



Maximizing Learning for Students with Special Needs

by Deborah Edelman Watkins

In the right environment, students with a disparate range of special needs can avoid failure and develop a sense of pride and accomplishment based on their strengths.

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As American classrooms abound with diversity, teachers are challenged to provide a supportive learning environment that effectively meets the needs of all students. Essentially, the principle of inclusive classrooms has engendered this course. Inclusion calls for the regular class placement of students who have disabilities with appropriate in-class

support. The concept embraces “the belief that students with disabilities are most appropriately educated with their same-aged peers” (O’Connor and Jenkins 1996, 30). Inclusive classrooms are expected to increase the social opportunities and improve educational outcomes for students who are behaviorally and academically challenged.

Providing a supportive learning environment and engaging students with a variety of abilities in effective learning activities requires a great deal of proficiency that extends beyond knowledge of subject content. Diverse classrooms challenge teachers to understand and accept the existence of academic, behavioral, and cultural diversity. Teachers are summoned to be skilled communicators, diagnostic and assessment specialists, firm but fair disciplinarians, and knowledgeable about an array of special needs and problems.

While this undertaking may seem monumental, research and practice have revealed that, for most students, learning is more likely to occur when the teacher proactively and purposefully creates a social climate that is empowering, motivating, success-oriented, based on mutual respect, and highlights socially responsible classroom behavior (Wentzel 1991). Several proactive strategies, described in this article, can help teachers avoid failure and promote a classroom climate where all students can feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. The objective of these interventions is to cultivate self-esteem, motivation, feelings of self-competence, student engagement, and a sense of social responsibility in students with special needs.

Empathy and Successful Communication

One of the ways teachers can promote motivation proactively is to create a warm, caring, and trusting alliance with students so that they feel comfortable sharing ideas and taking risks. To help a student who is challenged experience success, Parsons (1995) suggested

that an educator must, first and foremost, develop a relationship. Motivational theorists Connell and Wellborn (1991) concurred that a sense of social relatedness contributes to the adoption of classroom goals, whereas a lack of relatedness can result in rejection of such goals. Promoting group cohesion and positive interpersonal interactions is important so that individuals feel like they are integral parts of the social group

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(Wentzel 1991). Two interpersonal skills are critical: empathy and successful communication.

In his research on the struggles of defiant youth, Brooks (Brooks and Goldstein 2001) gained an appreciation of the vital role empathy plays in classroom relationships. He (Brooks and Goldstein 2001,17) defined empathy as “the ability to identify with or vicariously experience feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of others.” His findings revealed how defiant youth convey feelings of low self-esteem, inadequacy,

and loss of hope, particularly with regard to school. He argued that teachers need to assess their capacity to be empathetic so that they can realize their students’ perspectives. The capacity to be empathetic enhances communication and provides students with the strength necessary to change negative scripts in a way that allows them to be heard and appreciated (Brooks and Goldstein 2001).

Clearly, successful communication also begins with mastering the skill of active listening. Nichols (1995, 62) defined listening as the “art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us.” According to Nichols (1995, 9), “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, what we have a say in matters.” Active listening engenders rapport by affirming and validating what a student feels or says. The statement “No wonder you are angry!” reflects this technique. To be receptive, you also must be informed. To make sure that you understand, you can use a clarifying question such as, “So, what you are saying is that you are nervous about the upcoming exam. Is that correct?”

Being an effective listener requires that a teacher set aside biases, judgments, and personal agendas. Doing so allows a teacher to move beyond assumptions to openness, and to cut down on criticism. A teacher’s ability to listen and effectively convey empathetic understanding fosters an environment where communication is cultivated. In turn, the trusting and caring relationships that are nurtured engender a more positive learning environment.

Effort-Based Collaborative Classrooms

Structural features of the classroom climate can impact the behavior and motivation of students with special needs. Weinstein et al. (1982) compared the nature and context of the evaluation system in “traditional” versus “open” classrooms. A traditional classroom assesses learning based on outcomes (i.e., grades) and adopts the notion of fixed levels of ability and right or wrong answers. This type of classroom promotes competition among classmates and generates an environment where less confident students may not be as willing to participate because of the emphasis on right and wrong.

