

Using Multimodal Strategies To Teach Children with FASD

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Abstract

Teachers who adapt a multisensory approach to teaching learners who have been affected by fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD) will encourage them to be self-supporting, and to excel in the classroom through participating in a myriad of stimulating activities. Researching the learners' unique characteristics will provide teachers with the tools for planning, thereby maximizing the learners' strengths through the introduction of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and simulation strategies. There is no one learning style that suits all learners, and regardless of any learning difficulty experienced by FASD learners due to brain damage, if teachers capitalize on their unique strengths and talents, then they can create a student-centered learning environment wherein less disruptive behaviour is displayed, and more participation is encouraged.

Educators who use multimodal teaching strategies in the classroom are better able to facilitate children's learning, and to support the development of independence in children with fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD). The term FASD refers to the developmental impairment that occurs as a result of parental alcohol exposure during pregnancy, and children are affected in various ways, including having learning difficulties and behavioural disorders (Bertrand, 2009; Carpenter, 2011; Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010). If teachers understand the strengths and difficulties of children with FASD, then they will be better able to plan creative lessons to appeal to their senses and build on their strengths. Relevant knowledge about learners with FASD will provide teachers with valuable tools to tailor lessons to meet their cognitive needs (Rasmussen & Bisanz, 2009). Because there is no one approach to be used to teach every student, since "no two children with FASD learn and function in the same way," (Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010, p. 1) teachers who plan and practise visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and simulation teaching strategies will provide a wide array of learning tools for learners with FASD, and a better chance for them to excel in the classroom, thus creating a positive impact on their academic achievements (Graham, Glass, & Mattson, 2016). The use of multiple modes of teaching strategies will ensure that educators provide a classroom that facilitates the learning and independence of children with FASD.

It is important to note that children living with FASD are capable of learning, and they will succeed in a supportive learning environment that is interesting, engaging, and full of fun. In order to provide a high quality of support, teachers need to acquire adequate knowledge about the individual students they are supporting (Fulton & Richardson, 2014; Vida Health Communications, 2012). Teachers who are aware of the unique gifts and strengths that learners with FASD possess will be better able to plan programs to support and build on their talents and strengths, thereby reducing frustrations on the part of both the teachers and the learners (Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010; Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez, & Cummings, 2016). An understanding of what the students like to do, what activities they enjoy most, their skill level, their ability to work independently, and any special tendencies are all useful information when modifying lessons and classroom environment to provide children with FASD with an effective customised learning experience (Popova, Lange, Burd, Nam, & Rehm, 2016). The behaviour of children with FASD can be misconstrued, and bearing in mind that no two children are alike, if teachers are knowledgeable about their learners they will develop the skill to apply effective classroom interventions and plan interesting lessons to motivate and enthuse them, thereby considerably reducing any disruptive, off-task behaviour by children with FASD (Gaastra, Groen, Tucha, & Tucha, 2016; Skiba et al., 2016). Because children with FASD have the capacity to learn, they can succeed if they are well supported in an engaging classroom.

We rely heavily on our senses to process information, so we remember more when we use our senses, and sight plays an important role in developing organizational skills in learners with FASD because they are often visual learners (Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010; Hess, 2011). Tasks such as word search or spot the difference are considered useful in improving cognitive development and increasing attention span, because it will become necessary for learners to focus on the small details while doing the activities. Sight tasks can facilitate memory when used effectively, and having a daily schedule with illustrations and pictures can provide some structure in the lives of children with FASD (Cohen & Aduato, 2011). Visual reminders such as a chart to teach safety, or memory aids for spatial awareness and boundaries, for example, placing a mark on the floors to remind learners of where to stand, can prove beneficial (*Assessment for FASD*, 2016). The use of calming colours in the classroom will create a peaceful atmosphere in which a learner with FASD can work, and will discourage classroom disruptions. "Creative computing" can be used as an intervention to support active learning in various subject areas such as art, history and mathematics, whereby animation and games can be used to expand or cement learning concepts and create fun and enthusiasm in learners with FASD (Saez-Lopez, Roman-Gonzales, & Vazquez-Camo, 2016, p. 130). Teachers should however be mindful not to provide over stimulation in this area, as this can be distracting to some learners with FASD, and encourage hyperactivity in the classroom (Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010). Whilst visual language may be used to enhance learning, an over crowded wall display can be distracting for a learner experiencing FASD. Because we depend heavily on our senses when processing information, it is possible for organizational skills to be developed in many learners with FASD through the use of visual aids, since they are generally visual learners.

