Educating Children with Asperger Syndrome

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The education of a child must take into consideration the child’s strengths and weakness, his/her prior knowledge, and the information and skills the child may lack. The same is true for a student who has a disability, such as Asperger Syndrome. Because children with this disability lack the knowledge of necessary social skills, it is one area that might come into play when educating these children. It is important for teachers to understand Asperger Syndrome, ways to teach necessary skills to these children, other changes in the classroom that may benefit them, as well as how to deal with those who are also gifted.

Students with Asperger Syndrome, lack what Myles & Simpson (2001) call the “hidden curriculum,” otherwise know to us as the dos and don’ts of social skills, actions, and dress of society. “The hidden curriculum includes the skills that we are not taught directly yet are assumed to know” (p. 279). To complicate things, there are few general rules about these skills because they change between situations, people, and cultures. The authors give the example of knowing from what strangers it is all right to accept a ride (ex. bus driver), and the strangers who a person should stay away from. Programs have been developed however, to help students with AS learn some of these rules, or the “basics.” Most of these programs include instruction, modeling, guided practice, self-evaluation and an evaluation done by others (Myles & Simpson, 2001). It should be noted that this is the procedure almost all instruction uses in a school system.

Myles and Simpson (2001) discuss a program, which involves both instruction and interpretation. The instruction begins with a process called “scope and sequence.” During this step, the educator outlines the skills that the child has, and lacks, according to his/her level of development. Without this process, it is possible to overlook skills that may be lacking. The teacher then uses this outline to develop a direct plan of instruction. According to Myles and Simpson (2001), all instruction should include rationale, appropriate presentation, modeling,
verification, evaluation, and generalization of what is being learned, in order for it to be effective. The areas of instruction that would involve the child include the use of social stories, acting, and self-esteem building. The building of self-esteem can be done through the use of compliments, allowing the child to become a tutor, and incorporating something he/she does well into the lessons (Myles & Simpson, 2001).

The second area is interpretation of social and behavioral situations. This can be done through cartoons, which provide visuals to help understanding, social autopsies, and SOCCSS (situations, options, consequences, choices, strategies, and simulation). SOCCSS helps the child to understand the situations, his/her possible plans of actions, and consequences for those actions. In the first part, the situation is identified, defined, and goals are developed. Then the child brainstorms possible options, as well as determines the possible consequences. At the choices stage, the child prioritizes these options. The next step is to develop a plan of action and then practice that plan. The practice of this process will help the child to take these steps mentally when in an unfamiliar situation. (Myles & Simpson, 2001)

Besides teaching children with AS the “hidden curriculum,” there are other characteristics of the disorder which teachers need to be aware of so that they can implement strategies to deal with them. The article by Williams (1995) suggests ways for teachers to help children with AS, particularly in the areas of an insistence on sameness, restricted areas of interest, concentration problems, coordination problems, emotional vulnerability, social interactions, and academics.

Children with this disorder may become overwhelmed by small changes and changes that occur unexpectedly, which can bring on anxiety and panic. Williams (1995) suggests, as does Simpson and Myles (1998) and Safran (2001), creating a predictable atmosphere, which includes
having a daily routine with minimal transitions. In addition, if changes are going to occur, the child should be told in advance so that he/she can prepare.

Connected to this idea of minimal change, children with AS usually have a very strong interest in one area or in one thing. They may not want to stop talking about it or pursue other areas. Teachers can help by allowing a certain time within the day for the child to discuss his/her interest (Williams, 1995). Perhaps this can be done at share time at the beginning or end of the day, or even before the particular subject area. Williams (1995) also suggests setting expectations for the child’s class work, as well as providing assignments that capitalize on the child’s interest. She also states that some children may even need an individualized program since their interest and unwillingness to explore new things is so strong (Williams, 1995).

Class work may also be a struggle because these children sometimes have difficulty concentrating and withdraw into their own inner world. The help, the author suggests breaking the assignments down into chunks; seating the child at the front of the class; developing a signal to let him/her know he/she needs to get back on task; or having a buddy system (Williams, 1995). These ideas are also ones that can be used for any child with concentration problems.

Another characteristic of children with AS, is a problem with fine motor coordination. This usually results itself in slow writing and poor penmanship (Williams, 1995). This is something that I have seen myself while working with a child with Asperger Syndrome. Due to this, the teacher should take into account the amount of time allowed for writing tasks and/or providing writing guidelines. There may also be a lack of gross motor coordination. Therefore, a child with AS should not be pushed into competitive physical activities, but he/she should be provided with non-competitive activities (Williams, 1995).
Teachers may also have to deal with the students’ emotional vulnerability. These children may have low self-esteem, frustrations that can cause aggression, etc. Teachers can help by teaching the child coping strategies, as well as by noting any changes in behavior that may suggest the child is stressed or experiencing depression, since he/she may not know how to express this. These feelings may develop from any of the other characteristics as well as the prominent lack of social skills. This was also mentioned in the article by Simpson and Myles (1998). Not only can teachers help these children learn social skills, but they can also prevent the child from being picked on by others, simply by educating the students in the class about the disorder. It is also affective to provide cooperative learning activities in which the student can share his/her knowledge (Williams, 1995). As mentioned by Myles and Simpson (2001), this also helps to increase the child’s self-esteem.

Most of the children who have AS have average or above average intelligence. Even so, they may have difficulties when it comes to dealing with higher levels of thinking. Williams (1995) suggests that teachers provide explanations, especially for things like figurative language. Also, as with all children, provide a lot of motivation to keep them trying.

