning of the year than I do from the clinical descrip-

tions of students and their disabilities on the IEP. For example, a few years ago I had a student with dysgraphia who used a laptop to facilitate most writing tasks. Jacob tested well above average in reading, wanted to be a writer, and was appropriately scheduled in Advanced Ninth Grade English. His parents took an active role in his education, establishing email contact before classes began and checking in frequently throughout the school year. Corresponding with Jacob's mother at the beginning of the year helped me understand which types of assignments he would need to complete in shortened formats, when I should ask him to answer in handwriting versus typing, and how we could modify procedures such as notebook checks to meet Jacob's needs. Maintaining open communication throughout the school year ensured that the implementation of Jacob's IEP was appropriate to his needs and his academic goals. When parents do not initiate contact, I try to establish an open line of communication with them as early as possible so we can discuss the student's progress and challenges regularly, not just when a problem arises.

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Two women communicate in sign language. © Vladimir Mucibabic/Fotolia.com

## Improving My Teaching

As my understanding of the need for truly individualized education (for many students, not just those with documented disabilities) has developed, I have made significant changes to my classroom practice and philosophy. After Will's birth, I realized that I had been operating under the paradigm that it is my job as the teacher to present the material and the students' job to learn it. I took my part of the job seriously, working diligently to create detailed and structured assignments rich with rigorous content. If a student was unsuccessful, it was easy for me to tell myself that I had done my part of the job and to record the F as the natural consequence of the student's actions.

Now, I focus more on what students should be thinking than on what they should be doing. I still use my carefully designed step-by-step instructions to guide complex procedures, but I tend to teach by modeling metacognitive processes with think-alouds and by questioning students about how they determined that an answer is correct. I teach them patterns of response—what I think, why I think it, for example (“Increasing”)—and talk to them about strategies for remembering content by actively building connections to images and prior knowledge. Many students with special needs lack the academic skills to know intuitively how to navigate a rigorous activity independently, so I design instruction with bridges to help those students demonstrate their knowledge and meet the academic expectations.

I now take responsibility for structuring the content so it is more accessible to students by making abstract concepts more concrete. For example, when teaching theme, I use Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson's guidelines from *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* to establish the standard pattern—“sometimes when . . . a person may . . . because . . .”—for writing theme statements (188–94). The structure makes it easier for students who are still operating on a concrete level to write a theme that is neither trite nor simply plot summary. I give students the flexibility to deviate from the pattern if they are comfortable with the concept, but overall my students have an excellent success rate using the formula.

When students are struggling, this structure also gives me specific questions I can ask to guide

them toward this type of theme. I walk around the room checking students' progress as they write their early attempts at theme statements, and if I notice students' themes for Edgar Allan Poe's “The Cask of Amontillado” begin as a topic (revenge) or a cliché (every action has a consequence), I ask about the protagonist's development in the piece and how that experience reflects the general human experience: Does Montresor's attitude toward revenge change in the story? How do you know? Why do you think he feels that way? Do people sometimes imagine revenge will be better than it actually is? Such questions help move students toward a more sophisticated response, such as Morgan's theme statement: “Sometimes when they're insulted too much, a person may become vengeful because they have become tired of taking the insults.” Or Cameron's: “Sometimes when a person seeks revenge a person may feel guilty after he is successful because he realizes he has done bad.” Using this type of system, buttressed with individual monitoring, removes some of the developmental barriers for students who may not be ready to work comfortably at the level the standards require.

Sometimes, students with disabilities need tasks broken down into smaller steps than do their typical peers, much like Will needed to learn how to sequence his swallowing to eat effectively. The use of graphic organizers can remove procedural barriers for students who struggle to include all the required parts of a complex response. For example, when we study Juliet's soliloquy just before she fakes her death in act 4 of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, I want students to notice that what Juliet says and the way she says it reveal that Juliet becomes frantic as she prepares to take the potion. To facilitate their thinking, I use a three-column organizer (see fig. 1) that chunks the speech into smaller, meaningful sections and asks students to summarize and explain the significance of each chunk. The graphic organizer is similar to Kylene Beers's “It Says—I Say” strategy, which uses summary to allow students to understand a difficult passage before connecting it to their prior knowledge (165–71). Breaking the complex task into small sections with discrete steps keeps students from being overwhelmed by a long soliloquy and provides a visual clue about how structure reveals emotion as the length of the sections vary. Taking

**FIGURE 1.** Chunk and Think: A Literary Analysis Organizer

*Romeo & Juliet* act 4, scene 3: "God knows when we shall meet again."

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Block \_\_\_\_\_

In this scene, Juliet sets the plan she and Friar Laurence have made into motion. As you read her soliloquy, summarize each "chunk" and explain how each section adds meaning to the play through characterization, foreshadowing, and theme development.

What she says	What it means (summary)	Why it matters
<p>Juliet: Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again. I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins, That almost freezes up the heat of life. I'll call them back again to comfort me: Nurse!—What should she do here? My dismal scene I needs must act alone. Come, vial. [Takes out the vial.]</p>	<p><i>Juliet says good-bye to her Nurse but becomes afraid when it is time to drink the potion. She thinks about calling the nurse back in but decides she needs to carry out the plan alone.</i></p>	<p><i>This part reminds me that Juliet is still very young—14—and that she still needs the support of her Nurse when she is afraid. It also shows her determination to be with Romeo no matter what because she plans to drink the potion even though she is afraid.</i></p>

What if this mixture do not work at all?  
Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?  
No, no, this shall forbid it. Lie thou there.  
[Laying down her dagger.]

What if it be a poison, which the friar  
Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead,  
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonour'd,  
Because he married me before to Romeo?  
I fear it is: and yet, methinks, it should not,  
For he hath still been tried a holy man. . . .

Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here's drink—I drink to thee.  
[She falls upon her bed, within the curtains.]

steps to make content and academic processes more accessible to students of varying abilities has empowered me, as a teacher, to celebrate what my students can do while still holding them to a high academic standard.

### Responding to Literature about Disability

As my pedagogy has evolved, so has my response to the literature we use in my classroom. A year before Will's birth, a student I had taught as a ninth grader wrote a letter to me as his senior reflection on literacy for his portfolio. Jeremy had been in a collaborative General Ninth Grade English class and had been a conscientious student who was successful with the extra structure the class provided. He has Asperger's syndrome and depression and relates better to adults than to his peers, but he par-

ticipated well in class and mastered skills fairly easily.

I had enjoyed having Jeremy in class and spoke to him often in the hallways throughout his high school career, but I was surprised to see his reflection focused on an experience in my class. In his letter, he discussed how much he had enjoyed reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* because he could relate to the characters in the book. What surprised me was that the character he most related to is Boo Radley. He found comfort reading about a character who was as lonely and misunderstood as he often felt. Jeremy's reaction prompted a significant change in the way I address the themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* with my students, shifting my focus from Atticus's fight against racism to the more accurate and encompassing theme of otherness in the novel. We discuss the real and artificial barriers to inclusion in the

Maycomb community and our own, empowering students to share and reflect on their experiences as outsiders as a way to connect to the novel.

My greatest curricular challenge, however, occurred after Will's birth and was much more personal. Our ninth-grade short-story unit culminates with a study of James Hurst's "The Scarlet Ibis." The story is rich in figurative language and imagery with interesting characters, a clear theme, and an easily interpreted symbol, so it is a nice vehicle to synthesize the skills students learn throughout the unit. However, published in 1960 with a World War I setting, the story depicts some outdated attitudes about disability. When the story loomed on the schedule the following year, I was filled with dread, unsure about whether I could lead students through an objective analysis of the story when its significance had changed in such personal ways for me. When I read "The Scarlet Ibis," I always feel sorrow for Doodle's mother because we never see her loving Doodle for who he is and what he can do. For whatever reason, both parents appear to define Doodle by his limitations.

