When I look ahead at my journey as an educator, I am extremely interested in how I can support students with exceptionalities and learning disabilities. I truly believe that students with exceptionalities bring a unique and incredibly brilliant perspective to learning and our world in general. Teachers can provide the opportunities and tools for these students to express their learning and build confidence their abilities. I was very privileged to be able to sit down with one of these teachers and to learn more about his diverse role in educating children with exceptionalities. Mr. B at Larson Public School is a teacher who is committed to creating an inclusive and equitable environment for students with exceptionalities. Mr. B is the Learning Center teacher for the junior grades and is the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) for the whole primary division.

Each of Mr. B’s roles, as a SERT for grades 2-4 and as a Learning Center teacher, requires different skills and responsibilities. In his SERT position, Mr. B works with students that have either been referred by the classroom teacher or have a completed assessment indicating their areas of need. Typically, Mr. B works with students that are struggling in Language and Math in small group settings. A large portion of Mr. B’s SERT role is to support students and teachers by selecting assessments that need to be administered at school or outside of the school setting. In my discussions with Mr. B, he explained that by the time a student reaches grade 4, hopefully a lot of the groundwork has been laid for the student to be successful in their learning. Mr. B also explained that students with exceptionalities are most often assessed in the primary grades since developmentally, this is the time when challenges are identified. In addition, the primary grades is also the time to implement accommodations (such as assistive technology, OT assessments, speech referrals, physiotherapy or hearing resources) in to order ensure that the student can meet success as soon as possible. Mr. B explained, “I want to set students up to succeed and prepare them for grade 4. With the larger class sizes there is less 1:1 teacher time as students move to the junior grades. Students need to have the tools and strategies to be successful and be as independent as possible” (personal communication, January 23, 2018).

During Mr. B’s Learning Center instructional time, he works with students from the junior division. He gives support to students who struggle in the subject areas of Language and Mathematics for 100 minutes in a 300 minute school day. He works with students in small groups according to their grade level and abilities. This allows him to circle the room and check-in with various groups. Occasionally, there are opportunities for Mr. B to address the class as a whole for specific language areas of the curriculum. Depending on the complexity of the expectation, Mr. B adapts his instructional approach to meet the students where they are. In Mathematics, the wide range of abilities and curricular expectations are too disparate to approach all students with the same lesson and therefore he engages in 1:1 differentiated instruction.

In addition to conducting lessons and small group conferencing, Mr. B is also responsible for reporting on students’ abilities in Math and Language in the Learning Center. He co-shares the responsibility of reporting on Learning Skills with the homeroom teacher for mutual students. Mr. B explains that as a Learning Center teacher, he does not have an opportunity to observe students in a whole class setting and that the dynamic is quite different in the inclusive setting. Students receive less one-on-one support and are working alongside a wide range of learners. He notes that students with learning challenges often work better in small groups, so it is difficult to obtain a complete picture of their Learning Skills without the assistance of the homeroom teacher. Conversely, the homeroom teacher is limited in his/her ability to observe these students in a small group setting and can find it challenging to offer individualized support due to the large number of students. This is yet another reason why this partnership is effective. As part of Mr. B’s learning center role he is also responsible for writing IEPs and assisting classroom teachers with developing IEPs for their students.

When asked about the most rewarding aspect of his job, I was very encouraged by the enthusiasm he shared in his response. Mr. B explained, “I think it’s when students can feel like they've met a personal goal, because some students that are covered under the special education umbrella have a lot of struggles. Sometimes these students get a little down, especially when they get older and they come to realize they have problems. When they meet a goal and they are surprised, I get a really good feeling” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018).

When I asked Mr. B what the most challenging part of his work was, I really appreciated his honesty. Mr. B explained that trying to provide enough support for both the teachers and students is a delicate balance. “[As a teacher] you feel like you could do more to support both students and teachers. If a student is really struggling, sometimes, as an educator, you struggle to support that student. It can feel like you're failing them when neither of you are reaching the goal. Whenboth of us come to a roadblock and neither of us can overcome it, I try to think about how to get beyond it as painlessly as possible” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018). Mr. B explained that sometimes it is trial and error which can be a little painful for both the students and teachers. Mr. B explained, “I find that at my age (at 55), I don’t need to win any battles. An eight year old may need to win a few battles and I’m ok with that” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018). I loved the humility of this statement and in some ways this encompasses everything I want to be as a teacher. So often, we as educators are so determined to get our agenda across and have students complete work for our intended purpose that we fail to slow down, listen to them, and let them show us who they are. I love this idea of stepping back and letting the student just be. First, building a positive relationship can mean so much more to a struggling student. Mr. B continued to share that, “We need to take a step back so that it doesn't turn into something that it really doesn't need to” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018). Allowing our students to take some responsibility for their learning will in turn give them the confidence to try again next time. Creating trivial conflict will only create a greater roadblock.

