

Series I - Step-by-Step - Guide Part VI

Adapting Curriculum for Children with Learning Disabilities

Introduction

As a special education teacher you will be required to adapt the curriculum and make necessary modifications to increase the student's chances of success. In the last part we discussed the various techniques that can be used to adapt and modify curriculum for children with special needs. In this part we will discuss specific disabilities and the adaptation and modifications you can use for each area.

The chances are that if you are working in a regular school district you will come into contact with high incidence disabilities. These may include:

- Learning Disabilities
- Mental Retardation
- Emotional Disabilities
- Other Health Impaired: Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder

This section will deal with the curriculum adaptations for these specific disabilities.

A - Adapting Curriculum for Children with Learning Disabilities

The teacher should be aware that not all techniques will work with all students, but try as many of them as possible. These techniques should create a better learning environment for children with learning disabilities.

How to make adjustments in the type, difficulty, amount and sequence of materials

1. Give shorter but more frequent assignments.
2. Shorten the length of the assignments to insure a sense of success.
3. Copy chapters of textbooks so that the child can use a highlighter pen to underline important facts.
4. Make sure that the child's desk is free from all unnecessary materials.
5. Correct the student's work as soon as possible to allow for immediate gratification and feedback.
6. Allow the student several alternatives in both obtaining and reporting information--tapes, interviews and so on.
7. Break assignments down to smaller units. Allow the child to do 5 problems at time, or 5 sentences, so that they can feel success, receive immediate feedback if they are doing the assignment incorrectly and direct their energy to more manageable tasks.
8. Hold frequent, even if short conferences with the child to allow for questions, sources of confusion, sense of connection and avoidance of isolation which often occurs if the work is too difficult.

How to adjust space, work time and grouping

1. Permit the child to work in a quiet corner, a study carrel when requested or necessary. This should not be all the time since isolation may have negative consequences. This technique depends on the specific learning style of the child who may be less distracted by working under these conditions.
2. At first the teacher may want to place the child closer to her/him for more immediate feedback.
3. Try to separate him/her from students who may be distracting.
4. Alternate quiet and active time to maintain levels of interest and motivation.
5. Make up a work contract with specific times and assignments so that the child has a structured idea of his/her responsibilities.
6. Keep work periods short and gradually lengthen them as the student begins to cope.
7. Try to match the student with a peer helper to help with understanding assignments, reading important directions, drilling him/her orally, summarizing important textbook passages and working on long range assignments.

Consider adjusting presentation and evaluation modes

Some students learn better by seeing (visual learners), some by listening (auditory learners), some by feeling (tactile learners) and some by a combination of approaches. Adjustments should be made by the teacher to determine the best functional system of learning for the children with learning disabilities. This will vary from child to child and is usually included in the child's evaluation.

If the child is primarily an **auditory learner**, offer adjustments in the mode of presentation by use of the following techniques:

1. Give verbal as well as written directions to assignments.
2. Place assignment directions on tape so that students can replay them when they need.
3. Give students oral rather than written tests.
4. Have students drill on important information using tape recorder, reciting information into the recorder and playing it back.
5. Have students drill aloud to themselves or to other students.
6. Have children close their eyes to try and hear words or information.

If the child is primarily a **visual learner**, offer adjustment in the mode of presentation by:

1. Have students use flash cards printed in bold bright colors.
2. Let students close their eyes and try to visualize words or information in their heads, see things in their minds.

3. Provide visual clues on chalkboard for all verbal directions.

4. Encourage students to write down notes and memos to themselves concerning important words, concepts, and ideas.

B - Adapting Curriculum for Children with Retardation

A student can be defined as having a mental disability if he/she exhibits certain learning, social and behavior patterns to a marked extent and over a prolonged period of time. Such patterns may include:

- A consistently sub-average intellectual level
- Impaired adaptive functioning in such areas as social skills, communication and daily living skills
- Consistently slow rate of learning and as a result their level of development resembles that of a younger child
- Delays in most areas of development

Some common characteristics of a mild mental disability that may be observed by the teacher over a period of time include:

- academic underachievement
- difficulty with abstract concepts
- difficulty generalizing learned concepts to new situations
- social isolation or withdrawal
- poor social relationships
- anxious and worried, excessive fears and phobias
- easily frustrated even when confronted with a simple task
- resistance to change
- short attention span

However, students who are mildly mentally disabled learn in the same way as normal students. However, adaptations and a variety of techniques need to be utilized. Consequently, certain behaviors should be targeted as priorities when dealing with mentally disabled children in the classroom. These target areas include:

- Functional academics
- General Work Habits
- Career awareness

While the mentally disabled child may exhibit many or all of these areas, the teacher should try to focus on one area at a time. Patience, fairness, nurturance, humor and a sense of conviction in maintaining boundaries are all aspects required by the teacher in these situations.

