

Supporting Students With Autism: 10 Ideas for Inclusive Classrooms

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As I speak with colleagues in primary and secondary schools, I have noticed that many teaching veterans understand how to include students with learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, emotional disabilities, and physical disabilities in general education classrooms; but they remain puzzled at how to support and teach students with autism in these same environments and learning experiences.

These tips are designed for the teacher who is just beginning to work with a student with autism. These simple ideas may work for a myriad of students but they are particularly helpful for educating students with autism, Asperger's syndrome, and other spectrum labels.

They can help a teacher of any grade level or subject area plan lessons and engineer a safe and comfortable classroom for students with autism and other unique learning characteristics.

1) Learn About the Learner From the Learner

Oftentimes, educators needing information about a student will study the individual's educational records. While these documents are certainly one source of information, they are seldom the most helpful source of information. Teachers wanting to know more about a student with autism should ask that student to provide information. Some students will be quite willing and able to share information while others may need coaxing or support from family members. Teachers might ask for this information in a myriad of ways. For instance, they might ask the student to take a short survey or sit for an interview. One teacher asked his student with autism, to create a list of teaching tips that might help kids with learning differences. The teacher then published the guide and gave it out to all educators in the school.

If the student with autism is unable to communicate in a reliable way, teachers can go to families for help. Parents can share the teaching tips they have found most useful in the home or provide videotapes of the learner engaged in different family and community activities. These types of materials tend to give educators ideas that are more useful and concrete than do traditional educational reports and assessments.

Observing the student in another classroom setting can also be useful. In particular, these observations should focus on the student's successes: What can this student do well? Where is she strong? What has worked to create success for the student?

2) Support Transitions

Some students with autism struggle with transitions. Some are uncomfortable changing from environment to environment, while others have problems moving from activity to activity.

Individuals with autism report that changes can be extremely difficult causing stress and feelings of disorientation. Teachers can minimize the discomfort students may feel when transitioning by:

- Giving five and one minute reminders to the whole class before any transition.
- Providing the student or entire class with a transitional activity such as writing in a homework notebook or for younger students, singing a short song about "cleaning up".
- Ask peers to help in supporting transition time. In elementary classrooms, teachers can ask all students to move from place to place with a partner. In middle and high school classrooms, students with autism might choose a peer to walk with during passing time.
- Give the student a transition aid. Some students need to carry a toy, object, or picture, or other aid to facilitate their movement from one place to the next.

3) Give Fidget Supports

Often times, learners with autism struggle to stay seated or to remain in the classroom for extended periods of time. While allowing learners to move frequently is one way to approach this need, some students can be equally comforted if they have an object to manipulate during lessons. One student I know likes to pick apart the threads on patches of denim. Another folds and unfolds a drinking straw during long lecture periods.

Students having such a need might be offered Slinky toys, Koosh balls, straws, stir sticks, strings of beads, rubberbands or even keychains that have small toys attached to them.

Allowing students to draw can be another effective "staying put" strategy. Many learners with and without identified needs appear better able to concentrate on a lecture or activity when they are given the opportunity to doodle on a notepad, write on their folders, or sketch in a notebook.

4) Help with Organizing

While some students with autism are ultra-organized, others need support to find materials, keep their locker and desk areas neat, and remember to bring their assignments home at the end of the day. Consider implementing support strategies that all students might find useful. For example, students can attach a small "going home" checklist to the inside of their lockers or be reminded to keep a small set of school supplies in each classroom instead of having to carry these materials in their backpacks. Teachers can also:

- Have students copy down assignments, pack book bags, put materials away, and clean work spaces together. Specific skills can even be taught during this time (e.g., creating to-do lists, prioritizing tasks);
- Ask all students to do two-minute clean-up and organization sessions at the end of class; or

- Provide checklists around the classroom- especially in key activity areas. For instance, a checklist can be placed near a classroom assignment "in box" (e.g., Did you complete the assignment? Is your name on the paper?) or on the front of the classroom door (e.g., Do you have a pencil? Notebook? Homework?).