When sharing some helpful teaching tools and tips, Mr. B explained that for a lot of his students the most helpful applications he has found are the editing tools in Google Read and Write, which are an extension of Google Docs. Mr. B continued to explain that if a student is assigned a SEA (Special Equipment Amount) then they receive the full Google program. What Mr. B appreciates about this technology is that it’s very user friendly. Some students are able to take ownership of their editing process and for the first time ever can experience their writing in a positive way. For many of these students struggling with learning disabilities, their true potential is not reflected as they struggle to use pencil and paper. With a smile, Mr. B explained to me, “When students find success using the Google assistive technology they really do feel proud of their writing because they begin to recognize their abilities” (Personal communication, Janurary 23, 2018.). Their writingreflects their true abilities when they are equipped with the tools to express themselves. In addition, these students can also go back and make changes, even further developing their abilities.

When asked what forms of assessment Mr. B uses with his students, he shared a variety of tools and resources. In the primary grades Mr. B and the other teachers use the PM Benchmark assessment resource. This resource reveals the student’s reading capabilities and acts as a starting place for language assessment as students develop in their reading skills. Outside of PM Benchmarks, students in the junior grades will participate in the Nelson Ontario Literacy assessment known as CASI (Comprehension, Attitudes, Strategies, Interests). This assessment is used to determine where they are in their reading, concept of print, and understanding of text. If students are lower academically, Mr. B may have them complete a Marie Clay Survey, which assesses their concept of print, phonetic-letter identification, letter sound and association with that letter. For numeracy assessments, Mr. B utilizes the Primeassessmentto determine students’ understanding of number sense and this is used as a grade equivalency assessment.

In addition to these assessments, Mr. B explained that the KTEA. assessment is the largest assessment he can administer without a psychologist or outside professional. There is a small amount of training required to be able to administer this assessment. The KTEA assessment will evaluate the student’s reading ability and numeracy understanding. If there is an indication of a possible discrepancy between different components of the test, the student may be a good candidate for an outside psychological evaluation. KTEA gives a good baseline for where a student is academically and provides direction when planning out the curriculum and identifying goals. Mr. B also shared that he only completes this assessment with specific students, since it is time consuming. These are usually students that one is thinking about recommending for further testing. Through the KTEAassessment one might catch a student if they are struggling with processing or number sense, decoding issues, or comprehension issues.

When asked about his philosophy on inclusion for student with exceptionalities, Mr. B responded that he believes strongly in the inclusion process, yet he also recognizes the limitations of inclusion. “I like seeing students included in as much of the regular school day as possible, yet there are times when you are not able to or they need additional support” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018). Mr. B explained that the concept of inclusion is an excellent one, yet many times students lack the support they need to make sure it is a successful inclusive process. Students with exceptionalities are identified by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). This is a committee comprised of the principal, the student’s parent/guardian, the special education teacher, and classroom teacher. When students are placed into the learning center, gifted program, or developmental skills program, Mr. B says that staff are always looking for opportunities to include them in the regular class. Mr. B believes, “[inclusion] is good for students with special needs, but is equally as beneficial for those without challenges since they become exposed to different learning styles, establish new friendships, develop empathy and provide them with support” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018).

As I listened to Mr. B I was also interested in hearing more about the inclusion process. I asked Mr. B how often students are in regular programming versus special education programming. Mr. B explained that it really depends on the student and the amount of support they have. Some students need permanent EA support. He explained that there is a real tension when it comes to support for inclusion. “When students are clustered in a DS class with EA support and are then removed from this class to be included in a regular class the support is divided. There might not be enough support for all the inclusion you want to achieve- so the students spend more time in the DS class” (Personal communication, January 23, 2018).

As we concluded our conversation I was encouraged to have met with an educator who is passionate about helping students with exceptionalities meet their goals and believe in themselves. Throughout our conversation I noticed Mr. B would politely take frequent breaks from our conversation to assist students in the Learning Center. It is apparent that this educator puts the needs of his students first and is committed to trying to meet their individual goals. The interview was an inspiring opportunity and has encouraged my interest in pursuing the role of Special Education teacher. As I have been investigating this role in my practicum placements, I have been feeling myself gravitating towards students with learning challenges and the unique contributions the special education role brings to a school community. It is difficult to know which teaching role I assume in the future, however, I do know that seeking to serve the needs of individual students with incredibly unique learning abilities is something that I aspire to achieve.