**5 Strategies I Wish I Had Known when I Taught My First Student with Autism.**

By Deborah Bernard Santiago

In 1982 I graduated with my degree in elementary education and set off with excitement to implement my new found knowledge with my incoming students. Throughout the years, I would continue to do professional development to increase my proficiency for teaching students who required more attention and specialized skills; in particular, students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders. Over the years, I felt well equipped for the diverse population of students in my classroom.

In the year 2003, my life as a teacher took a different turn, because that was the year that D was in my class. I was a second-grade teacher. D was new to the school that year. As I did at the beginning of each school year, I taught my students about the structure of how the class would run, and we practiced the behavioral expectations. I administered the beginning of the year evaluations for all my students. D’s scores seemed appropriate for his placement. There were no “red flags” that indicated any particular learning concern.

As we progressed into the weeks of school, independence of my students was expected. I started to conduct learning groups and rotations, and I began to see some “red flags” with D. His interactions with peers seemed unusual. While working in groups, he would get easily upset if a peer’s paper or supplies touched his desk. His response seemed overly emotional for the issues. He would cry for extended periods and always call on me for help. If I had to correct him for any reason, I ran the risk of triggering what seemed like “an emotional breakdown.”

As I observed him closer during social times with his peers, such as recess, he didn’t seem to have any particular group of friends. Instead, he would walk around by himself, sometimes looking at what they were doing, other times just standing around “in his own world.” I would encourage students to invite him into their play groups, however it often was short lived. He had difficulty playing with his peers, and definitely struggled with accepting not winning at any game.

I held conferences with his parents to explain what I was seeing, in hope that they would “shine a light” on something I was clearly missing. Academically, he was meeting his benchmarks. My concerns however, were not with his academics, but with his social emotional and independent skills. While his parents listened, they saw no problem with his behaviors. He was simply “immature.”

I sought help from the school guidance counselor. She pulled out a book from the bookstand behind her desk. “I think this sounds like Asperger Syndrome,” she said. As we read the indicators that were written in her book, I started nodding my head in agreement. And so, my challenge began to accommodate D within my class, and give him and his peers the education they deserved. I had gotten to know his triggers, his likes, his dislikes, what made him cry, what made him smile, and accepted who he was, and what he needed to succeed. He was not just “immature”. Although he had no formal neurological diagnosis, I would treat him like he did. I started to give him more “warnings” than other students because he needed it. We now call this “priming.” If we were doing extra-curricular activities such as field trips, I would tell him his expectations in great detail because I realized that he didn’t accept change well, and I had 27 other students I was responsible for. For me, it was a year of “trial and error” and definitely one of the years of great learning for me as a teacher.

The truth is, there were not as many known strategies for teachers of students with autism twenty plus years ago, and there were definitely not as many students with autism in our classes then. A study published on March 2022 in Autism Research showed that 1 in 100 children around the world are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

The chance that you have, or will have students with autism in your classes are very likely. The promising news is that today there are many evidenced-based strategies available for parents and teachers to accommodate each individual student. We only have to be open to using them effectively and consistently.

These are the five strategies I know today that I wish I had known when I taught my first student with autism:

1. **Use Visual Supports.** There is evidence which supports that students with autism are visual learners. Visuals are helpful because they are concrete, non-transient and visual symbols can be understood by most students, regardless of the level of support that may be needed in the educational process. Visuals have been proven to increase independence and opportunities for interaction and communication, and decrease fear, anxiety and challenging behaviors. Visuals are used to create individualized schedules, behavioral reminders, organization cues and social narratives and expectations.
2. **Give Positive Behavior Support.** Teachers play many roles. They are primarily educators however, they are often care givers, psychologists and detectives. As you work with your students and get to know them, you know their likes and dislikes. As you learn what motivates your student with autism, use this motivation to “shape” behavior so that appropriate behavior is increased. Focus on prevention of inappropriate behavior rather than reaction. Motivational systems can also be used to achieve academic outcomes. With older students, these systems can be used for self-monitoring of social and emotional behaviors.
3. **Provide Instructional Accommodations.** Students with autism have a neurobiological disorder which can affect three main areas of functioning: communication, social interaction and repetitive behaviors. These areas can be manifested in different ways in each student, and each student may require different levels of support. You have to consider your goals for all your students: on-task behavior, increased focus, active participation, cooperation, demonstration of skills, and access to curriculum and instruction. With that being said, be open to accommodations that might be needed for your students with autism to achieve these goals. It might be extra time to complete a task, working in smaller groups, providing lecture notes or study guides, using peer support, or being flexible with ways student can respond on tests. The bottom line is that we need to remember the simple saying, “Fair is NOT when everybody gets the same, it’s when everybody gets what they need.”
4. **Address Sensory Dysfunction.** Students with autism often have sensory processing issues. This may display itself in sensitivities to sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste as well as vestibular (movement and balance), proprioceptive (body awareness in space) and interoception (information regarding the internal state of our bodies). As you observe your student, you will be able to see if the student reacts strongly to the way things sound, smell, taste, look or feel.

For example, you may provide student with earplugs to alleviate loud noises, or have student eat lunch in a separate area of cafeteria, if food smells and/or noise is overwhelming.

1. **Teach Social Understanding.**  Students with autism struggle with social skills. A student can be academically advanced but unable to read non-verbal cues such as body language, or have difficulty understanding other people’s feelings or their own. This hidden curriculum has to be taught throughout the day, and direct instruction is necessary. Modeling, role playing and social narratives are just a few of the ways that social skills can be taught.

For more information on strategies for teaching students with autism, visit caribbeanautismsupport.com.