

Teaching Children with Disabilities: Some Implications

This fact sheet is for classroom teachers whose pupils now include children with disabilities; for special education teachers who are experienced with one kind of disability but wish to know something about others; for resource room teachers whose classrooms may contain children with many different disabilities; and for administrators and supervisors who want to know more about educating all children, including children with disabilities.

Dealing with a child who has disabilities is dealing *first with a child*. All children learn differently, and the teacher's challenge comes in recognizing and adjusting to the individual. Thus, the ideas that follow are simply suggestions which teachers should accept, reject, or modify to match the needs and characteristics of individual children.

In general, when a student with a disability enters a regular class the following steps should be taken.

1. Obtain background information prior to the student's enrolling in the class, if possible. Find pertinent information about teaching children with the same type of disability in journals, books, and magazines.
2. Elicit assistance from resource room teachers, therapists, and other professionals involved in the care of the child.
3. Ask the student and parents about special provisions or adaptations that may help the student.
4. Encourage the student to be as independent as possible. It may require effort to keep from helping the student with a difficult task. If it is within the student's ability, encourage but don't intrude.
5. Discuss the nature of the disability with the other students when appropriate. The teacher's attitude toward the student with a disability will determine largely how the class responds. Emphasize that all students are more alike than different.

The following steps will aid in working with a student who has mild retardation.

1. Set realistic goals for the student, keeping environment and abilities in mind.
2. Carefully sequence learning activities, from easy to difficult ones.
3. Use concrete concepts and simple phrases in your explanations.

When working with a student who has a severe disability remember the following tips.

1. Work closely with parents to choose goals, teaching methods, and evaluation strategies. Try to keep home and school programs consistent.
2. Use materials, reinforcers, and methods that are chronologically age appropriate.
3. Emphasize repetition and provide opportunities for using the skill once it has been learned.
4. Promote skill generalization; teach the same skill in diverse settings.
5. Provide as many opportunities for interaction with non-disabled peers as

possible.

The following ideas will aid in working with a student who has a learning disability.

1. Use highly structured methods. Tell the student exactly what is expected.
2. Understand that a learning disability may cause inconsistent performance across subject area.
3. If the child has a receptive language problem, use short sentences and simple vocabulary at first.
4. Allow students who have difficulty with written language to use tape recorders or the zerox notes of fellow students.
5. Use self-correcting materials for immediate feedback without embarrassment.
6. Provide ample opportunities for drill and practice.

When working with a student who has emotional or behavioral problems remember the following.

1. Provide adequate structure in the learning environment. Let the student know what is expected, but also indicate where there may be some flexibility.
2. Reinforce appropriate behavior; ignore inappropriate behavior. Model and explain what constitutes appropriate behavior.
3. Expect improvement on a long term basis. Understand that small gains may take time to become permanent.
4. Be sensitive to individual differences. Try to create an atmosphere where students are respected and learn to respect others.

These tips will aid in working with a student who has visual problems.

1. Before the school year begins, acquaint the student with the classroom and the school.
2. Teach other students the sighted guide technique or other ways to help without sacrificing the student's independence.
3. Keep background noise to a minimum.
4. Encourage the student to use a tape recorder or other special equipment in class.
5. Set an example for the other students in the class by describing the things you see and relating them to their sounds.
6. Give the student ample opportunity and assistance to structure personal space.
7. Find out how much residual vision the student has and make sure that lighting is appropriate.

When working with a student who has a physical disability or other health impairment remember the following ideas.

1. Ask the student about aids and adaptations he or she may use.
2. Find out from parents or therapists what physical or medical limitations the child has, if any.
3. Don't do unnecessary things for the student. If he or she appears to want help, ask first.
4. Encourage the student to participate as much as possible in the regular school day.

The following tips may be helpful when working with a student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

1. Seat the student where he or she can see your lips clearly.
2. Speak facing the class, with no bright light behind. Don't inadvertently cover your mouth when speaking. Try not to pace or walk around when speaking to the class.
3. Body language and gestures help students with hearing impairments understand the message.
4. Speak in a normal tone of voice.
5. Become familiar with hearing aids or any other special equipment the student may use.
6. Write assignments and directions on the board or on handouts. Have a hearing student take notes for a student with a hearing loss.
7. If the student uses the services of an interpreter, do not talk to the interpreter. Rather, talk directly to the student. The interpreter will translate what you say; there is no need to funnel requests or questions through the interpreter.
8. After a lesson, clarify any questions or problems the student may have.

Attitudes

Teacher Attitudes and Expectations

The teacher's attitude toward students with disabilities sets the tone of the classroom and shapes the interactions among students. One important aspect of attitude is expectation. Research findings have repeatedly emphasized the influence of teacher expectation on student performance. If teachers expect students to be behavior problems, students may very well fulfill this expectation.

Labels may affect expectations. Frequently, labels introduce a set of preconceived characteristics (a stereotype) causing a teacher who is assigned a class including a student with a disability to envision a specific behavior pattern before even meeting the student. A teacher should be aware of his or her own attitudes and expectations and should ascribe to labels no greater import than the information they provide about how the student learns and what services the student needs.