In an open classroom, teachers focus more on the thinking process and how the student arrived at the answer. Evaluation is based on a broader set of criteria over multiple activities, and progress tends to be individualized rather than reviewed in relation to classmates. Teacher feedback and students’ actual task completion rates, differential expectations, and negative evaluations are less public than in a traditional classroom (Rosenholtz and Wilson 1980). Instead, teachers respond to all participation with respectful appreciation and constructive redirection. As a result, students of all abilities tend to be more willing to risk, openly expressing their opinions and ideas. This type of classroom prompts competition within the self and rewards individual effort. In such a supportive context, students of all abilities are willing to collaborate because they are afforded an equal opportunity to earn top grades.

The “effort-based” open system is conducive to diverse class-

rooms for two reasons. First, it empowers students of all abilities to take control of their own achievement outcomes. This, in turn, engenders autonomy, a sense of ownership, and responsibility. Second, the open classroom does not accentuate differential treatment for students with special needs. This approach is supported by research findings that children, even at young ages, may use the information contained in differential teacher treatment to

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develop their own expectations for performance (Weinstein et al. 1987). Such research underscores the powerful role the classroom environment can play in the development of all children’s expectations for learning.

Creative Solutions

To be effective and understand the world of the student with special needs, teachers must be knowledgeable about exceptionalities, trained in diagnostic and assessment methods, and unceasingly vigilant. Understanding

begins with knowing the normative developmental changes that occur during childhood and adolescence. Normal child development involves a series of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social changes. Becoming familiar with developmental trends can facilitate the assessment of strengths and weaknesses for children with special needs. With this knowledge, the teacher can apply diagnostic and assessment methods to determine whether the student is functioning at the appropriate instructional levels and whether that instructional range diverges from the norm for that age.

This concept is captured in Vygotsky’s (1978, 86) notion of the zone of proximal development, which he defined as “the distance between the child’s actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” Being able to assess the student’s region of learning and teach to that realm can ward off frustration for students who have diverse levels of skills and eliminate a student’s need to seek attention in negative ways.

To apply diagnostic and assessment skills, teachers should become familiar with the wide range of needs and problems children cope with during their major years of growth and development. This information may range from specific disorders, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders, or conduct disorders, to the learning challenges children face. Observant teachers in diverse classrooms often are the first to

recognize children who are experiencing barriers to learning due to traumatic life events such as child abuse, violence, alcoholism, or suicidal behaviors.

While an awareness of symptoms is important, teachers also must know the school policy and procedure to follow when they suspect, for example, that a student is in danger (e.g., abuse, suicide). Knowing policy and being aware of available resources—including colleagues and community services—are vital. Basic needs, such as safety, supersede learning and affect achievement. When basic needs are threatened, as may occur in divorce, death, and formation of stepfamilies, it is up to the teacher to monitor the student’s level of academic and behavioral decline and to intervene. A teacher may need to adapt the curriculum and lower expectations temporarily until the student is receptive to new information. During this process, a teacher may turn to a peer study partner for support. Collaborating with colleagues as well as conferring with the student’s family are powerful ways to support students with special concerns.

When students are undergoing traumatic life experiences, they often do not have necessary coping skills to manage. Therefore, they may exhibit inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. Applying diagnostic and assessment methods through functional behavioral analysis (FBA), allows the teacher to analyze the student’s behavior by gathering information and determining the function the behavior is serving. The objective of this analysis is to replace the inappropriate behavior with a more acceptable one while still fulfilling the student’s need. The goal of FBA is to allow the

teacher to develop and implement a behavioral support plan.