5) Assign Class Jobs

Many students with autism are comforted by routines and predictability. Class routines and jobs can provide this type of structure while also serving as opportunities to provide instruction and skill practice. A student who likes to organize materials might be put in charge of collecting equipment in physical education. A student who is comforted by order might be asked to straighten the classroom library. In one elementary classroom, Maria, a student with autism, was sometimes given the chore of completing the lunch count. Counting the raised hands and having to record the right numbers in the right spaces helped to build Maria's literacy and numeracy skills.

6) Provide Breaks

Some students work best when they can pause between tasks and take a break of some kind (walk around, stretch, or simply stop working). Some learners will need walking breaks - these breaks can last anywhere from a few seconds to fifteen or twenty minutes. Some students will need to walk up and down a hallway once or twice, others will be fine if allowed to wander around in the classroom.

A teacher who realized the importance of these instructional pauses decided to offer them to all learners. He regularly gave students a prompt to discuss (e.g., What do you know about probability?) and then directed them to "talk and walk" with a partner. After ten minutes of movement, he brought the students back together and asked them to discuss their conversations.

7) Focus on Interests

Whenever possible, educators should use interests, strengths, skills, areas of expertise, and gifts as tools for teaching. For instance, student strength areas can be used to facilitate relationships. Some students who find conversation and "typical" ways of socializing a challenge, are amazingly adept at connecting with others when the interaction occurs in relation to an activity or favorite interest.

One of my former students, Patrick, had few friendships and seldom spoke to other students until a new student came into the classroom wearing a Star Wars tee-shirt. Patrick's face lit up upon seeing the shirt and he began bombarding the newcomer with questions and trivia about his favorite film. The new student, eager to make a friend, began bringing pieces of his science fiction memorabilia to class. Eventually, the two students struck up a friendship related to their common interest and even formed a lunch club where students gathered to play trivia board games related to science fiction films.

Any of the interests students bring to the classroom might also be used as part of the curriculum. A student who loves weather might be asked to write a story about tidal waves, investigate websites

related to cloud formation, or do an independent research project on natural disasters. A student fascinated by Africa might be encouraged to write to pen pals living on that continent or asked to compare and contrast the governments of certain African nations with the government of the United States.

8) Rethink Writing

Writing can be a major source of tension and struggle for students with autism. Some students cannot write at all and others who can write, may have a difficult time doing so. Handwriting may be sloppy or even illegible. Students who struggle with writing may become frustrated with the process and become turned off to paper/pencil tasks.

In order to support a student struggling with writing, a teacher may try to give the child gentle encouragement as he or she attempts to do some writing- a word, a sentence, or a few lines. Teachers might also allow the student to use a computer, word processor, or even an old typewriter for some lessons. In addition, peers, classroom volunteers, teachers, and paraprofessionals can also serve as scribes for a student who struggles with movement and motor problems, dictating as the student with autism speaks ideas and thoughts.

9) Give Choices

Choice may not only give students a feeling of control in their lives, but an opportunity to learn about themselves as workers and learners. Students, especially those who are given opportunities to make decisions, know best when during the day they are most creative, productive, and energetic; what materials and supports they need; and in what ways they can best express what they have learned.

Choice can be built into almost any part of the school day. Students can choose which assessments to complete, which role to take in a cooperative group, which topics to study or which problems to solve, and how to receive personal assistance and supports. Examples of choices that can be offered in classrooms include:

- Solve five of the ten problems assigned
- Raise your hand or stand if you agree
- Work alone or with a small group
- Read quietly or with a friend
- Use a pencil, pen, or the computer
- Conduct your research in the library or in the resource room
- Take notes using words or pictures
- Choose any topic for your term paper

10) Include

If students are to learn appropriate behaviors, they will need to be in the inclusive environment to see and hear how their peers talk and act. If students are to learn social skills, they will need to be in a space where they can listen to and learn from others who are socializing. If students will need specialized supports to succeed academically, then teachers need to see the learner functioning in the inclusive classroom to know what types of supports will be needed.

If it is true that we learn by doing, then the best way to learn about supporting students with autism in inclusive schools is to include them.



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