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All Children Can Write! Teaching Strategies for Helping Children with Autism

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Mrs. Johnson sat and watched her thirty fourth graders busy at work. The sound of pencils hitting their papers echoed throughout the room. The class was to write a story on a family member that they admired. They had started the project last week, and Mrs. Johnson hoped they would be to the final drafts by today. However, some children were still writing the beginning to their stories.

Mrs. Johnson looked over at Billy. His head was leaned back and his brown eyes stared at the ceiling; watching the spinning of the fan. Billy was a small boy with sandy brown hair and a face full of freckles. His thin frame was swallowed up in the Beatles shirt that he wore at least once a week. He would have worn it every day if his mother would have let him. The Beatles were his favorite band. Billy could recite the words to every single song the group ever recorded. Mrs. Johnson thought back to last week when Billy started singing "A Hard Days Night" in the middle of the math lesson. She remembered being furious with the interruption, but as she looked back on it a smile crossed her plump face. She knew she could not stay mad at him because it was not his fault. Billy was a special boy; he was different from the other children. He had been diagnosed with mild autism when he was just an infant.

Mrs. Johnson remembered the first day of school when she met Billy. As she stepped into her new classroom, she saw the fourth grade class talking amongst themselves about their summer. As she scanned the room, there was one little boy that

caught her attention. He was sitting in a corner desk all alone. A large drawing pad was the focus of his attention. The tips of his slim fingers were covered in charcoal. Mrs. Johnson walked to the front of the room and put her belongings on the desk.

"Good Morning Class. My name is Mrs. Johnson, and I will be your teacher this year. I would like to start off by having you all introduce yourselves." Each one of the children went around the room and reluctantly introduced themselves. When it was Billy's turn, he did not say a word and continued on with his drawing. Mrs. Johnson came out from behind her desk and walked closer to the desk in the corner.

"What's your name?" She asked gently.

"Billy," he said with out taking his eyes off his drawing. The loud speaker brought Mrs. Johnson out of her day dream. The principal was letting her know that Amber's mother was in the office to pick her up for a doctor's appointment. Billy had his ears covered and was moaning to drown out the loudness of the principal's voice.

"Mrs. Johnson, Amber needs to be excused for her appointment."

"Thank you, Mr. Moilanen. I will send her down to the office," said Mrs. Johnson. She stood up and walked over to Amber's desk and helped her put her things in her Barbie backpack, then dismissed her to the office.

"Bye, Mrs. Johnson!"

"Bye, Amber. See you tomorrow."

Mrs. Johnson walked around the room to check on everyone's progress. She stopped at Billy's desk and knelt down beside him. He had three sentences written on the paper. His handwriting was very hard to read; Mrs. Johnson squinted at the paper tried to make out the words.

"Billy, why aren't you working on your story?"

"I am, but I don't know what else to write," Billy said in a soft voice.

"Would you like to work together?"

Mrs. Johnson took Billy over to the computer she had behind her desk. She knew from experience that it was hard for Billy to write his

stories on paper because he became frustrated with his handwriting. He tried hard to make it neat like the other children, but it was hard for him to control his pencil. Billy often wrote only a few sentences before he gave up and started drawing.

"Billy you sit down at this computer and type what you have written so far, then we will think of other things to write together." Billy sat at the computer and started typing the three sentences he had already constructed. He was writing his story about his mother.

"What else do you like about your mom?" asked Mrs. Johnson.

"I like how she makes me breakfast in the morning. I like how she plays games with me and helps me with my homework," Billy said with excitement.

"Okay, let's put that in your paper then." Together Billy and Mrs. Johnson worked on the paper. By the end of writing time, they had constructed a one-page paper about Billy's mother.

"See Billy, you finished your paper."

For the first time Billy looked Mrs. Johnson in the eyes, "Thank you Mrs. Johnson."

"You're welcome, Billy."

Autism is a "developmental brain disorder that typically appears during the first three years of life. It affects brain areas controlling language, social interaction and abstract thought" (Fay and Schuler 7). The term autism was first introduced to society in 1911 to describe an individual's exclusion of the outside world and withdrawal from social life.

Despite research, autism is a mystery to the community, even today. It has been determined that autism has no single cause. In the 1950's and 1960's mothers of children with autism were unfairly accused of causing their child's disorder. The medical community believed autism was an emotional disorder caused by uncaring mothers. However, it is now generally accepted that autism is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Doctors have found that the shape and structure of the brain in autistic children differ greatly from those children who are not autistic.

Some researchers believe that a cluster of genes may be what interferes with the brain development resulting in autism. Yet other researchers are investigating problems during pregnancy and delivery, as well as "viral infections, metabolic imbalances, and exposure to environmental chemicals" (Autism Fact Sheet, 1). Whatever the cause, it is believed that children with autism are born with the disorder or born with the potential to develop it. It is not caused by bad parenting (or teaching). It is not a mental illness. Children with autism do not behave badly because they choose to do so.

Autism is considered to be a spectrum disorder. This means that although autism is classified as having certain symptoms, children show different combinations of symptoms in varying intensities. These symptoms can be classified from mild to severe. Warren Fay and Adrianna Schuler state that "two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act very differently from one another and have varying skills" (14). Each child with autism has his or her own unique personality.

For example, there was a young boy in my high school (I'll call him Danny) who could only remember the names of the teachers he saw every day. Otherwise, he would frequently ask us his fellow classmates what their names were. When he talked to us he would not look us in the eye; his eyes would constantly be on the floor. If we were wearing anything that had lettering on it, he would read what it said out loud while he traced the letters with his fingers. Danny has been diagnosed as having a severe case of autism.

At the other end of the spectrum are children with mild autism. My friend's little brother was diagnosed with mild autism when he was in first grade. "Chad" can tell you the name of every Red Wings hockey player, every game they ever won, and who they played against. He could remember my name every time I went over to their house, and unlike Danny, he was not afraid to look me in the eye. Both of these boys have been diagnosed with autism, but they each display different personalities and severities of the disorder.

Common Behaviors Associated with Autism

The three most common features of autism include impaired social interaction, communication delays, and repetitive behavior. Impaired social interaction can be regarded as showing no interest in developing friendships among peers. Children with autism have a hard time remembering names and often avoid looking people in the eye. Danica Mamlet states that “autistic children are happiest when left alone, not seeking out connections with parents or peers. Autistic children may actively avoid interactions with others, straining away to avoid eye contact or being held” (1). Children with autism may also show delays in spoken language. Sometimes they may not speak at all. With help, some autistic children may develop some language skills, while others use non-verbal communication.

Autistic children typically display repetitive behavior. This can include repeated body movements such as hand flapping or rocking, or something as specific as tracking objects with their eyes and repetitive waving or twirling of an object, such as a piece of paper. Also children with autism need consistency in their environment. They may need to take the same route each day or use the same materials. A change can result in furious and aggressive behavior.

In addition to the symptoms listed above, autistic children may display an extraordinary skill in areas like music, math, or drawing and sensitivity to certain sounds or smells. When the school bell would ring, Danny would cover his ears because he did not like the sound.

It is estimated that nearly 400,000 people in the United States have some form of autism. It is now known as the third most common developmental disability (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke 1). However, most of the public are still unaware of how autism affects people and how to effectively work with individuals with autism. It is very common today for a teacher to have a child with autism in the classroom. It is very important that we know how to work with these individuals.

Effective Ways to Accommodate Children with Autism

Temple Grandin from Colorado State University has listed ways teachers can adjust so that they are able to make a comfortable environment for autistic children. I am going to list a few examples below: Many autistic children are able to learn better visually. It might be easier to teach children using pictures instead of just language. Grandin explains that he was better able to learn nouns because he could picture them in his head. When teaching the children words such as right or left, the teachers should demonstrate them to the children.

As I said earlier, children with autism are typically good at drawing, math, or music. These skills should be encouraged. The children should be practicing their talents because they could become useful in other areas of school. Sometimes children become frustrated when they can not grasp an understanding of Math or English. By letting them practice at something they are good at, we are giving them a sense of accomplishment.

Some children can learn better by using their sense of touch. Danny had to trace the letters in a word while he was reading. Grandin says that autistic children “can learn their daily schedule by feeling objects a few minutes before a scheduled activity. For example, fifteen minutes before lunch give the person a spoon to hold. Let them hold a toy car a few minutes before going in the car” (3). Children with autism have a hard time controlling their hands. They tend to have very bad handwriting, and this can frustrate a child. It is often suggested that the teacher should let the child use a computer to write. This will cause less frustration and more enjoyment while writing (Grandin).