Among researchers who have identified the functions of behavior in children are DuPaul and Stoner (1994), who focused on children with ADHD. They identified functions of ADHD behavior as needs to avoid or escape effortful tasks; obtain peer or teacher attention; gain sensory stimulation; or gain a tangible object. Determining the function begins with observing and analyzing the behavior a child is exhibiting. First, the antecedent event is identified. This event occurs prior to the inappropriate behavior, often provoking it. The inappropriate behavior is then identified. Finally, the teacher determines what positive or negative consequences are reinforcing that behavior. The process is illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 and exemplified in the discussion that follows.

A boy with ADHD gets out of his seat continually during individual math work. The teacher observes and collects information that reveals when the child is out of his seat most frequently and what events appear to be reinforcing the behavior.

Table 1. Evaluating the Sequence of Events

Antecedent Event	Behavior	Consequence
Tedious math task is given as seatwork.	To avoid or escape, child drops pencil, goes to pencil sharpener, taps classmate on the arm.	Teacher reprimands child for being out of seat and not completing

The teacher knows that the function of this ADHD child’s “out of seat” behavior is to fulfill a biological need to move and gain sensory stimulation. The teacher and child meet to ascertain whether they agree that a problem exists. This process involves and empowers the child. Upon agreement, they develop a strategy to adjust the assignment and allow movement. The child is instructed to complete only the even-numbered problems. The child will come to the teacher’s desk after completing four math problems. When he does, he will receive constructive feedback and positive attention. He will return to his seat to complete four more problems. This accomplishes several goals: he is provided with the legitimate movement he requires; he receives immediate positive feedback that fulfills his need for teacher attention; and his progress is monitored to ensure that he is performing the task correctly.

Table 2. Using Functions of Behavior to Determine a Plan

Antecedent Event	Behavior	Consequence
Tedious math task is reduced to even-numbered problems only.	Child completes four problems and is allowed to get out of seat to go to the teacher’s desk.	Teacher and child check thoroughness and correctness of problems. Teacher rewards child with attention and praise.

Upon completion of this task, the ADHD student is encouraged to display a math problem on the blackboard. His success in doing the

math problem correctly is publicly acknowledged by the class. The teacher's proactive analysis and implementation of a support plan have helped position the child for success. This experience instills a sense of academic self-competence, fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for behavior, builds the student-teacher relationship, and serves as a viable alternative to punishment.

An Environment Where All Students Contribute

Students are more likely to thrive in environments where they feel welcomed and connected, and where they are making a valuable contribution. The opportunity to contribute to the class reinforces social responsibility and motivates competence and interest—two important dimensions of school motivation (Kozeki 1985).

Motivating all students to succeed is facilitated by identifying and reinforcing their “islands of competence” (Brooks 1999; Deci et al. 1992). Brooks (1999) described an individual's island of competence as any area that is a source of pride and accomplishment or has the potential to be so. Each student has a unique strength, which does not necessarily emerge in the academic arena. Brooks argued that taking time to find each student's island of competence can change the negative script, or diminish a sense of hopelessness the student has brought to the classroom based on past failures.

Brooks's notion is exemplified by the following scenario. Perhaps a student is struggling with and avoids reading, but she has exceptional talent in art. The

teacher meets with the student and asks whether she would like to try a strategy to improve her reading and also help other students. Together the teacher and student decide that she will help first-grade students to write and illustrate their own books. After receiving positive recognition from the first graders, the student is encouraged by her teacher to share her reading-illustration program with her own classmates. Publicly she is deemed an expert in art and is assigned to

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assist classmates to illustrate their specific reading assignments on the bulletin board. The student and teacher have established goals that play to her strengths. Because the student is given opportunities to contribute, based on her island of competence, she now views herself as a valuable member of the class. This public recognition builds her academic self-competence in this classroom. As a result, she is likely to be more willing to receive reading assistance and take a risk when it comes to reading in class.

Final Thoughts

Engaging heterogeneous groups of students in effective learning activities presents a clear challenge to teachers. It requires familiarity with children who possess a wide range of cognitive, physiological, and social abilities. However, only within the framework of the teacher's internal strength and the development of a caring classroom environment can a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and self-competence be cultivated for all students.

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