

## Accommodations for Learning

### Linus: The Journey Begins

*Each year teachers encounter a new group of learners with varying strengths and abilities. This makes it important for teachers to spend time at the beginning of the year closely observing their students to gain a sense of where these students are as learners. In this case, Kindergarten teacher Samantha MacDonald focuses on Linus, a student who is having a difficult time adjusting to the emotional and academic demands of Kindergarten. During the first weeks of school, Ms. MacDonald observes and interacts with Linus to learn more about what he knows and can do. This information will help her design the work she needs to do with Linus in the months to come. Here Ms. MacDonald describes Linus's behavior at the start of school.*

From the first day of school, I could tell that Linus was not feeling very sure about his new class and the set of expectations that accompany coming to Kindergarten. In moments of confusion or commotion, he would find comfort in sucking his thumb. When a new task was introduced to the class, he often asked, “Will this be long?”

*After watching Linus's participation in two daily math routines, Ms. MacDonald realizes that his apprehension may have to do with his limited number sense. As Linus participates in the activity Counting Around the Circle (part of the attendance routine), she notices that he has trouble with the counting sequence beyond the number 5. She also notices that Linus calls out 18 at the end of the count, regardless of how many students are present. Here Ms. MacDonald describes his participation in another number activity—The Counting Jar.*

The *Counting Jar* activity brought up another challenge for Linus. I began the activity by placing three apples in the jar. All of my students seemed to recognize right away that there were three apples in the jar and did not find it necessary to count to confirm the total. Next, I passed out a plastic plate to each student and set out bear counters, connecting cubes, and color tiles. I asked them to use the tools I had set out to make an equivalent set of items on their plate. When they completed the task, they returned to our meeting area. With one glance around the circle, I could tell that most of my students made sense of the task and were quickly successful.

However, 4 of the 18 students had more than three items on their plates. Linus was one of them. I called the students back together to discuss the problem.

I asked the students to each explain what they did to solve this problem. When it was Linus's turn to share, he said, “I don't remember.” Keeping in mind Linus's emotional tenuousness, I decided to move on. I felt tense as I tried to meet Linus's need while I simultaneously encouraged the next student to share.

Later, I asked Linus to do the *Counting Jar* activity with me individually. He was sure there were three apples in the jar. He counted them without taking the apples out of the jar. However, when it came to creating an equivalent set, he grabbed a handful of bear counters and dropped them on his plate without counting.

**Teacher:** How many bears do you have?

**Linus:** I don't know [thumb quickly moves to his mouth].

**Teacher:** How can you find out?

**Linus:** [quickly removing his thumb as he spoke] I can count.

With this, Linus began to randomly touch a bear and say the counting sequence. When he got to 10, he repeated 6, then said 7, 8, 10, 16, 4, 7, and 2. His number naming was as random as his pointing to the objects. As a signal for him to stop, I placed my hand over his. He did. Instantly his thumb went back in his mouth.

**Teacher:** How many bears do you have?

**Linus:** I don't know. Three?

**Teacher:** How many apples are in the jar?

**Linus:** Three.

**Teacher:** Do you have the same number of bears as apples?

**Linus:** No.

**Teacher:** Why not?

**Linus:** [pointing to the bears] These are more.

We stopped our conversation, and Linus went happily on to another activity with his friends. Our quick conversation had helped me to see the kinds of goals I need to put in place for Linus. Rote counting to 20 and beyond, one-to-one correspondence of a given set of objects, and establishing the purpose of counting to determine a quantity—these were all benchmark phrases that clicked through my mind to create an instructional map. The statements were clear, but what do they mean for right now and how do they help us move into the future? So many questions, and most pressing, as in every year, I wonder, how do we get from here to there with meaning and grace?

*At the beginning of the year, Ms. MacDonald observes all her students carefully to assess their understanding of and facility with numbers. She assesses Linus during whole group activities, and then meets with him individually to help her understand more about his number knowledge and his approach to solving problems.*

### Questions for Discussion

1. What did Ms. MacDonald discover about what Linus does and does not understand about counting?
2. What goals does she have in mind for Linus in the area of counting? What could she now plan to support the development of Linus's counting skills?
3. What are ways you informally assess your students' counting skills at the beginning of the year? What experiences do you plan to help students develop these skills?