Helping the child attain functional academics

General

- Design practice activities in any basic skill that may relate to the child's daily life problems.
- Provide materials that are commensurate with the child's skill levels.
- Provide activities that will reinforce independent work. If the activity is too hard the child may become too dependent on teacher supervision.

Reading

- Provide activities that focus on reading for information and leisure
- Provide activities that require the child to become more aware of his/her surrounding environment having the child list the names of all food stores in the community, or all hospitals and so on will increase his/her familiarity with the surrounding environment.
- Have the child collect food labels and compare the differences
- Allow them look up the names of the children's families in the phone book. Use the smaller local guide for this activity.
- Develop activities that will allow them to become familiar with menus, bus and train schedules, movie and television timetables, or job advertisements.

Handwriting/Spelling

- Have the child make a list of things to do for the day.
- Have the child run a messenger service in the classroom so that he/she can write the messages and deliver them from one student to another.
- Provide activities for older children that incorporate daily writing skills necessary for independency such as social security forms, driver's license application, and bank account applications and so on.

Math

- Have the child buy something at the school store
- Have the child make up a budget on how they plan to use his/her allowance
- Encourage the child to cook in school or at home so that they can become more familiar with measurements
- Have the child record the daily temperature
- Involve the child in measuring the height of classmates
- Have older children apply for a loan or credit card
- Show the child how to use a daily planning book
- Provide activities that teach the child how to comparison-shop
- Provide the child with a make believe amount of money and a toy catalog and have them purchase items and fill out the forms.

Helping the child improve general work habits

This particular area is composed of many skill areas that are necessary to allow the child success in the regular classroom. They include:

Work Completion

- Make reward activities contingent upon successful completion of work.
- Have the child maintain a performance chart on the number of tasks completed each day
- Evaluate the length and level of an assignment to make sure it is within the ability level of the child
- Give shorter but more frequent assignments
- Build a foundation of success by providing a series of successful assignments. In this way the child can gain a sense of confidence.

Attendance and punctuality

- Communicate to the child the importance of being on time to class
- Let the child know your expectations in clear terms concerning attendance and punctuality
- Have the child maintain a record of attendance and on time behavior,
- Develop a make believe time clock that the child has to punch in on when they enter the classroom
- Encourage punctuality by scheduling a favorite activity in the morning
- Have the child sign a contract establishing the consequences and rewards of on time behavior.

Working with others

- Provide the child with small group activities that are geared to his ability levels
- Utilize peer tutors for the child so that relationships can be established
- Have the child participate in many group activities that require sorting, pasting, addressing, folding simple assembly and so on.
- Provide the child with some simple job that requires the other students to go to him/her. For example, place him/her in charge of attendance and have him/her check off the children when they report in.
- Help the child start a hobby and then start a hobby club involving other students
- Have the child be part of a team that takes care of the class pets or some other class activity. Calling it a team will make the child feel more connected.
- Speak with the school psychologist and see if he/she can run a group in your classroom.

Helping the child with career awareness

Career awareness is a skill that can be part of the classroom curriculum in many ways. Many of the skills mentioned above will enhance the child's career skills which should focus on adapting to and integrating into society.

C - Adapting Curriculum for Children with Emotional Disabilities

Adapting the curriculum for students with emotional disabilities may not be the real need of these students. The issues that need to be addressed more than likely will involve management concerns which can be found later in this section. If you need to adapt the curriculum use many of the suggestions found in other disability areas.

Dealing with incomplete class work

- Work out a contract with the child where he/she can determine the rewards for completion.
- Give shorter but more frequent assignments.
- Do not force the child to write if handwriting is beyond correction.
- Compensate with a word processor or typewriter.
- Correct assignments as soon as possible and hand them back for immediate gratification.
- Reward students for handing in neat, completed and timely assignments.
- Help the student become organized by keeping very little in his/her desk, using a bound book for writing rather than a loose-leaf where pages can fall out and add to disorganization; use large folders for the child to keep work in and so on.
- Have students mark their own work.
- Be very specific on what you mean by "neat", "organized", and so on. Abstract labels have different meanings to different people. Instead say, "Please be neat and by neat I mean...."

