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PRACTICAL TIPS ON ADAPTING CURRICULUM FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS

When we begin the curriculum adaptation process by first choosing the adaptation method, we are putting the cart before the horse. Instead, the first task is to decide what we want the student to learn --his personal learning goals. Some students are capable of going beyond the general curriculum, while others learn the content that is given. Some students can learn a portion of the curriculum, and for others the essence of the content can be distilled into the basic information needed for life. For instance, in a unit on electricity, a gifted student may do some in-depth research on positive and negative charges. The average student may study watts and currents. The learning disabled student may learn some practical information from hand-on experiments, while a lower functioning student with autism may learn that lights and appliances are powered by plugging into the electrical system and some important safety rules about their use. The students may participate in some activities together and do others separately. The activities that they do will be designed to meet their personal learning goals.

Once we are clear what we want the students to learn, we can choose a curriculum activity that will help the student to reach that goal. There are many different lists of curriculum modifications from which we can pick and choose ideas. However, using a system can help us to be sure that we have considered a wide range of adaptations.

One of these symptoms is Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. Our traditional teaching methods have focused on a limited concept of intelligence represented mainly by linguistic and mathematical skills. We penalize students who have other kinds of intelligence by not teaching in a way they learn and by not recognizing the value of their abilities. Gardner listed seven different kinds of intelligence: Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Bodily-kinesthetic, Intrapersonal, and Interpersonal. Many teachers and entire school systems are now using a variety of methods that suit the learning styles of persons strong in these seven different areas. Gardner has only recently added an eighth intelligence that he calls the "naturalist" which is distinguished by the ability to understand, relate to and function in the natural world.

Gardner's ideas are especially relevant for our students with autism because many of them have extreme strengths and weaknesses in one or more of the eight intelligences. Some have strong linguistic memories and are early readers, responding to print better than speech. Others have talents in mathematics. It is well documented that many individuals with autism are visual-spatial learners, have musical talents, and/or do amazing feats of bodily coordination.

There are a number of individuals with autism who show naturalist abilities in their exceptional understanding of animals and plants; however, most individuals with autism are weak in the intra-personal and interpersonal intelligences.

To use the Multiple Intelligence system for curriculum adaptation, analyze your students to see which of the eight intelligences are their strong and weak areas. Use their areas of strength to teach through and build self-esteem. Go easy on the weak areas, approaching them with a lot of support and allowing for slow growth. For instance, a student strong in the Linguistic area may learn well through the more traditional methods: textbook, lecture, writing, or story. A student who has Logical-mathematical skills may want to chart and graph, calculate and compute, or think about patterns and statistics. Persons who are Spatial think in visual images, understand best by using hands-on materials and often work well with computers. Rhythm and pattern appeal to the musically intelligent, so putting content to a beat or melody makes it accessible. The Bodily-kinesthetic person learns through his body, so make him/her move to learn. Connecting content material to the cycles seen in nature may make it motivating to the naturalist. It is important for our students with autism to grow in the personal intelligence areas, so support them in working in a variety of individual, small and large group settings. Planning your lessons using activities in all the intelligence areas will make learning easier and more accessible to a diverse group of learners.

Another system of curriculum adaptation focuses on nine ways you can modify curriculum activities:

Size: Adapt the number of items the learner is expected to learn or complete.

Time: Adapt the minutes, hours, or days you allow for completion or testing.

Input: Adapt the way information is delivered to the learner.

Output: Adapt the way the learner can respond to instruction.

Difficulty: Adapt the skill level or problem type according to the student's need.

Participation: Adapt the extent to which a learner is actively involved in the task.

Level of support: Increase the human interaction with a particular learner.

Alternate goals: Adapt the outcome expectations while using the same materials.

Substitute Curriculum: Provide different curriculum and instruction to meet a learner's individual goals.

When using this system, review the curriculum to be taught, decide on appropriate learning goals, then choose a method of adaptation that will meet those goals. It helps to brainstorm with other people so that you can spark each other's creativity.

It is important that the adaptations chosen encourage active and meaningful participation in the classroom activities, and that these activities look as similar as possible to the general class activity. The adaptations should encourage interaction between the student with a disability and other students. Sometimes the student or one of his/her friends in class may have an excellent idea for an adapted activity. These modifications should encourage independent work behavior and build on the learner's strengths. There is a delicate balance for the student with disabilities -- having enough support to be successful, but still doing as much as possible for himself. In this way learning, personal dignity, and the possibility of interaction with peers is maximized.

Curriculum adaptation is in the law for individuals with disabilities under the requirement for supplementary aids and services. However, within the so-called "regular classroom" are diverse learners with no label but lots of unmet needs. It is important for teachers to be able to teach in a diverse way so that all students can learn.

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