Student Attitudes

Placing students with disabilities into the mainstream, or regular class, does not guarantee that they will be liked, accepted, or chosen as friends by their non-disabled peers. Without careful attention by sensitive teachers, such a placement could even be a harmful experience.

Working closely in advance with the parents, the student, and the resource or special class teacher may be instrumental in preparing the student with disabilities for regular classroom experiences.

To prepare the class for the entry of a student with disabilities, focus on students' similarities rather than differences. Deal forthrightly and comfortably with students' questions, letting them know it is all right to discuss disabilities. Two other approaches can promote positive relationships among students: encouraging cooperative learning tasks and establishing ways for students to help each other.

Cooperative Learning

In small groups, students work together on tasks that encompass all the students' abilities. Cooperative learning is the opposite of competition, which may not be fair to all students with disabilities. The following teacher actions may assist in promoting cooperative learning.

1. Give the student with the disability a structured role in the group.
2. Show that each member of the group has different skills.
3. Emphasize that the best work will need everyone's contribution.
4. Teach students with and without disabilities how to cooperate.
5. Adapt the tasks so that the student with a disability can succeed. This may mean giving group members different tasks and using the average scores, varying the amount of work each member receives or using improvement rather than performance scores.

Peer and Cross-Age Teaching

Another way to promote acceptance among students is to encourage them to help each other. They do it all the time informally. Given a little training, students can learn how to teach and encourage their peers, and in the process they can improve their understanding of the subject and of themselves. Students with disabilities do not always need to be on the receiving end. Their strengths can be used to help their classmates, and they can develop confidence in so doing. Students can be older than their "clients" (cross age teaching) or the same age (peer teaching).

Peer or cross-age teaching won't work without some guidance from teachers. In regular sessions with the tutors, teachers can demonstrate methods of instruction and answer specific questions, especially about the tutor's feelings. Through role playing and keeping a journal, tutors can analyze their reactions to their clients.

One unexpected benefit of the peer teaching approach is the effect it may have on the rest of the school. Tutors may begin to look out for their clients in other school situations-the lunchroom, for example. As students see their classmates assuming the tutor role, they may become interested as well, and associating with students who have disabilities may take on greater status. Above all, some real contact is being made between students who might otherwise never have gotten to know each other.

Classroom Management

These general guidelines for class management cluster in two areas: organizing the environment and directly controlling the students.

Organizing the Environment:

The Physical Structure

Teachers organize the learning environment all the time, consciously or unconsciously. There are some very simple steps you can take to maintain order. For example, desks can be grouped in ways that encourage or discourage interaction among students, and learning centers can be set up to structure independent work or provide for small group instruction. Areas for rewards and punishment (time-out space) can also be designated.

Students with special needs may need special equipment. For example, young children with physical problems may need to use a prone board while doing fine motor tasks because positioning in a certain way gives them the greatest control over their movements. Therapists will advise you about these kinds of special needs, but incorporating the special equipment into the classroom routine will be up to you.

Seating considerations are another important aspect of physically structuring the class. Hearing-impaired children who rely on lip-reading skills will naturally need seating that gives them a clear view of the teacher or other speaker with adequate lighting on the speaker's face. Distractible children may be best placed near quiet self-directed classmates, rather than beside other distractible children. Visually impaired students should be situated so that it is easy for them to find their seats and equipment (braille writers, low-vision aids, or other aids).

The classroom should be organized so that all students can be as independent as possible. This means access to equipment, easy passage in and out of the classroom, and access to the chalkboard or to a central spot where written or audio instructions are kept.

Another important element in the physical arrangement of a classroom is the traffic pattern. It may be helpful to map out pathways that students use to get to various places in the room. Careful planning before arranging the room will pay dividends later when students no longer distract each other when moving from one activity to the next. It is in that transition time-the period between tasks or classes-when students are most likely to be disruptive.

Scheduling

Many teachers find it useful to tell students what will be happening ahead of time and when. This is especially helpful for students who have difficulty changing gears (the hyperactive or perseverative child, for instance). A timer is one means of letting students know about an approaching schedule change, and it may help students assume greater control over their actions. Times can be set for different intervals for different students.

In addition to transition times, other periods that should be built into the schedule include major instructional time, reward time (for all students or specific students, based upon individual performance), and time for evaluating and reviewing learning.

Volunteers and Paraprofessionals

Some teachers are fortunate in having volunteers at their disposal. Others use and depend on teacher aides or classroom assistants. Both volunteers and paid assistants can help enormously, but only when they are given direction and feedback. Frequently they have creative ideas about new ways to approach learning tasks. They can also help by giving extra individual time a particular student genuinely needs but which the teacher cannot possibly give. In many schools, volunteers have been very valuable in helping to ease disabled students' transition into mainstreamed classes.

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program and the Foster Grandparent Program are possible sources of volunteers, as are local colleges and universities.

Directly Controlling the Students:

Scanning

An effective yet often overlooked technique for behavior control is scanning the classroom every few minutes. Keeping track of the various groups in the class may help prevent problems. Some teachers find that merely establishing eye contact with a student can forestall mischief. Detecting restlessness may allow a teacher to intervene before misbehavior occurs. Also, of course, scanning reveals students who are having difficulty with their work.