D - Adapting Curriculum for Children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder

Classroom teachers of children with ADD can adjust certain factors to accommodate the individual curriculum needs of these children. Some examples include:

Organizational Ability

- Prepare a copy of the homework assignments and hand it to the child at the end of the day. This will alleviate a great deal of stress on the part of the child especially if they are disorganized and frequently forget to copy the homework. The goal here is to create a comfortable and successful environment. In this case, having the child accomplish the homework is more important than the difficulty encountered in copying the assignment.
- Ask the parent to organize the child at night. Have them develop a checklist so that the child's clothes, books, assignments and so on are ready for the next morning. The stress and disorganization of the morning should be avoided at all costs. This will also make the child feel more secure when going to school.
- Avoid multi-directions or multi assignments. Allow the child to finish one assignment or direction at a time before going on to the next.
- Reinforce word processing, typing, spell checks on the computer and use of the computer in general. This device can be very motivating and the end product (i.e. typed report) will make the child feel very good about him/herself.
- Children with organizational problems will usually maintain very disorganized notes, notebooks, desks and lockers. Try to make it a weekly task of having the child organize these areas. Making it part of their contract and routine will also make them feel better about themselves.

Academic Skill Areas

Allow the child to use graph paper while doing math. In this way the child will have a structured environment in which to place numbers. Use very large graph paper so that the child has little difficulty placing one number in each box. This will keep him organized and focused.

- Allow him/her to use a calculator or basic math tables when doing his/her assignments. The goal here is for successful accomplishment of the assignment. If the child becomes frustrated because he/she can't recall the facts, they may give up.
- Allow other forms of reporting information. A very thorough list can be found under Alternative Learning Activities in this book.
- Do not use bubble sheets. Allow the child to answer directly in the booklet or on the paper. Reducing the amount of movement during academic tasks is more beneficial since ADD children have difficulty refocusing.
- Use manipulative materials as often as possible
- Use books on tape as well as having the parent tape-record a chapter so that the child can read and listen at the same time.
- Window out single math problems so that the child only sees one at a time. This can be accomplished by cutting out a square on a piece of paper that the child can move from one problem to the next. When he/she does this all the other problems will be covered.
- For older children, allow them to have a sheet with the formulas already printed. Asking them to memorize may reduce their ability to accomplish the task. The less they have to worry about the more they may be able to finish.
- Determine what your goal is when presenting an assignment. Once you have done this pave all the roads for the child up to that point. For example, if your goal is to see if the child can find the circumference of a circle, provide him/her with the formulas, definitions, and examples.

These materials will reduce frustration and confusion and will increase chances of success.

- Have the child do 5 problems, 2 questions and so on at a time. Then have them come up for immediate feedback. Numerous successful tasks can only add to his/her confidence levels. This will also prevent the child from progressing to far making the same error.
- Use unison reading when having the child read aloud. This means that both you and the child have the same book and read out loud together. The added sensory feedback and pacing will keep the child more focused.
- Try to use interactive CD reading programs if possible. The multi-sensory stimulation will keep the child focused. However, make sure the program does not require the child to do too many tasks at one time since this could overload him/her.

Tips for teachers working with children with AD/HD

Learn more about AD/HD. The resources and organizations at the end of this series will help you identify behavior support strategies and effective ways to support the student educationally. We've listed some strategies below.

- Figure out what specific things are hard for the student. For example, one student with AD/HD may have trouble starting a task, while another may have trouble ending one task and starting the next. Each student needs different help.
- Post rules, schedules, and assignments. Clear rules and routines will help a student with AD/HD. Have set times for specific tasks. Call attention to changes in the schedule.
- Show the student how to use an assignment book and a daily schedule. Also teach study skills and learning strategies, and reinforce these regularly.
- Help the student channel his or her physical activity (e.g., let the student do some work standing up or at the board). Provide regularly scheduled breaks.
- Make sure directions are given step by step, and that the student is following the directions. Give directions both verbally and in writing. Many students with AD/HD also benefit from doing the steps as separate tasks.
- Let the student do work on a computer.
- Work together with the student's parents to create and implement an educational plan tailored to meet the student's needs. Regularly share information about how the student is doing at home and at school.
- Have high expectations for the student, but be willing to try new ways of doing things. Be patient. Maximize the student's chances for success

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