I opted to be honest with my students about my misgivings, and as a result, students began asking questions about my experience as we read. Now, in addition to analyzing the story's literary qualities, each class has meaningful discussions about what it is like to raise a child with a disability. We discuss how expectations of people with disabilities have changed over time; why some people choose to terminate pregnancies when they learn their unborn child will have a genetic or health concern (and why I hope they will choose not to if they ever face that decision); and how we treat people who do not conform to society's definition of normal. This story has become a highlight of the year for me now because it offers a chance to share Will's story with my students and to share lessons about resilience, faith, and tolerance in a way that is meaningful to them.

### **Making Connections to and for People with Disabilities**

Many of our students will grow up to have personal experiences with disability: Some will be the doctors who deliver the news, some will receive the news themselves, and some will support a friend or family member. Most will at some point have to

explain disability to their children. I want them to know that Brent and I cherish Will; we love him completely, delight in his accomplishments, look forward to a promising future for him, and worry about how the world will treat him. Because the students see a real-world context for "The Scarlet Ibis," they pay more attention to both the content and the craftsmanship, resulting in text-rich analysis. They also see how literature can speak to us and contextualize our lives through my example.

While not every teacher will have this personal connection to the story, any teacher can use contextually relevant articles to open dialogue with students about disability. Next year, our ninth-grade teachers plan to use articles about American snowboarder Kevin Pearce's relationship with his brother David, who has Down syndrome, to contrast the narrator's embarrassment at "having a crippled brother" (Hurst 169) and open a dialogue with students about their experiences with and attitudes toward disability.

My hope for Will is that, when he enters public school next year, he will enter an environment where he is valued and his accomplishments are celebrated, whenever they may occur in relation to his peers. Unfortunately, the way we currently measure progress means that Will, who scores in the tenth percentile or less in every area of development, will most likely receive a barrage of subtle and direct messages that he is not good enough. After all, under NCLB, schools do not get credit for the learning that students do after the test. Some teachers, assuming that he will never meet proficiency in time for the results to matter, may give up on Will to focus on those students "on the bubble" with more potential to meet standards on the typical timetable. This breaks my heart for him.


As a society, we have made enormous progress in the way we value people of varying abilities. I am thankful that, unlike a generation ago, no one suggested that we institutionalize Will and move on with our lives. I am delighted that he has a legally protected right to a free public education. I am concerned that, like many students with disabilities, he will be judged educationally deficient because, although he makes progress, he does not keep pace with his typically developing peers or learn in the same way as them. I am embarrassed that I have sometimes been a party to creating this environ-

ment for my students. And I am resolved that I will do everything in my power to make sure that my practice as an educator strives to meet the needs of each student as an individual.

School should be settings where we encourage and celebrate each student's accomplishments. As Alfie Kohn states, "our emphasis should be less on *student achievement* (read: test scores) than on *students' achievements*" (italics in original). Will benefits far more from us cheering when he cruises and transitions from the coffee table to the sofa than he does from us documenting the fact that, because this is occurring at 29 months of age, it puts him in the first percentile for gross motor development. Likewise, my students make more progress when they see me celebrating their successes instead of documenting their deficiencies.

It is a moral imperative that we continue to provide a rigorous education to all students; however, by measuring each student against a norm, we place too much emphasis on pace and not enough on progress. The mandated expectation that all students master skills at the same rate devalues the progress made by students who take a little longer to acquire skills and fails to inspire those who attain them quickly. Instead of focusing so much attention on test results, educators should be about the

business of producing authentic learners and productive members of society.

When, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout comes home from her first day of school, determined never to return because her teacher told her not to read with her father anymore, Atticus wisely asks, "Do you know what a compromise is?" (Lee 50). Perhaps it is time we, too, struck a compromise that balances our need for accountability and parity with our acknowledgment of diversity and individuality. 

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In "Spend a Day in My Shoes: Exploring the Role of Perspective in Narrative," students imagine spending a day in someone else's shoes. After reviewing the characteristics of narrative writing, students write from another person's point of view. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/spend-shoes-exploring-role-265.html>

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