

## *A Teacher's Reflections*

When I found out Max was going to be placed in my ninth-grade U.S history class, I can't say I was excited. I've been teaching ninth-grade U.S. history for nine years, I'm pretty comfortable with what I do. I work hard, put a lot into my teaching, try to make adjustments for students with learning disabilities and behavior challenges, engage the students, and generally do a good job teaching. I work well with the special education teachers and feel comfortable with having their kids in my class. At the end of the year, I always attend the IEP meetings I'm invited to for those students being included in my class. It's nice that the district hires a substitute to cover my class while I'm out for the day at IEP meetings. It's usually a pretty routine procedure. We listen to the eighth-grade teachers discuss the student's progress. The teachers ask the parents if they have any questions or additions. Then the ninth-grade special education teacher discusses goals for the next year and the classes the student will have in special education and/or general education. We all sign our names, and the parents walk out with a stack of papers, looking a little dazed.

Usually, the kids who will be in my classes are your typical students with learning disabilities. The students are bright kids who have trouble with reading, or, math, or writing. They need tests read to them, a note taker, books on tape, extended time to finish assignments, big projects broken up, and/or help with organization. Once you have done that type of adjustment for students, it's easy to implement. The first year I had a student in my class who needed modification, it was a different story. I felt unable to meet the student's needs and uneasy about having him in my class. But I worked things out with special education teacher, and I think our modifications and adaptations have worked well for most of the students.

Max's IEP was different. For one thing, both parents showed up. That's pretty unusual. I am used to seeing one parent or sometimes no parent. Max's step-mom was very quiet, and his dad appeared angry even before we began. It seems that they were at a party recently overheard a couple of teachers from the junior high talking about their son and his "unusual behavior." The teachers even compared Max to the character in *Rain Man*. To top things off, Aaron Fuentes is a lawyer! He was talking about a parent's right to confidentiality and a breach of ethical behavior. Finally, the principal was called in to talk with Mr. Fuentes. They set up another meeting to talk to the director of special education and the principal from the junior high to discuss the matter. After that, the principal, who usually wanders into an IEP meeting just long enough to sign his name, decided to stay for the whole IEP. I guess every IEP is supposed to have an administrator in attendance.

The rest of the meeting was tense. The teachers started talking about Max's characteristics. This is when I began to get worried. This student wasn't diagnosed with a learning disability. He was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDDNOS). I had never heard that term. When I asked the team to explain the diagnosis, Aaron Fuentes seemed happy to get a chance to share his story. He explained that Max has some but not all of the characteristics associated with autism. Although children with autism have difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, have impaired social interactions, engage in repetitive or stereotyped movements, have

trouble with change, and have unusual sensory experiences (like being overly sensitive to sound or light), Max has appropriate language skills and no stereotyped movements. However, he does have unusual behaviors, impaired social interactions and some unusual reactions to sensory stimuli in the environment. It sounds like *Rain Man* to me.

Mr. Fuentes went on to talk about Max's unusual behaviors and his areas of strength. When Max was young, he wasn't able to play in the park until his parents walked around the entire park and touched all of the parking and street signs. This limited their ability to go to big parks because they would spend all of their time walking to touch signs and had no time to play. When Max was a baby, he would organize his toys by size, shape, and color. He wears the same clothes every day. His parents have seven pairs of the same pants and shirts. He refuses to wear shorts or long-sleeve shirts. In the winter, he wears his T-shirt. He will put on a light jacket while he is outside but immediately removes it when he goes in. He also hates shoes and wears sandals all year long. He says shoes make his feet feel too hot. This has led to problems for physical education, because the rules say, "no tennis shoes, no participation in PE." Max doesn't have any "real attachments" to people, according to his parents. Mr. Fuentes told the story about leaving Max for two weeks, when he was three, to go on his honeymoon with Max's stepmother, and Max didn't appear to miss him at all. Max's aunt came to stay with him for two weeks, and he never once asked about his father. When Mr. Fuentes called, Max refused to talk because the phone was too loud. He said this is the hardest thing about having a child with PDDNOS. A couple of weeks ago, Max's little sister walked into the room in a new party dress and Max said, "Nice dress." His eight-year-old sister began to cry because, she said, "It's the first time Max has ever noticed me." She wore the dress again the next day, but Max didn't say anything. On the other hand, Max is almost a genius in history. It's his passion. He can name all the battles fought in the Civil War in alphabetic order and knows the number of casualties recorded for each side. He reads everything he can about war. He even searches the Internet for U.S. troops who are killed in current U.S. missions overseas. It's kind of creepy.

After Mr. Fuentes talked for a while, the teachers began to talk about Max's progress in Junior High. The team decided that he needed special education services in homeroom and was to be included in the general curriculum for all content courses. His weaknesses were in knowing what to study, remembering due dates, completing assignments, and keeping track of his work and materials. He was reading on grade level, although he had trouble with cause/effect and inference when reading. His math skills were on grade level, and his writing was weak but nothing that required extensive support. When Max got poor grades, it was because he didn't complete work or didn't turn assignments in. Max also had trouble moving between classes. It seems that he only had one route that he walked in the school. He went to each classroom in the order of each period and that was the only route he took. If his schedule for the semester was homeroom, English, math, art, history, PE, and science, and he forgot a book in science, he had to go to all the other rooms before he went to his locker. His parents got Max a rolling backpack in which he carried all of his books and supplies. That way he had all of his stuff with him and never had to use a locker.

When the teachers started talking about what Max would need from his general education teachers, I really felt like this kid was going to be a burden. He needed a study guide sent home two weeks in advance for each test. His parents wanted me to email

them every day with his assignments. They wanted books on tape so Max could both read and listen to the book. It was suggested that the teachers use multimedia or PowerPoint lectures to hold Max's interest during the lectures. Plus, Max would carry a calendar to be checked each period by all of his teachers and daily by his parents. Max's dad bought him an electronic organizer, for the teachers to record voice directions for assignments, too. It sounded neat, but I would have to spend time learning to program the organizer, which is time I could spend working on other things that would benefit the entire class. Since Max is so interested in history, Mr. Fuentes asked if I could do an independent study project with him to allow him to expand his knowledge. Finally, the parents wanted the teachers to facilitate Max's social development by writing "social stories." They wanted the special education teachers to take pictures of Max with the digital camera showing positive interactions and to write stories about Max in the lunchroom or in the hall that emphasized how he should greet peers, ask questions about their interests, and so forth. They wanted me to develop a social story for history class revolving around the cooperative learning groups I use. It seemed like a lot of work. I am beginning to think Max needs a personal assistant assigned to him like I've seen with students with significant disabilities. An assistant could handle all of these tasks without requiring so much of the teachers who are already stretched working with all the other students. I think inclusion works for students with mild disabilities but maybe isn't what we need to do for students like Max.