


Supporting Students with Autism: 10 Ideas for Inclusive Classrooms

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While most educators agree that no recipe exists for teaching any individual student or group of students, there are certainly some guidelines that can be helpful for supporting students with certain labels. Students with autism may have unique needs with learning, social skills, and communication, therefore, teachers will need strategies to address each one of these areas. These ten simple ideas will help teachers address some of the aforementioned needs and provide guidance for bringing out the best in learners with autism labels.

(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 informal 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. Another teacher had his student with Asperger syndrome create a short video for staff. The video outlined helpful supports and featured stories of this learner’s “classroom disasters of the past” as a way of helping new teachers avoid pitfalls.

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 video 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.

(2) Teach to Fascinations

Whenever possible, educators should use interests, strengths, skills, areas of expertise, and gifts as tools for teaching. To begin, an educational team can brainstorm all of the possibilities and connections for a particular interest. Make a list of all subject areas and related skills and see how many ideas can be generated in ten or fifteen minutes.

Here are some questions generated by a team supporting a lover of GPS technology: Can a passion for GPS be used to inspire more reading (operations manuals), new math skills (be a “human GPS”-calculate shortest route between two places), or fun social studies questions (“How would the world be different today if Christopher Columbus had GPS?”) .

[For more on using fascinations to support students with autism see *Just Give Him the Whale*, a book I wrote on this topic with my colleague, Patrick Schwarz.]

(3) Get Them Talking

In some classrooms, a handful of students dominate small-group conversations and whole-class discussions. While it is important for these verbal and outgoing students to have a voice in the classroom, it is equally important for other students---including shy and quiet students, students using English as a second language, and students with disabilities---to have opportunities to share and challenge ideas, ask and answer questions, and exchange thoughts. To ensure that all students have opportunities to communicate, teachers need to put structures and activities in place that allow for interaction.

In one classroom, students were asked to “turn and talk” to each other at various points in the day. A high school history teacher used this strategy throughout the year to break up his lectures and to give students time to teach the material to each other. After giving mini-lectures of fifteen minutes, he asked students to turn to a partner and answer a specific question or re-explain a concept he had taught. For instance, after giving a short lecture on the Presidency, he asked students to discuss, “What qualities do Americans seem to want in a President?; and “How has this list of desired qualities changed over time?” A student with Asperger’s syndrome who needed practice with skills such as staying on topic and turn taking was able to practice them daily.

Teachers can also provide opportunities for communication by giving all students “airtime” during whole-class discussion. One way to do this is to ask for physical whole-class responses to certain prompts. For instance, instead of asking, “Who can tell me a fraction that equals one half?”, the teacher might say, “Stand up if you think you can name a fraction that equals one half”. This strategy not only gives all learners a chance to give an answer, but it allows for some teacher-sanctioned movement, something often welcomed by students with autism. Whole-class physical responses are also appropriate for students who are non-verbal, making it a perfect choice for the diverse, inclusive classroom.

(4) 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. Choice may be especially helpful for students with autism who have special needs when it comes to learning environment, lesson materials, and communication. 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, 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
- Choose any topic for your report
- Read the assigned article or any short book on the same topic
- Report the results of the experiment in words or images
- Play an organized game of soccer or run a cross country route
- Create a piece of art with finger paint or make a design using a computer program
- Eat lunch with a large group or just a few friends
- 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
- Sit at the table, on the floor, or at your desk
- Take notes using words or pictures

(5) Consider Handwriting Alternatives

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. 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 an iPad, a computer, a word processor, or even an old typewriter for some or for all lessons. For some learners, being able to type when writing helps them focus on the task at hand (content) instead of on their motor skills (process).

(6) 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 instance, teachers can have all students copy down assignments, pack book bags, put materials away, and clean work spaces together. Structuring this time daily will give all learners the opportunity to be organized and thoughtful about how they prepare to transition from school to home. Specific skills can even be taught during this time (e.g., creating to-do lists, prioritizing tasks).

Visual supports can also be a great help to students when it comes to organizing. Consider creating an arrival or going-home checklist to attach to the inside of student lockers or to the door of the classroom (for all to use).

(7) 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 reminders to the whole class before any transition.
- Use a visual timer so students can manage time on their own throughout an activity.

- 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”.
- Posting visual directions during the transition itself (especially helpful for in-class transitions). This idea (provided by a savvy 3rd grade teacher, Diane Kamil), not only clearly communicates the teacher’s expectations but helps the teacher stay organized.
- Playing a familiar song for each significant in-class transition so students will know exactly how much time they have to get from one area of the classroom to another (or to get ready for a new activity).
- Asking 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 might choose a peer to walk with during passing time.
- Provide a transition aid (a toy, object, or picture).

(8) Create a Comfortable Classroom

Sometimes students are unsuccessful because they are uncomfortable or feel unsafe or even afraid in their educational environment. Providing an appropriate learning environment can be as central to a student’s success as any teaching strategy or educational tool. Students with autism will be the most prepared to learn in places where they can relax and feel secure. Ideas for making the classroom more comfortable include providing seating options (e.g., beanbag chairs, rocking chairs, lawn chairs, seat cushions, couches, stuffed footstools, therapy balls, armchairs); reducing direct light when possible (e.g., using only some banks of light and turning off others, using upward projecting light, providing a visor or baseball cap to a student who is especially sensitive); and minimizing distracting noises (e.g., providing earplugs or headphones during certain activities, installing carpeting when possible, banning whistles from gym class).

(9) Take a Break

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.

Keep in mind that not every student will need to move, pace, or walk during each break. Some students simply need time away from class work. For these individuals, breaks might involve drawing, doodling, reading, writing, playing a video game, or chatting with a friend for a few moments.

(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.