Reinforcement

Teachers use reinforcements all the time: acknowledge good work, helpful attitudes, or contributions to the class. Unfortunately, it is also easy to reinforce negative behavior. Shouting at a student who may be misbehaving merely to get attention is one example of reinforcing negative behavior. Ignoring inappropriate behavior (whenever possible) is frequently more effective. Once behavior is acknowledged, it must be dealt with.

Removal from the group is another method that may control a student's behavior. Some teachers believe it is helpful to provide children with time out away from the others for short periods of time.

One advantage of a straightforward reinforcement approach is that it helps students to understand what is expected of them and what the consequences of their actions may be. Sometimes teachers establish contingencies, e.g., if students complete the assignment they can choose a game or read on their own, or whatever is particularly rewarding to them. Sometimes, too, students can plan their own contingencies. Getting them involved in regulating their own behavior is a major milestone in helping them develop self control.

Stimulus Control

Teachers can also use cues or signals to control student behavior. This approach gives students guidelines for behavior, based on an agreed-upon indicator. For example, flashing the lights may be a signal that students should return to their desks, or sounding a note on the piano may indicate time for a change of activities. Of course, these cues must be modified for students with sensory deficits.

Additional Suggestions

Every teacher has a special repertoire of practices for keeping a classroom under control.

1. Teaching students how to react to other students' misbehavior.
2. Letting active students do tasks that require them to be out of their seats for stated periods of time.
3. Using peers as role models.
4. Helping students find acceptable ways of venting frustration and aggression.

Placement Options

And in the Body of the Church
there are many different members.
We are joined together in a gentle covenant
and communion.
No one is better than the other.
But each one is there for the others,
shedding light on one another,
each in need of the other.

Jean Vanier

The availability of a continuum of placement options is an accommodation which requires further explanation. In many educational settings, it has been common practice to segregate students with disabilities. While a segregated class may be appropriate for some students, it may not be for others. The particular strengths and limitations of each individual as well as the gifts their presence offers the entire community should be the determining factors in deciding which environment is most appropriate.

What is meant by a continuum of placement options? It simply means that a variety of instructional settings are available. The type of settings may include, but are not limited to the following options:

- * inclusion in a typical classroom with no additional supports or accommodations;
- * integration in a typical classroom with appropriate supports or accommodation;
- * part-time instruction in a typical classroom and part-time in a segregated setting either one-to-one or in a small group;
- * full-time in a segregated setting in a small group; and
- * full-time one-to-one.

Rather than determine the educational setting by some arbitrary judgment based on a student's type of disability, the option that is most appropriate for the individual should be provided.

Each student should be placed in the most inclusive environment possible. This means that options are to be considered in order of the most inclusive to the most segregated. Can this student function well in a typical classroom? Does he or she need any supports or accommodations to do so? Is inclusion in a typical class possible with additional tutoring outside of class? If full-time placement in a typical class is not in the best interest of this child, can he or she participate in the class for part of the time and then move to a segregated setting for part of the time? Is full time instruction in a small segregated group best for this student or is one-to-one interaction required?

It is recommended that all students attend religious education classes at the same time and in the same pace as their peers. This reinforces the reality of the diversity of the people of God within the local faith community and is powerful witness that all are welcomed and valued. It is also a practical consideration for parents who have more than one child in the program. All students go to the same place at the same time for the same reason.

The pastoral implications of clusters of parishes combining students in one segregated class should be carefully considered. It may be convenient if a small group needs a catechist with specialized training. However, whatever decision is decided upon should be in the best interests of the students. Isolating individuals apart from their local faith community is a serious decision that should not be made lightly.

Students taught in segregated settings should be included in any special events of the religious education program such as liturgies, paraliturgies, social and recreational activities. People with disabilities should also receive the sacraments in their own parish with their age appropriate peers. The students should never be totally isolated from the larger community, but always connected to and part of the larger community. Who should be involved in the process of determining what is most appropriate for each student? The best approach is a collaborative one with input from some or all of the following people:

- * individual with a disability;
- * family member(s);
- * director or coordinator of religious education;
- * catechist;
- * student's teacher and/or therapist; and
- * pastor and/or pastoral associate.

Great care should be taken to respect confidential information which may be discussed in this process. Also keep in mind that only information that will be helpful in providing an appropriate religious education experience for the individual is needed. In the course of these discussions, show a genuine interest in the student and welcome him or her into the program. Learn about the individual's disability and the nature of any help or accommodations required.

Working cooperatively with family members, providing support, and seeking advice, is essential. Parents know their child better than anyone else and can offer valuable insights and practical suggestions. Including family members in activities offered for parents of all children in the religious education program is also very important.

During a workshop on including persons with disabilities in religious education programs, Judy McCarthy and John Collins created this illustration.

Individuals

growiNg in faith as a
Community of learners
Loved, lovable
Unique and
Special
Invited with
the same Opportunities
and Needs to be met

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