

Supporting Students With Autism: 10 Ideas for Inclusive Classrooms

How can we do better supporting students with autism?

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 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.

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1) Learn About the Learner from the Learner

Often, educators needing information about a student will study the individual's educational records. While these documents are certainly one source of information, they are not the only source providing the most help. 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 answering questions about their strengths and weaknesses in the classroom and how the teacher can assist them learn best.

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.

Observing the student in another classroom setting can also be useful or discussing the student's strengths with colleagues from another faculty. In particular, these observations/dialogues should focus on the student's successes: What can this student do well? Where is he 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 minimise the discomfort students may feel when transitioning by:

1. Giving five and one minute reminders to the whole class before any transition.
2. Using a visual lesson outline (list on the board) and crossing off when part has been completed.
3. Providing the student or entire class with a transitional activity such as writing in a homework diary.
4. Ask peers to help in supporting transition time. In primary 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.
5. 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. Ask the student to open their diary and check what/where/who is coming up in the next lesson. Alternatively some school's have used the student's mobile phone with their timetable, picture of building and teacher to aid transitions).

3) Give Fidget Supports

Often, 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 such as a 'squeeze ball' or other fidget aid.

Students having such a sensory need might be offered small slinky toys, squeeze 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. Choose an appropriate place for this to occur, use as a reward/motivator i.e. ...'complete Q1-5 then take out your drawing book.....'

4) Help with Organizing

While some students with autism are ultra-organised, 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 see a small "going home" checklist displayed in their classroom, 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 organisation sessions at the end of class; or
- Provide checklists (visual supports) 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 diary, pencil case, workbook, text book?)
- Provide plenty of time to write down homework activities and assessment tasks and provide scaffolds to assist with structuring work. Additionally structure appropriate timeframes to have certain parts completed and check your students have done this.

5) Assign Class Jobs

Many students with autism are comforted by routines and predictability. Class routines (reinforced visually), lesson formats, (visual lesson/ task outlines displayed on the board) and jobs can provide this type of structure while also serving as opportunities to provide instruction and skill practice. A student who likes to organise 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, or in the primary class, a student with ASD could collect the lunch orders and notices.

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 five or ten minutes or longer depending on the age of the student and time spent on task. Some students will need to walk up and down a hallway once or twice, others will be fine if allowed to move within the classroom between workspace areas.

One teacher who realised 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 favourite interest.

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 an information report about tidal waves, design a weather podcast, 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 another government in a developed country.

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 (impairment in executive function). Handwriting may be sloppy or even illegible. Students who struggle with writing may become frustrated with the process and become turned off to complete paper/pen tasks.

In order to support a student struggling with writing, a teacher may give the student encouragement as he or she attempts to do some writing. Alternatively provide cloze passages, mind maps, or print the materials and allow the student to draw in main ideas with captions. Teachers might also allow the student to use a computer/ word processor for some lessons. Use the smartboard as a great visual aid; remember our students with ASD are 90% visual, 10% auditory learners.

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 classroom
- Take notes using words or pictures
- Choose a topic from the list for your assessment task
- Choose your delivery mode for your assessment – written report, smartboard presentation, podcast etc
- When you have completed this task choose one activity from the following options

10) Include

If students are to learn appropriate behaviours, they will need to be in the inclusive environment to see and hear how both their teacher and 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 socialising.

If students will need specialised 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.

Reference:

Adapted from:

Kluth, P. (2003). "You're going to love this kid": Teaching students with autism in the inclusive classroom. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing