



Roselyn Dixon explains how to create an autism-friendly environment in mainstream settings...

Introduction

If educationalists try to follow a “recipe”, then they will sooner or later come across a child or a situation where the recipe does not work.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours and sensory sensitivities (APA 2013; Aspect 2018). Researchers estimate that around 1/68 of people are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (ADDMN 2014). Almost all students with ASD required specialised education adjustments to support their communication, social and learning difficulties (ABS 2014). The majority of these students are enrolled in regular education settings (Aspect 2013) with only one in four being enrolled in special schools (ABS 2014). All of these students may have differing needs. However, there are some evidence-based strategies that, if implemented to match their individual strengths and weaknesses can empower them to fulfil their potential in the inclusive classroom environment.

All students with ASD need educational adjustments

Although there are a number of strategies which have been proven to be successful, a careful analysis of the pupil’s learning needs must have taken place to understand how ASD will affect each individual pupil’s perspective, motivation and preferred ways of working.

There are no two people with ASD who will be exactly alike.

Therefore, it is imperative for educators to develop effective intervention strategies for students with ASD. The following strategies can be applied to students with ASD of all ages, across a range of settings (Attwood, 2007). However, the particular emphasis in this article is on those strategies which can be implemented by teachers and support personnel in the inclusive classroom.

Overall, most students with ASD will benefit from a structured and explicitly outlined teaching approach with clear expectations (Dixon et al., 2017). Structure and predictability can reduce anxiety and stress and, in some cases, challenging behaviour (Pittman, 2007). Students with autism also need structure and clarity in the presentation of tasks, in timetables and in the learning environment. This structured teaching approach needs to be supported, where appropriate, by visual materials.



Manage the physical environment of the classroom

The physical learning environment impacts significantly on students on the autism spectrum because of their sensory sensitivities (Smith-Myles, 2005). It is important to provide as predictable and as calm an environment as possible. As a general rule, aim for a clutter-free environment to cut down on distraction and confusion. Sometimes it will be appropriate to provide a separate work area for certain pieces of work - this could be their work area, or a work station, incorporated into the classroom.

Specific strategies for creating an autism-friendly classroom include:

- Set up an organised classroom where there are places for resources, stationary and personal belongings and teaching the students how to access the resources in an appropriate manner;
- Plan strategies along with places and times for calming breaks. This could include giving the student an individual break card;
- Set up a calm zone within the classroom. This is not time-out and can be used for short periods of time such as three to five minutes;
- Clearly define boundaries for specific areas using classroom furniture, masking tape, rugs and/or cushions. Also, these areas should be clearly labelled with a visual;
- Reduce visual clutter. Allow for some clear areas, especially near the seating areas of students on the Autism Spectrum, and change art works and student displays so as to avoid a visual overload;
- Be aware of sensory sensitivities and make commonsense changes to the environment (Smith-Myles, 2005).

Managing the teaching and learning environment of the classroom: the use of visuals, simplifying language and managing changes in routine

Visuals

Specific strategies can be designed to support students on the autism spectrum to learn more effectively (Pittman, 2007). As most students on the autism spectrum respond to information presented visually rather than relying on language or verbal instructions, one of the most commonly used strategies to support learning is the use of specialised visual supports. This has particular advantages for students with an ASD who have strengths in the visual modality and may experience difficulties dealing with abstract concepts (Attwood, 2007).

Whilst some students on the autism spectrum can function well using whole-class visuals it is often necessary to provide individual visuals (Walker, 2010).



Specific strategies that can be implemented using visuals include:

- Predicting and preparing for the day's activities, which often reduces anxiety and distress;
- Organising themselves, which reduces confusion and frustration for teachers and students;
- Introducing and developing an understanding of the concept of time (now, next, finished);
- Working through tasks or common routines independently;
- Making choices and expressing opinions;
- Identifying and exploring feelings;
- Reflecting on personal experiences and behaviour patterns.

Another helpful strategy is to provide a checklist that breaks larger tasks down into more manageable parts that can be checked off when completed. This also serves as a visual support.

Simplifying language

Students with ASD have significant social communication problems. Social communication problems refer to the effective use and understanding of communication in a social context including non-verbal communication, such as eye gaze, facial expressions, body language, gestures and tone of voice. Also, they may appear to know a lot of words and use them correctly but often comprehension of meaning is lacking (Smith, 2012). Therefore, simplifying language is often necessary.

Specific strategies include:

- Check for comprehension of word meanings;
- Watch for literalness. Do not use metaphors, idioms or sarcasm;
- Be very specific when providing instructions to ensure that the student knows what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Use their name in an instruction;
- Keep language concise and simple, saying exactly what you mean, telling the student exactly what to do, for example, "Clean up the science lab" should be "Put the microscope back on the shelf".

Managing changes in routine

Changes to routines are inevitable within classrooms and students do need to learn to cope with change. However, they need specific strategies within an autism-friendly environment to cope with change.



Specific strategies that can support students to manage changes in routine include:

- If possible, avoid sudden changes;
- Provide as much advanced warning of change as possible through visual representation. This may include a reminder of an upcoming event or change written on the board or a photo of the setting for an excursion coming up or a supply teacher coming in (Kluth, 2010);
- Prepare the student for change by discussing it in advance using a Social Narrative such as a Social Story (Gray, 2000);
- Provide a reason for the change and explain exactly what will happen and what is expected of the students;
- Students should be warned of any changes in routine for the day during the early morning class routine. Changes can be indicated on the visual timetable by placing a “not” visual on the activity concerned or preferably by removing the visual and replacing it with something else. Do remember to remind students of what is not going to change, such as all the other activities, the classroom and break times.

Managing the social environment of the classroom

There will also be a need to plan the social environment and be aware of strategies to support pupils to negotiate the hidden social curriculum of the classroom. Anxiety may also be an issue as children and young people on the autism spectrum may experience significant social interaction difficulties that need to be addressed before they are ready to learn. Social-emotional learning is fundamental to the success of every component of the teaching and learning program of the classroom. It is essential for students on the autism spectrum (Dixon, et al. 2017).

Specific strategies include:

- Social rules need to be taught where possible. Make social rules or procedures explicit and possibly use a supporting visual;
- Specific teaching of social skills;
- Social Stories describe a specific social situation and often include suggestions for appropriate actions in the future. Social stories should always be individualised. It is highly unlikely you will ever be able to photocopy a social story, as it would not be specific enough to your situation;
- Comic Strip Conversations are discussed and developed with the pupils in a factual non-judgmental way. The adult (or child) talks through a situation, illustrating relevant people with matchstick figures;



- Power Cards are a form of skill or behaviour modelling which show what a student SHOULD do, and not what a student SHOULD NOT do;
- A 5-Point Scale (Buron and Curtis, 2003) is a useful tool for teaching students how to recognise and communicate their distress. It can also aid them to self-calm and possibly prevent challenging behaviours from occurring.

Conclusion

Although all of the strategies suggested in this paper are evidence based it is important to reiterate that students with autism may respond individually to each one of them. It is important for educators to assess which strategies will work for the student on the autism spectrum in their classroom environments. However, by implementing the range of strategies suggested in this article to make a classroom an autism-friendly environment, teachers can contribute to a successful school experience for their students.

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