

## Developing Academic Accommodations Promoting Successful Inclusion – Introduction

Accommodations. The word can strike fear into the hearts of the most seasoned educator. Regular education and special education teachers alike are often challenged when asked to make changes for the special learners put into their charge. Regular education teachers are especially challenged, if on top of educating 25-30 regular education children, they are then asked to make these modifications for special education students that suddenly appear in their classroom without much warning or preparation.

However, in becoming familiar with teaching to the different learning styles and abilities of children with autism and other special needs, it becomes possible to classify academic accommodations into groups. In fact, I have found that most accommodations are actually extensions of good teaching practice. For example, an accommodation asked of me for was to provide a student with autism in my computer class with an advance organizer. Therefore, before each class I wrote a list of activities for that day on the board. My sense is that every student would benefit from knowing what today's lesson will cover as part of preparing for the days class.

After researching into and developing accommodations I have found it useful to classify accommodations under nine different domains (Deschenes, Ebeling, and Sprague, 1994). Categorizing academic accommodations into these categories makes it easier for my (and I suspect others) to best match what we offer and require of our students to their needs and abilities. Below I shall describe and provide examples of accommodations in each of these areas.

### Nine Domains of Academic Accommodations

These areas of accommodation have been adapted from the work of Deschenes, Ebeling, and Sprague (1994) and appear in *Understanding Autism for Dummies* (Shore & Rastelli, 2006) as well. These nine domains group different ways of approaching the education of and managing expectations of students with disabilities as well as providing a nice framework to think about modifications. The domains of these adaptations are:

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|---------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Size             | 4. Input      | 7. Participation         |
| 2. Time             | 5. Difficulty | 8. Alternate             |
| 3. Level of Support | 6. Output     | 9. Substitute Curriculum |

**Size.** Adapt the number of items the student is expected to learn or complete. For example, an instructor could reduce the number of spelling words that must be learned at a given time. Instead of testing on 20 new spelling words each Friday, consider reducing the requirements to 10 new items. Another possibility might be to split the spelling quiz into two parts with 10 words on Tuesday and the rest on Friday.

**Time.** Adjust the time allotted for learning, task completion, or testing. Develop an individualized timeline for the student. Some parts of the task may be learned faster or slower than what is normally expected. Many students on the autism spectrum have challenges with executive function. This means they have difficulties in scheduling subtasks for the completion of a long-term assignment. Often just graphically working out intermediary deadlines is enough to help the student.

**Level of Support.** This type of accommodation involves gauging the amount of additional support a child needs to accomplish a task. My wife, a music teacher, will often request (never demand!) students who are excelling at a concept if they would like

to help a child needing assistance. Three immediate benefits arise when children engage as peer buddies, teaching assistants, peer tutors, or otherwise help others. The students helping others gain a firmer grasp of the knowledge as they think about how to explain it to others. The students being taught may actually learn faster from peers close to their own age than from a teacher. Finally, students have more of an opportunity to form friendships as people with and without learning difference discover that they are more alike than different.

**Input.** Adapt how instruction is given to the learner. Although most people on the autism spectrum are visually based, others may be kinesthetically oriented or favor other senses for input of information. Using different visual aides, concrete examples, hands on activities, or group work may help children on the autism spectrum. Whatever their learning style happens to be it will probably be to one extreme or another combined with greater difficulty than nonspectrum students for using other modes of input.

**Difficulty.** Matching the skill level of the child to the challenge of the work. For example, some children may need to use a calculator for arithmetic. While it may be ideal for a student to be able to perform mathematical functions in their head, being able to accurately use a calculator is better than no math skills at all. Additionally, the student may learn how to perform these functions in their head later on.

For a long time I had great difficulty learning multiplication and division tables. As a result I “cheated” by using a slide rule type of contraption for multiplication. Soon I learned that I could come up with the answers to division problems by using the device in reverse. After using this device for a

several months, I eventually learned my multiplication and division tables through sheer repetition of using this device.

I was lucky to have the opportunity to use this contraction alone, in my bedroom, in a low stress environment.

**Output.** There are many ways for a student to demonstrate they have a grasp of the material covered in class. For example, instead of writing longhand, a student might use a computer keyboard. Other alternative might include verbal responses, pointing to correct answers in a multiple choice format, or even drawing mind maps of the material.

**Participation.** This area concerns how the student is *meaningfully* involved in a task. For example, suppose a student with special needs is included in a chorus class. At first, due to the challenges the student faces it may appear that this is not a good inclusion decision. For example, instead standing still with the other students while singing he paces about the room. Additionally, instead of singing he tends to yell in a loud monotone. Instead of thinking of all kinds of reasons not to include the student, a teacher faced with this very problem gave the student a flag matching the country from where a song was being sung. Both the student's need to pace, the challenges in singing with the group, and the need for meaningful participation were successfully addressed. Hopefully at a future time the student will be able to join the chorus as a singing member. This student was *meaningfully* included.

**Alternate.** It may become necessary to modify the goals or outcome expectations while still using the same materials. For example, a student may learn geography right alongside her classmates but will only be required to locate the states of the United States whereas the others may be required to learn the capitals as well. Possibly this student

with special needs can learn the capitals as well but it may take longer or the information presented/tested in smaller chunks.

Substitute Curriculum. In this case, the child is provided with different instruction and materials to meet their needs. However, the student's individual goals remain aligned with the curriculum. For example, having great difficulty in the physical act of writing may spend some of the time learning keyboarding skills on a computer in the back of the room to enable them to complete their writing assignments. It is important not to let this domain turn into "geographical" inclusion. "Geographical" inclusion is when a child with special needs is in the same room as the regular education students but the topic worked on has nothing to do with the goals of the class. For example, in a class I observed, there was a student working on a project using PECS with an aide. Occasionally the student would make a noise, distract the other students from their studies, and the regular education teacher would have to redirect the class. In this case, all that happens is that the regular education students get a misimpression that students with autism and other special needs are really very different than they are.

#### A Final Word on Inclusion

Inclusion, just like autism, is a spectrum rather than an all or nothing proposition ranging from 100% in a regular classroom with an aide at key time to participating in half a class session once a week. In some cases, it may not be possible to engage a student with autism or special needs in a regular education class until proper supports can be worked out. However, with careful attention paid to the needs of the child, supporting regular education teachers in our efforts, and keeping in mind what is best for all parties

involve, it should be possible to find a way to include most child with special needs at least some of the time.

### Conclusion

The common goal in keeping these different domains in mind is for meaningful involvement of the person with a difference in their way of learning in school, at their residences, in the community, and later on in employment. Inclusion is successful when *both* children with special needs and regular education benefit from the interaction.

## References

Deschenes, C., Ebeling, D., and Sprague, J. (1994). *Adapting Curriculum and Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: A Teacher's Desk Reference*. Bloomington, Indiana: The Center for School and Community Integration, Institute for the Study of Developmental Disabilities.

Shore, S., & Rastelli, L. (2006). *Understanding autism for dummies*. NY: Wiley & Sons.