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ASD Team Members:

- Patricia Assoud
ASD Consultant-
Coordinator
- Dr. Andrew Bennett
Psychologist-Coordinator
- Jovette Francoeur
Special Needs Consultant
- Sabrina Gabriele
ASD Consultant
- Joëlle Hadaya
Occupational Therapist
- Katie Cohene
ASD Consultant
- Jade Lawsane
ASD Consultant
- Cheryl Scaife
ASD Consultant
- Helene Packman
Speech & Language
Pathologist
- Dr. Amira Rahman
Psychologist

Providing Access to the General Curriculum: An Essential Aspect of the Balanced Day

A number of evidence-based best practices are widely used in schools to support the integration of students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Elementary and high schools professionals alike encourage the use of visual tools, provide students with opportunities for choice, use special interests to increase motivation, and allow students to ask for breaks throughout the day. The term *balanced day* is recognized by educators who use flexible scheduling to ensure that the physical, social, and academic needs of students with ASD are met. There also appears to have been a shift toward functional curriculum and real-life learning in the community. This article will argue that, regardless of the limitations that students may exhibit, there is always value to providing all students access to the general curriculum.

Consider the following real-life scenario: *Mehdi is 10 years old. He is able to communicate his needs using 3-4 word sentences. He is an extremely hard worker who loves to be in school. He reads at a grade 1 level. He is on a modified academic program. His grade 4 teacher was thrilled that Mehdi mastered long division. The grade 5 teacher reflects aloud on his priorities for Mehdi, "What is the purpose of teaching Mehdi to do long division? When will he ever use this again in his life?" The grade 5 teacher would like to focus on Functional Math skills such as money concepts.*

In her article *The Least Dangerous Assumption*, Jorgen (2005) stated that "Children learn best when they feel valued, when people hold high expectations for them, and when they are taught and supported well." Even if they are on modified programs, it is essential to provide all students with ASD access to the general curriculum. Individuals with autism have very uneven learning patterns. Expressive and receptive language difficulties sometimes make it a challenge to adequately assess their learning. Current standardized tests do not adequately reflecting the aptitudes of individuals with autism (Dawson, 2007). Together, these factors suggest that even if students cannot always demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge and information, this does not mean that they are not learning. As the potential of students with ASD is unknown, we must ensure that they have opportunities to access course material similar to that of their peers. Over the years, a number of students with ASD have surprised educators with their grasp of class content.

Another argument for providing students with ASD with access to the general curriculum is that it is an excellent way to showcase strengths. Having good rote memory and strong visual skills are commonly noted in IEPs as strengths for students who have ASD. Locating countries on a map, memorizing the periodical table, and reciting Shakespearean soliloquies are thus excellent ways for students with ASD to shine. In one elementary classroom, students at varying levels receive one of three spelling lists to study for a weekly spelling test. A bonus spelling word is then selected randomly from the dictionary. For two years in a row, classmates have celebrate their friend, who happens to have ASD, as he gets every single word on all 3 lists plus the additional bonus word correct! In other words, access to the general curriculum provides students with ASD an opportunity to be recognized

Another common feature in the IEPs of students with ASD is the need to follow group instructions, and organize materials needed to work. One strategy that is often taught to students is peer referencing. Students are prompted to look at their peers to see what they are doing to provide them with clues as to what they should be doing. If students are always working on another curriculum with different texts, the skill of peer referencing cannot be developed. Similarly, students learn that it is not necessary to listen to group directions from the teacher because what the teacher is saying will not be relevant or apply to them because they are on a different program. Even if students are on modified programs, there is benefit to having them use the same materials as their peers so that they can learn to tune in to the teacher and to their classmates. The development of these skills will have a beneficial impact on the lifelong learning and autonomy of students with ASD.

