Are we teaching students with autism effectively in inclusive classrooms so that they can benefit from their educational programs?

**Intervention Strategies for Teaching Students with Autism in Inclusive Classrooms**

Although there is a range of intervention strategies designed for students with autism and used in many educational settings, there is no one intervention or approach proven effective for every child with autism (National Research Council 2000).

To gain the most from any intervention or teaching strategy requires a careful review of the

- Family's vision for their child;
- The student's ability to communicate,
- How he or she prefers to communicate, and
- The student's cognitive ability,
- Learning style,
- Adaptive behaviour and
- Independent daily living skills.

**Strategies to Promote Successful Inclusion Experiences**

The following suggestions may help teachers provide better learning experiences in an inclusive classroom:

1. **Use consistent classroom routines.**
   
   For example,
   
   - Asking for help,
   - Frequent breaks,
   - Putting away homework,
   - Getting assignments,
   - Bathroom breaks.
   
   Consistent routines lower all students' anxiety and increase their ability to function independently in the classroom.

2. **Give visual instructions, rules and use visual classroom schedules.** Use the student’s visual strengths along with visual reminders to increase his or her ability to function independently, both academically and socially. Picture icons and social stories can encourage appropriate behaviour and keep attention to tasks. For example, when jokes are appropriate, free time activities allowed after completed tasks, and social stories about classroom rules. Picture icons like Boardmaker or Writing with Symbols help to increase student understanding. Use a picture or words system for independent work listing the procedures and tasks to be
completed. It is recommended that photographs from the student’s immediate environment can also be used as they may make more sense and are therefore understood by the student rather than using expensive and prohibitive software. See the Centre’s Best Practice Online Resource

3. Watch for signs of high anxiety or difficulties a student may be having with sensory and emotional overload, and other signs of stress. Students experiencing stress may put their hands over ears, plugging their ears, squeezing a body part, or repetitive behaviours, like rocking. Show students to a pre-selected self-calm area, such as a chosen chair in a quiet area or a 'sensory area' (place within the room providing stress release activities or items, i.e. brushing, koosh balls and squeeze toys, weighted blankets, headphones, and music. See the Centre’s Sensory Processing Online Resource

4. Give students a visual menu of appropriate behaviours to use when they become agitated or overwhelmed. Show students their 'menu" when their stress levels rise. Frequent breaks will allow them to self-regulate sensory input and improve their attention and performance.

5. Understand the need for transition time and plan for it. Set up and practice transition activities for students to do when finished with their assigned tasks. Visual reminders of transition times and activities can help guide the child through the process easier.

6. Structure the layout of the room. When students know where their work areas are, and expected classroom behaviour, with visual schedules to remind them when they need to move and the length of each work period, lowers the students' anxiety. Mark the area where students can get extra supplies. Mark the area where transition tasks or an activity can be done after their assigned work is completed.

7. Structure the presentation of worksheets. Highlight directions, number the steps to complete harder tasks, and give an example of the completed task to help students transition to and from a work assignment.

8. Explain clearly the purpose of all work assignments, presentations, multimedia materials, or other learning tasks. Students with autism have difficulty reasoning and making conclusions, and may not see the importance of the content material unless a teacher plainly states the purpose for an activity.

9. Provide written rubrics or explanatory comments and rules with due dates clearly marked for each part of a multi-step or multi-part project or writing assignment. Help students design a colour-coding system to keep track of due dates in their daily planner. Students with autism need clear written expectations for their work assignments, procedures for completing the task, and a rubric or written guidelines to evaluate their finished product to ensure success.

10. Encourage students to use one or two sentence knowledge summaries. In summarising, students can easier identify key concepts and information from a book, chapter, or unit on tests and assessments. It is also recommended that end of topic mind maps are used to display understanding and can then be used for revision purposes.

11. Make the most of special interests to introduce new and difficult tasks. Use special interests as motivators to help students engage in new and/or difficult material. For example, a student who loves trains may learn more quickly or engage well in an assignment if a train
sticker appears at the top of the worksheet or the task uses train-related information in the task scenario or directions.

12. Assign individual roles for group work. Provide a list of expectations or tasks for each role lowers the possibility of misunderstanding and makes working within a group easier. For example, a written job description and scripted cues for introducing items, innovative ideas, asking questions, making further suggestions, and expressing disputes appropriately encourages responsible participation of all group members.

13. The following chart shows how to represent roles in a group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Recorder</th>
<th>Keep a record of what the group does</th>
<th>Writes important ideas down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Things I could say</td>
<td>Could you say that again for me please?</td>
<td>Let me see if I have this right.</td>
<td>Which one should I write down?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Assign a peer buddy. Give peer buddies information about autism and ideas to use with students. Modelling strategies can be helpful. Use several peer buddies within a class to avoid burnout. In higher grades, peer buddies could be students who need community service hours or students enrolled in an elective peer tutoring or peer assistant class.

**Strategies to improve organisational skills**

Students with autism may have poor organisational skills that need to be considered when creating classroom routines and procedures, and during lesson planning and preparation. First instruction of organizational skills must start when the student starts school. All students benefit from being taught how to use daily schedules and planners, and how to use and organise their subject folders and notebooks.

**Activities to improve organisational skills**

- Set up a routine and procedure for homework and long-term assignments, and tests in a daily day planner. Teachers need to establish how and when to record assignments. Long-term projects need short-term due dates to make on-time completion easier. Projects given an established time and procedure should allow students to complete this task independently.
- Laminate daily schedules and place on the student’s desk or in the front of a binder. Use water-soluble markers when daily schedules change, to mark the changes directly into the schedule. Use post-it or sticky notes for unexpected changes, such as early or weather-related dismissals.
- List tasks or work assignments to be completed during the day. Picture and written task lists are helpful organizational tools. Students check off each item as they finish them. A quick review of the list gives teachers an opinion of the student’s progress and problem areas can be identified.
• Create a colour-coding system for pocket folders or binders in each subject area. Write each homework assignment on the homework board with markers or chalk to match the colour-coding system. Colour-coding help students to distinguish their assignments.

• Make it a rule that all students keep their school supplies in a pencil case. Get students to check the status of their supplies and write reminders to replenish them in their daily planner.

• Separate the binder or folder into clearly marked sections to show where completed assignments, homework, and handouts need to be placed.

• Notes are helpful tools to prepare or calm students during expected times of stress, like tests or when unexpected things turn up during the day. Notes prepared ahead of time are useful. Notes can provide students with a quick reminder or to use a relaxation strategy. For example, "deep breathing," or "Before I take a test... I need to deep breathe 5 times, count to 10, get a drink, read through the test, do items I know first."

• Set up consistent written rules for each classroom. Students with autism must have separate rule sheets for each teacher they have. Students will not anticipate or understand that teachers have different behavioural and academic expectations. Laminate the rules for long wear and keep them handy in the student’s notebook.

• A colour-coding system helps students manage their behaviour and class participation. Particularly in classes involving their special interests or knowledge. For example, a green card is used to show the student is behaving appropriately, yellow shows the student that their behaviour has become disruptive, and a red card is given when the student should leave the room.

• Students with chronic disruptive behaviours should be provided a Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) and/or Behaviour Intervention Plan (BIP). School psychologists, special education teachers, school social workers can complete Behaviour Assessments and help general education teachers develop Behaviour Plans.

• Give examples of the finished product and writing assignment which meets all the project or composition requirements. Examples of correct lesson assignments are helpful for all students.

Source: National Education Association, "The Puzzle of Autism"