This above average intelligence may sometimes prevent a child who has Asperger Syndrome from being diagnosed. “Gifted children with AS are not always diagnosed because unusual behaviors are attributed to either their giftedness or to a learning disability” (Neihart, 2000, p. 223). Diagnosis may also be hindered because children with AS share characteristics with children who are gifted. Such characteristics include verbal fluency; fascinations with letters, numbers, and facts; interest in special topics; hypersensitivity; and uneven development between cognitive, social, and emotional development (Neihart, 2000).
There are differences however. “An AS child will talk interminably in a monotonous or pedantic tone about a favorite topic, unaware that the listener might not be interested…AS children will also interrupt private conversation and enter or leave abruptly without the concern for…others” (Neihart, 2000, p. 225). In addition, these children unlike those who are only gifted, have attention disturbances that come from within, and a lack of understanding when it comes to humor (Neihart, 2000).

Neihart (2000) also gives suggestions when working with children who are gifted and have Asperger Syndrome. She recommends using rote styles of learning and memorization since these are some of their strengths. In addition, these children are also strong visual learners. That is why the use of cartoons mentioned in Myles and Simpson (2001), is a good strategy when helping these children learn and interpret social situations and appropriate actions. Neihart (2000) also discusses that the lack of social skills, possible behavioral problems, as well as the possible hypersensitivity needs to be taken into account when educating these children.

All three of these article were well written and discussed ways for educators to help teach children with AS social skills, deal with and aid these children to overcome their weaknesses, and ways to capitalize on their strengths. I believe that some of the suggestions that Williams (1995) gave are also good to keep in mind for the entire class. Especially if there is a child who has one of the problems mentioned, not necessarily connected to any disability. I believe that the examples that were given in these articles aid in the understanding of the given suggestions.

There was one thing that I thought should have been reconsidered in the article by Neihart (2000). Throughout her article, she neglects to use the children first language that has been adopted when discussing various differences. On several occasions she uses the term “gifted children,” and as seen in the above quote she uses the phrase “an AS child.” This is
disturbing because the article was only published a year ago. I am sure on occasion people forget to use the “politically correct” language, but it should not be that way in a published journal article. Also, when she mentioned using rote styles of learning, I thought that she should have mentioned along with higher learning methods. These children will never learn or become any better if they only use the ways that they perform best. Their weaknesses will only become weaker.

Synthesis

All six of these articles discussed in some form the characteristics of a child with Asperger Syndrome. Each mentioned the main characteristic of social skill deficits, but some continued to discuss other characteristics that can interfere with their education. This is especially true for the last three articles. The text by Friend & Bursuck (2002) does not elaborate on Asperger Syndrome although autism is mentioned. However, because the disorders are related some of the characteristics are similar. Neihart (2000) also mentions in her article the similarities they share such as the interest in a specific topic. Safran (2001) mentions the similarities between AS and autism, as well as its similarity with other Pervasive Developmental Disorders. These similarities as well as being gifted may also hinder the diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

There was one contradiction between the two articles by Neihart and Williams when they discuss a characteristic of AS in the area of academics. Williams (1995) mentions that although children with AS can have above average intelligence, they may have difficulty with higher levels of thinking. However, Neihart (2000) says that a characteristic of AS is “excellent logical abstract thinking” (p. 222). I would consider this to be part of upper level thinking since it deals
with the abstract, which Williams says is a problem for most of these children. However, because Williams wrote her article five years earlier, it is possible that it is a development that has changed.

Each of the articles, except Roe (1999), are written in the same type of format that explains AS and then gives suggestions for educators. However, these articles are not just for educators. They are also good for parents and family members of a child with AS because they have to help their child with social skills, deal with behavior problems, and provide an accommodating environment as well.

One of the ways to teach these children social skills, or prevent aggressive outbursts, that all of these articles mention, is the use of social stories. Both Myles and Simpson (2001) and Neihart (2000) elaborate on what these are, explaining the four sentence types involved. These are descriptive, explaining the setting; directive, what the child can do; perspective, the thoughts of others; and control, a statement about the strategies to be used.

The article Roe wrote, is the exception to this because she portrays the information about the disorder as if she is describing one specific child. I think that her article is in a way more powerful than the others are because it places the reader into the shoes of a child with Asperger Syndrome. Roe (1999) is also more effective in portraying the feeling that these child have at different times.

Classroom Implications

Most of the articles I chose to read provided suggestions for teachers and others, so that they can give the best possible learning and living environment for these children. These
suggestions include ways to teach these children the specific skills they lack, ways to accommodate some of their frustrations, coordination, and concentration problems, above average intelligence, etc. I think that it is important to realize that if a child with AS interrupts or acts inappropriately around others they are not being rude or acting up. Rather they just do not understand what the proper actions are and need help learning them. I think these articles also imply that for the most part, a child with AS should be included in a general education classroom. Most of the recommendations that are made can benefit every child in the class, not just the one.

Asperger Syndrome is a fairly new disorder characterized by a lack of social skills, or the “basics” that other children seem to pick up. For children with AS these skills need to be taught to them. Learning these skills will also help to prevent frustrations and a lack of self-esteem that some of the children experience because of their deficits. There are ways to accommodate these children so they can learn the best to their ability. In addition, as we continue to learn more about this disorder from doctors, psychologists, and the children themselves, those suggestions will probably grow. However, there is “no exact recipe for classroom approaches that can be provided for every youngster with AS, just as no one educational method fits the needs of all children not afflicted with AS” (Williams, 1995, p. 9).
References