Of equal importance is the need for auditory strategies to be used in the classroom, which could result in sustained focus from some learners with FASD who are often sensitive to sounds. Thinking aloud, which is called vocalization, can produce desired results for people with short-term memory, and also for people with focusing problems such as learners with FASD (Martin, 2009). Organizational skills can also be taught through auditory means, such as singing a song when resources are being packed away after each activity. "Sing song" rules, and instructions or stages for an activity, can assist children to remember what to do when faced with a problem (Hess, 2011). The use of auditory strategies can aid learners with FASD in understanding the world around them when these strategies are used in collaboration with visual teaching aids such as an "identifying and labeling" activity. To establish routine, educators can establish a system by which learners respond to the clapping of hands or the sound of a whistle in a physical education class. Learners with FASD can enjoy real-life experiences through the introduction of interactive books with sound activation. Playing soft background music and using head phones when working on the computer are popular strategies that I have used in the classroom, because many of my learners have been diagnosed with FASD, and the strategies serve as a useful way to engage their concentration (Cohen & Aduato, 2011). Quiet music can be relaxing for a learner with FASD, but educators should be careful not to overload the learning environment with noise such as loud singing or sudden noise like a bell or a timer alarm. Due to their sensitivity to sounds, persistent focus can be achieved by some learners with FASD if auditory teaching strategies are employed (Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010).

In like manner, some children who are diagnosed as having FASD can be taught with the use of kinesthetic teaching strategies, because they usually like to be creative with their hands and because such activities make it easier to process concepts "through body movements and sensations" (Hess, 2012, "When Giving Instruction," para. 11). Learners who like to feel and touch will become very excited about their achievement if they have made things themselves (Pitts, 2012). The use of manipulative maths can create interest and build a sense of achievement and self-worth in learners. Play dough can be utilised to teach creativity, and science classes that include experiments can hold the interests of learners with FASD (Healthy

Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010; Vida Health Communications, 2012). If these learners are given opportunities to feel and touch items in the classroom, such as a plant, then they will develop concepts through real-life experiences and enjoy relaxation as well as a sense of duty. Because they may be required to compare and describe items in a science lesson where, for example, a blanket is used to teach temperature, or in a home economics lesson where flour and sugar are used to teach textures, their attention span will be broadened through focusing and repeatedly touching the items. Using kinesthetic learning strategies to teach through discovery will create motivation, and improve the learning experience of learners with FASD, because some usually enjoy doing activities with their hands, through project-based learning which supports dynamic edifying experiences (Saez-Lopez et al., 2016). Teaching children with FASD by using kinesthetic teaching strategies can also be effective, because of their love of creativity and the benefits derived by many children from the movement and sensation that these activities provide.

In addition, simulation is effective in the classroom, because it encourages learners to engage in decision making and problem solving while transforming the classroom from a teacher-centered environment to one that is learner centered (Pettenger, West, & Young, 2014). Learners affected by FASD generally lack social skills and are not sensitive to social cues (Bertrand, 2009; FASD Network of Saskatchewan, 2015; Lutherwood, 2012), but if they practise social skills while engaging with their peers in role-playing real life situations, then it will encourage concrete thinking and play to their strength of conversing, while being given multiple chances to respond to instructions and the curriculum (Skiba et al., 2016). In some situations, when many children suffering from FASD become overwhelmed and display aggressive or abusive behaviour, they can be taught to practise positive self-talk through modelling acceptable behaviour during role-playing, and role-playing is an effective learning strategy to encourage participation by passive learners (Stevens, 2015). When learners take on a role in a simulation, they are placed in a real-life situation, thereby displaying the expected desired outcome. I use role play to teach many social skills in my classroom where many learners are affected by FASD, and it proves successful in their daily interactions with their peers. Examples of lessons that I teach using simulations are “preparing for a stressful conversation” and “expressing a complaint constructively.” Simulations will stimulate the imagination and encourage creativity, and require learners to listen, take turns, and display feelings such as empathy, thereby encouraging intellectual development in learners with FASD (*Expat Since Birth*, 2013). Participating in simulation exercises can be an effective classroom tool because it teaches problem-solving and decision-making skills, and will showcase the learning environment as being learner centered instead of teacher centered.

It is important for educators to use multimodal teaching strategies, in order to ensure that learners with FASD are provided with an opportunity to excel in school and to exhibit less disruptive behaviour in their learning environment (Vida Health Communications, 2012). Despite the learning difficulties experienced by learners with FASD, due to brain damage caused from parental alcohol exposure, if teachers capitalize on their unique strengths and develop a teaching approach that is based on adapting to learners’ strengths, then encouraging progress can be experienced by the learners (*Assessment for FASD*, 2016; Cohen & Aduato, 2011; Healthy Child Manitoba & Manitoba Education, 2010). A happy and successful classroom can be created if teachers gain the knowledge and skill to develop and use a multisensory approach to stimulate all the senses (Gaastra et al., 2016). In teaching, there is no “one size that fits all,” so for learners with FASD to achieve success in the classroom, it is imperative that teachers use visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and simulation teaching techniques that meet the cognitive needs of their learners while fostering independence (Rasmussen & Bisanz, 2009). A “happy classroom” can be produced when learning strategies are multisensory, so that the senses are stimulated by the activities that are introduced in the classroom (Pitts, 2012, para. 7). Less disruptive behaviour, and more engagement in the classroom, can be achieved if teachers use a multimodal approach to teaching children with FASD (Skiba et al., 2016).

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