

Augustana College

Praxis Review: Areas of Exceptionality in Student's Learning

Concepts addressed:

Areas of Exceptionality in Student's Learning

At first glance, "exceptionality" or "exceptional student" seems to apply to any student who differs substantially from his or her peers. However, the terms have more narrow meanings in education, referring to students from birth through high school that have one or more of the 13 disabilities defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Additionally, the disability must impact the student to such an extent that the student needs special education services, as documented in an Individualized Education Program (IEP), in order to make adequate progress in school. Between 11 and 12 percent of all school-aged students meet federal criteria established for exceptionality and have IEPs. While many more students have learning problems or challenges, only students who meet the criteria for one of these of disabilities are deemed "exceptional." While this frustrates teachers and parents who have struggling students who don't "fit" any of the disability categories, schools offer many programs in addition to special education that help such students, and teachers may adjust instruction and the classroom environment for any student. The 13 IDEA categories are defined below (adapted from Friend and Bursuck's *Including Students with Special Needs*, 2006, p. 21).

Learning disability (LD, or specific learning disability): A disorder in information processing (storing, retrieving, integrating, perceiving) that leads to difficulties in reading, writing, or math even when receiving good instruction in school. IQ scores range from low average to gifted, but students score significantly below those levels in certain academic areas; the most common disability, accounting for half of all students on IEPs.

Speech or Language Impairment (also called communication disorder): A problem accurately producing the sounds of language (articulation) or meaningfully using oral language to communicate.

Mental Retardation (Due to the stigma of this term, many states are using the terms intellectual disability or cognitive impairment): Significant limitations in cognitive ability (IQ 70 or below) with deficits in adaptive behavior (practical skills such as hygiene, money, cooking, basic work skills); severity ranges from mild MR to severe MR in which individuals need full personal assistance in basic life activities like eating and toileting.

Emotional disturbance (ED, BD, behavior disorder, emotional disability): Significant problems in social, emotional, or behavior areas to the degree that learning is negatively affected, May include psychological disorders such as depression, bi-polar disorder, etc. or there may be no specific diagnosis.

Autism (or Autism Spectrum Disorder): A disorder that includes extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness, problems with meaningful communication, and unusual reactions to sensory input. May be mild or severe. There is debate if Asperger's Syndrome (a mild form of AU) is or is not covered under IDEA.

Hearing Impairment (deaf, hard of hearing): A partial or complete loss of hearing. **Visual Impairment (low vision, blind):** A partial or complete loss of vision.

Deaf-blindness: Both hearing and vision losses of significant degrees, but not necessarily total loss. **Orthopedic Impairment (Physical disability):** A significant

Development of this review sheet was made possible by funding from the US Department of Education through South Dakota's *EveryTeacher* Teacher Quality Enhancement grant.

physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities. May be mild to severe. Cognitive abilities are usually intact.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI); A medical condition denoting a serious brain injury as a result of accident or injury; the impact of the disability varies, but it may affect learning, language, social skills, and behavior.

Other health impairment (OHI): A disease or condition so significant that it negatively affects learning.

Examples include cancer, diabetes, heart conditions, etc. Diseases or conditions that occur in mild forms that do not significantly impact learning are not covered under IDEA.

Multiple disabilities; the presence of two or more disabilities such that none can be considered the primary disability. The most common example is combined cognitive disability (MR) and physical disability.

Developmental delay (DD): A nonspecific category that states may use as an alternative for young children up to age 9 who need special education. Upon reaching age 9 (or an earlier age in some states), the child must be identified as having a specific disability category in order to receive special education.

It is important to note that while some states call gifted and talent students "exceptional students," these students are not covered under IDEA. Additionally, students with ADD or ADHD are not automatically considered "exceptional," because, while challenging to teach, many make adequate progress in school without special education. Students with severe ADD or ADHD may "fit" IDEA disability categories such as other health impairment or learning disability and thus may be considered eligible for special education in that way.