



INCLUDE & ADAPT

Inclusion is not something that a school has, but is instead something that a school does.

THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

“The first time a general education teacher finds a student with an identified disability on his or her class list, he or she may feel unprepared to support the learner with such a label. I have often heard teachers say that they are ‘not trained in special education’ and, therefore, cannot be effective with students with disabilities. Although it can be beneficial to know about autism before teaching students with that label, teachers are most effective when they show acceptance, look for strengths in learners, provide personal attention when necessary, and allow for differences in the ways students approach tasks and complete classroom work.” – Paula Kluth, *“You’re Going to Love This Kid!”*

Inclusive classrooms can include a wide range of supports to effectively address the individual needs of students on the autism spectrum:

SENSORY SUPPORTS

Consider the sensory needs and sensitivities of children with autism when planning the classroom environment. Many children with autism are disturbed by the flickering of fluorescent lights or simply find direct lighting too intense. For these students, it may help to use lamp lighting in some parts of the room or provide visors to those who can tolerate them. For those who struggle with sounds like noisy fans, hallway voices, bells, or fire alarms, headphones might be offered or seating away from the most disturbing sounds can be provided. Sensory toys or manipulatives (e.g. modeling clay, bean bags, novelty pens, desk-top fidgets) can provide more comfort for students who seek additional sensory input to regulate themselves. Similarly, they may be calmed by the ability to take short breaks within the classroom, with access to music through headphones and/or adapted seating (e.g., bean bags, rocking chairs, wiggle seat, exercise balls).

VISUAL SUPPORTS

Many learners on the spectrum are strong visual learners. Teachers can take advantage of this strength by using a range of visual strategies across the school day. Visuals can not only help teachers communicate more effectively with students, but can also provide real comfort to learners who may feel real anxiety when expectations, directions, or information is unclear.

Some visuals commonly used in classrooms create predictability so that children know how long they will be expected to engage in a particular activity, and what will come next. Visual timers, picture schedules, and first/then boards all serve this purpose. Visuals can also be used to help students learn classroom requirements, stay on task, and follow directions. Examples of these types of visuals include calendars, checklists, picture instructions, illustrated rules, and task cards. Finally visuals can be used as communication tools. Photo albums, “I want” boards, and request cards are all examples of supports that can help learners with autism understand and be understood.

COMMUNICATION SUPPORTS

For many on the spectrum, communication struggles are at the heart of any learning, behavioral, or social challenges. Helping students improve communication skills and helping all learners successfully connect with classmates should be priorities in inclusive classrooms. For students who are non-verbal or have unreliable communication, place communication at the center of all other goals. These students will need multiple opportunities across the school day to speak and share with others and/or to use their augmentative and alternative communication systems (e.g., sign language, letter boards, voice-output communication aids). Learners with complex communication needs will also require plenty of opportunities to interact with peers in the context of standards-based instruction. By using strategies such as stations and centers, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, classroom games, and reading partners, all students will have time to connect with peers and those needing practice with skills such as turn taking, asking and answering questions, and accessing questions, and accessing new vocabulary or menus on their communication device will have opportunities to learn academic content while gaining communication skills and competencies.

Keep in mind that addressing communication needs may be useful for all students on the spectrum. While students with more significant needs may need daily support to learn, be assessed, and to express themselves, other students may need help with pragmatics such as terminating a conversation, topic maintenance or interpreting facial expressions.

ADAPTING CURRICULUM

Curricular adaptations include adjustments and modifications that provide access to the general curriculum for diverse students. Adaptations can be further categorized as:

Accommodations: changes to provide equal access to curriculum and compensate for differing needs, without substantially changing the instructional level, content, or grading. These may include changes in seating, presentation, environment, materials, response format, time to complete tests, peer support for note-taking, and other considerations.

Modifications: changes to provide the student with meaningful and productive participation in the learning environment, but modified to reflect individual needs, abilities, and learning expectations. Modifications may focus instruction on a selected portion of the general content,

provide additional supports such as calculators on math tests, visual hints or partially completed problems, specific choices in place of open-ended questions, and may provide substitute projects in place of tests.

Several types of adaptations are frequently considered before choosing a replacement curriculum:

- Input: changes in the way instruction is delivered
- Output: changes in how the student can respond or demonstrate knowledge
- Time: changes in the time allowed for learning, completion, or testing
- Difficulty: changes to the skill level, problems, or rules that must be followed
- Level of support: changes in the amount of assistance by teachers, paraprofessionals or peers
- Size: changes in the number of items the student is expected to complete
- Degree of participation: changes in the extent to which the student is actively involved
- Alternate goals: changes in goals or expected outcomes while using the same materials

Finally, students with autism can often benefit from “priming” – previewing or pre-teaching portions of the curriculum, such as vocabulary or general concepts, before the subject is introduced in class. This strategy can result in fewer challenging behaviors and greater academic responding in students with autism who are included in general education classes. Priming can also provide an opportunity to show the student how a given learning objective may be relevant to his or her own interests.

Information provided by the Hussman Institute for Autism. More information can be found on their website at www.hussmanautism.org.