

BEACH CENTER STORIES

Erin (and her teacher's) story: What have I Gotten Myself Into?

Erin was a fourth-grade student with deafness in a general education classroom. Usually happy and engaged, Erin didn't connect with her new teacher, a long-term substitute brought in when the school year was half over. Fortunately, her teacher observed what things worked and didn't work for a girl with many gifts to offer.

Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



Erin's (and her teacher's) Story

What have I Gotten Myself Into?

This story was written by Jennifer Laylock for a Spring 2007 graduate course, Family and Inter-Professional Collaboration in Special Education, taught by Ann Turnbull, Ed.D., at the University of Kansas. The subject of this story, Erin, was a student in a fourth grade general education classroom taught by Jennifer Laylock.

Trial by fire – that is the theme for a brand new teacher who is completing a practicum as a long-term substitute with no cooperating teacher to fall back on. It is a challenge for every teacher to set up her class at the beginning of the year. Teachers want to bond with their students and create a trusting relationship while setting a standard of hard work and learning. The level of challenge is raised when a teacher comes in at the end of the year as a substitute. At the end of February 2007, I stepped into someone else's classroom as a long-term substitute teacher. This is where I met Erin.

At the time I had Erin in class, she was a 12-year-old, fourth-grade student with deafness. Erin was a happy girl with blond hair and glasses. She also had braces, which she was very proud of, and a cochlear implant, which she used quite well. Her primary means of communication was a form of sign language called SEE 2 (Signing Exact English). Erin had apraxia, which makes both receptive and expressive language challenging. She went to the deaf/hard-of-hearing resource room for math and language instruction.

Her mom and dad discovered that Erin was deaf when she was six months old. She received a cochlear implant at three-and-a-half years. Erin's family continued to hear various diagnoses of their daughter, terms like "failure to thrive" because of Erin's small stature and a delay in language and development. However, the family never grew discouraged. They continued to believe in Erin, and today she is growing and thriving.

Getting Acquainted

On my first day in the classroom as the official teacher, I was eager to get started. I had been visiting the regular teacher and observing the kids, and I was anxious to give it a try. The teacher made it look so easy, and Erin worked beautifully for her. Erin and I did not work so beautifully together that first day. I was dancing around her, and she was unsure about me and why her real teacher was not there. I knew I was going to have to prove my place in the classroom.

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On those first few days, Erin was not ready for the change and was not ready to show me what she could do. Some days were great; she came in ready to work and was excited to read stories and work on language. Other days, she wouldn't respond to me calling her name. She was interested in anything *but* working with me. I knew there was something I needed to change about the way I was working with Erin because every morning she would do math eagerly and happily with her paraeducator.

Les, Erin's para, was a familiar face and Erin was used to working with her, but there was something else that Les was doing. Les was using a motivation system to reinforce Erin for completing different tasks. As they worked together, the two of them hung paper clips from their glasses each time Erin completed a task or a problem successfully. It sounds silly, but was extremely fun and motivating for Erin. "Erin is always coming home telling me Mrs. Willett did this or that today," Erin's mom said. I knew that I needed to find something that would motivate Erin in the same way.

A Turning Point

As I got to know Erin, I found ways to make her laugh. Being silly seemed to alleviate her anxiety and frustrations. I also learned that Erin loves getting surprises, pieces of candy, and reading books. I came up with a reinforcement system that involved a visual schedule and pennies for completing tasks. By completing different tasks on the schedule, Erin would be reinforced with a penny. When she earned 10 pennies, she could choose a prize or a piece of candy. This also required her to count the pennies, which was one of her academic goals. This was the turning point for Erin and me. It brought routine to our time together, and it gave me a way to motivate her. By the end, we were so comfortable with one another that Erin did not even need the schedule any more.

As we began working better together, I began to change other things for Erin. I wanted her to be more included. Some of the time we were spending in her general classroom was more exclusive than inclusive. Other students would be working on math or practicing naming and spelling the states, which was not relevant for Erin in the way it was being carried out. Nothing was being modified for Erin, and I felt that Erin could be more included with some modifications. By working with Erin's interpreter and other members of her IEP team, we were able to help Erin be more included academically in her classroom. Modifying maps with the signs for the states and creating pages with more room to write made the work more appropriate for her needs.

More Participation in Class

Typically, a fourth grade class does a lot of project work at the end of the year. These projects were motivating for Erin, and they provided a great chance for her to participate more fully with her class. Her interpreter and I kept each other informed about what was going on in the classroom so that the assignments would better suit Erin.

Another target goal we had was to encourage Erin's socialization with new peers. She has some friends with whom she is very comfortable, but we wanted her to be able to increase her communication with these kids and make new friends. Erin was part of a lunch group that met once a week with me or the speech pathologist. We introduced new kids encouraged them to use more signing. In class, I tried to prompt more signing dialogue between Erin and her neighbors when they are playing and interacting with one another. A communication book was a great place to keep up with Erin's interests and the things that were going on in her life outside of school. Erin's mom would tell us about these things, and we could use these stories as a foundation for dialogue, spelling words, and chances for Erin to share with her class.

Erin loved to use language and communicate on the playground. I loved to go outside with Erin because she would tell me lots of stories there. She also interacted more with other kids when she was playing outside.

Happy Endings

In looking back, I see that communication was the key to our success. Erin's family was an excellent support system for me, helping to keep me up on Erin's interests and ways I could help her to be successful and happy at school. Erin became so much more open and ready to share her language when we could talk about things she was interested in. She loved to tell silly stories about things that happened at home or at school. Erin has an excellent sense of humor, which helped me develop a sense of trust and a bond that helped us transition through the change that we were both experiencing.

Erin has grown in so many ways, and I am proud to have gotten to know her. I got to watch her grow and blossom. We became comfortable with one another, and I felt like she came to trust me. I came to learn all the wonderful strengths that Erin has. She became more active in her class and got to do more of the things that other kids do. She became more social. She said hello to people in the halls and made new friends. She was a joy to work with.

What Did I Get Myself Into?

I am thankful for all that Erin taught me. The experience that I stepped into with so much hesitation I stepped out of as a better teacher who gained so much from students whom I will never forget.

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