

COME ONE, COME ALL

Lisa Combs

TO THE GREATEST CLASSROOM ON EARTH!

Step right up, step right up and witness, if you will, the most amazing spectacle in education.... .. a classroom that is designed for every child to succeed; a place where each child is honored for their unique strengths; for every child to be accepted just as they are, but encouraged to rise to their greatest potential. Imagine if you will a classroom where each child has access to rich instruction and all the tools necessary to express what they know; a classroom where every child participates in a meaningful way; a place where the child with autism learns alongside neurotypical peers that he/she calls friends.

For many, a sense of awe and excitement emerges as the school year looms like the Big Top on the horizon, promising excitement, wonder and more than a little nervous energy in anticipation of the unknown just around the corner.

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION

While we continue to push the boundaries of opportunity for children with autism, we still face challenges in how best to support kids with complex needs alongside their nondisabled peers. Even the most well prepared teacher can have some anxiety when informed that a child with autism will be included in his/her class. Some of the questions that commonly crop up include things like:

“What if he melts down?”

“Will the time I spend on him take away from my other 25 kids?”

“How will I communicate with her?”

“How will I help him make friends?”

The good news to share with teachers who ask these kinds of questions is that having a child with autism included may be the best thing that has ever happened to their classroom.

BENEFITTING ALL STUDENTS

Many instructional practices that benefit the child with autism will provide better instruction for every single child in the classroom. This principle is called “Universal Design for Learning” (UDL). UDL is a concept developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to expand opportunities for students in the classroom. The concept actually began with an architect named Ronald Mace who approached the design of environments for people of all ages and abilities. An example of universal design in action are the curb cuts in sidewalks made for individuals in wheelchairs, but which also provide access for people using bikes, skateboards, strollers and grocery carts. The researchers at CAST began exploring methods to provide access for students with disabilities in a manner that would benefit all students.

According to CAST (www.cast.org), UDL concerns itself with understanding WHAT we learn, HOW we learn, and WHY we learn. Students with autism require special consideration of these three networks when planning for their success; however, these supports can provide a richer learning environment for ALL students.

Currently there are 27 “evidence based practices” identified by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders (www.autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu), and many of these are beneficial to all learners in a classroom.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Five evidence based practices that can support your child AND enhance instruction for the rest of the students in the classroom are:

1 Visual Supports can increase functional communication and social skills, reduce aggressive behavior, and support academics. In addition, about 65% of ALL learners are “visual learners”. So, increased use of visual supports, like schedules, checklists, and charts can improve instruction for every child.

2 Peer Mediated Instruction is the concept that kids learn from other kids. All students benefit from opportunities to learn this way, with research confirming that it creates more opportunities for active participation, self-directed learning, critical thinking, problem solving, and social skills.

3 Technology Aided Instruction can provide a solution to many challenges. For students who struggle with motivation, computer apps and games can make practice of rote skills more engaging. To support language arts, there is screen readers, spellcheck and word prediction software. FM systems make it easier for students to filter out noise and hear the teacher. The teacher who embraces technology has a world of solutions at her fingertips.

4 Self-Management. Ask any teacher if students with autism are the only ones who struggle with self-management and you will get a resounding “NO WAY!” in response. Teaching self-management involves helping students discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and monitor their own actions. Teachers can help ALL students learn these skills by teaching, rehearsing and rewarding expected behaviors.

5 Social Skills Training involves instruction, role-play and guided practice to help students learn how to appropriately engage with others. Opportunities to learn these skills benefit students with autism, but also those with limited social experiences, English Language Learners, and those who simply have less mature social behaviors.

These five practices can not only enhance the social, behavioral, communication and academic growth of the child with autism, but provide a richer educational environment for every child in the classroom.

Welcome, one and all, to the GREATEST CLASSROOM ON EARTH!

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