In a study of five autistic boys and their use of computers, Patricia Hutingger and Robert Rippey found positive outcomes (How Five). Their results showed that “prior to computer exposure, the boys were likely to scream, fall to the floor, resist adult assistance, throw books into pudding bowls during cooking activities, run around the room aimlessly, and refuse physical contact.” However, after the children were exposed to the computer, Hutingger

and Rippey found a change in the boys' attitudes and actions.

They started to socialize, share, communicate, and learn at the computer. (How Five). This study shows that computers can in fact be a helpful tool for autistic children.

The above list is just a few of the ideas teachers could use to help make a comfortable environment for their students. However, not every idea will apply to every child, so each teacher will need to adjust accordingly. As a future English teacher, I will also need to make adjustments, especially in the area of teaching handwriting. It has been said that children with learning disabilities have a harder time writing than children without learning disabilities. Steve Graham states that children with learning disabilities "have considerable difficulty generating context. For example, the papers of [students with no diagnosed learning disabilities] were twice as long as those of learning disabled students. In addition, learning disabled students are less likely than non-disabled students to develop text that adequately conforms to the purpose, conventions, and features of the genre under consideration" ("The Role of Production Factors").

Children with learning disabilities also have more errors in punctuation and spelling in their writing, and their handwriting is harder to read. All of these factors make writing for the learning disabled student very difficult, and it starts to become something they choose to avoid. We as teachers should encourage these students to continue to write. If students become frustrated, we need to let them know that they can in fact write.

Writing allows students to express their feelings and to show what they know. We can give students assignments to write without fear of a grade; non-graded writing allows students to put their thoughts on paper and get a response rather than an evaluation. Journals are a great way to invite students to experiment with writing. For instance, Billy, who loves to draw, should be asked to write about his drawings. Other students like Danny, who might be more touch oriented, could be asked to write in puffy paints (designed for use on t-shirts) in

order to help him understand that writing can be enjoyable. We should not be afraid to try new and different ideas in our classrooms.

Another idea might be to help students feel a sense of routine by doing the same kind of writing each day to start the class. For example, in a morning meeting, elementary students often tell what happened to them the day before or if they have anything to share. This is typically done to help students develop effective verbal communication skills. By adding a time for writing right after the meeting, during which students could write what they wanted to share and forgot, or what they might want to share the next day, teachers would be fostering writing as a part of a classroom routine. Students with autism and other learning disabilities would receive positive reinforcement for writing as well as an understanding of writing being a regular part of the daily routine and not something about which they have to be anxious. In the section below, Billy shows us what can happen when we as teachers take just a few minutes of our time to help out a student who needs additional assistance.

Billy returned to his seat. He put his finished story on his desk and started drawing a picture. His hands moved with delight over the paper. Mrs. Johnson smiled as she watched Billy work. She knew he loved to draw, so she tried to encourage it in most of her lessons.

"Ok, boys and girls it's almost time to go home. Everyone put your stories in your writing folders and clean up around your desk." Mrs. Johnson commanded.

There was a rustle in the room as the children moved around their desks; picking up any scraps of paper or garbage they could find. Once they had finished cleaning, they all sat quietly in their desks and waited for Mrs. Johnson to dismiss them so they could get their coats.

"Row 2 you may go get your coats and then line up at the door. Row 1 can go. Row 3. Row 5 and row 6."

The children bustled around the room. They all hurried to get their belongings out of their

lockers. Billy slowly walked up to Mrs. Johnson with a piece of white paper in his little hand.

"Mrs. Johnson, this is for you." Billy said quietly.

Mrs. Johnson took the paper from Billy's hand. It was a drawing of two people sitting at a computer. He had written the names above the figures; one was Billy and the other, Mrs. Johnson. The drawing of Billy had a bubble coming out of his mouth and inside it read, "Thank You."

Mrs. Johnson leaned down and gave Billy a big hug. Billy offered a faint smile and walked to the door. Mrs. Johnson smiled as she watched him line up at the door. She knew that she was making progress with this shy little boy.

"It's going to be a wonderful year!" she thought to herself.

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¹ According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, "Experts estimate that three to six children out of every 1,000 will have autism. Males are four times more likely to have autism than females" (*Autism Fact Sheet*). My examples are all boys; this was not intentional, but does seem to support the idea that autism affects males more frequently.

About the Author:

Bridgette Buehrly is in the Elementary Education program at Northern Michigan University. She is looking forward to student teaching so that she can implement the strategies she's spent the last few years learning.