Article Continued

Meeting the social needs of students in an inclusive environment is yet another reason for providing students with ASD access to the general curriculum. Copying things off the board, learning French verbs in different tenses, and other classroom activities may be considered *meaningless* for students who have an intellectual impairment or for students who are on a modified program. However, these activities give students an opportunity to feel like their classmates, and provide a reason and an opportunity to socialize, especially if these skills are built into the activity. For example, students can be paired up to share one dictionary or one atlas to increase social interaction and develop social skills during a class activity. More often than not, the modified curriculum goals for a student can be embedded within the whole class activity. This helps the student with ASD to feel more included, more competent, and more motivated to participate.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that access to the general curriculum does not negate teaching or promoting on life skills. Life skills and functional academics remain important aspects of the IEP. One does not outweigh the other. In a *balanced day*, there is room in the schedule for both general curriculum classes and activities focused on functional life and academic skills. By combining the two, we are able to address both the social needs and the unknown academic and cognitive potential of students with ASD.

Jorgen, C. (2005). The Least Dangerous Assumption. *Disability Solutions: A publication of Creating Solutions, A Resource for Families & Others Interested in Down Syndrome & Developmental Disabilities*, 6, (3),

Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Gernsbacher, M.A. & Mottron, L. (2007). The Level and Nature of Autistic Intelligence. *Psychological Science*, 18, 657-662.

Communication Corner:

Some students with ASD enter the school system with very limited communication skills and may even be non-verbal. It often becomes a challenge to engage these students in academic tasks. One area of the curriculum that becomes particularly challenging is literacy. When a student is unable to demonstrate their knowledge verbally, literacy activities often focus on matching activities such as matching letters or matching pictures of nouns to their written words. An alternative to these types of activities is reading books written in a format that is engaging for our students. Tar Heel Reader is a resource that will give students with limited language skills the opportunity to participate in meaningful literacy activities.

Tar Heel Reader.org was created by The Center for Literacy and Disability Studies and the Department of Computer Science at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It is a free resource that provides users with a collection of hundreds of easy-to-read electronic books on a variety of topics with engaging real-life photographs. These books can be easily accessed using an iPad or computer and also features text to speech. The books are also compatible with Read and Write for Google Chrome™.

The feature that makes Tar Heel Reader unique is that it addresses the needs of older students who often don't have access to age-appropriate and motivating content in a format that is easily understood. For example, there are biographies on a variety of famous people from Jackson Pollock and Robert Frost to Lady Gaga. You can also find chapter summaries of books commonly used in schools such as Hatchet and Tuck Everlasting. Tar Heel Reader will make it easier for teachers to find materials that match the content being taught in class. You can search books on topics such as math and science, history, holidays, and health.

Finally, Tar Heel Reader also carries a limited number of books written in French. These books will allow our students to explore more content in French.



Lester B. Pearson School Board
1925 Brookdale Avenue
Dorval, Quebec
Phone: 514-422-3000
Fax: 514-422-3014

Our team is composed of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web! <http://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>

Save the date!

April 3-7, 2017

Structured and Individualized

Intervention for Students with ASD

This five-day training course, inspired by TEACCH principles (Treatment and Education of Autism and Related Communication Handicapped Children), provides both a theoretical foundation and hands-on experience for working with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a classroom setting. The main purpose of the training is to help create a better understanding of the learning styles and needs of individuals with ASD. Stay tuned for more information.

WWW

www.5pointscale.com

Kari Dunn Buron

www.5pointscale.com was developed to share information about the use of the 5-point scale and other systems to teach social and emotional concepts to individuals with ASD.

Kari is committed to positive support for all students and to the teaching of skills needed for social success. It is our hope that this site will inform, teach, support, and excite anyone looking for some good ideas.

Behavior Tip

The Importance of Providing Daily Breaks

Whether your student with ASD is following the regular program or a modified one, there is much benefit in providing daily breaks (or down time) for them or allowing them the opportunity and/or choice of taking a break from the academic demands of the classroom.

It is a fact that most students with an ASD also experience underlying anxiety, which can be triggered by many different factors, including academic expectations. Often, this anxiety manifests itself by displays of negative or challenging behavior from the student, which can be difficult for school personnel to manage. In order to mitigate against this behavior and to help insulate the student from increased feelings of anxiety, implement daily breaks for the student either by including them at fixed times in the daily schedule or by teaching the student to ask for breaks when they become aware of heightened feelings of anxiety during the day. This can be done by providing a limited number of *break* cards to the student that they can use, as well as through the use of other tools such as the 5-point scale or anxiety curve (www.5pointscale.com). As a general rule of thumb, we recommend that a minimum of two to three breaks a day be provided to the student.