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Autism Spectrum Walks Into a Classroom: Toward a Method of Understanding

Daphne Stanford · Thursday, October 27th, 2016

Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) certification and the study of autism is a worthwhile pursuit for current and former educators. Considering how common autism still is, as well as the general understaffed state of special education classrooms, ABA certification is definitely a worthwhile credential to add to one's teaching portfolio. However, considering how few teachers working with neuro-typical students are familiar with the unique needs of students on the autism spectrum, a greater awareness of a few different effective teaching methods is sorely needed.

In a recent article for [The Edvocate](#), Domonique Randall explains a few ways for parents can deal with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a comprehensive, science-based manner. Watching for early detection signs is widely considered the best way to ensure early intervention and effective treatment, at an early age. These signs include the following characteristics and behaviors: lack of smiles or eye contact by six months or later; absence of back-and-forth communication like sounds or facial expressions by nine months; no babbling by twelve months; no words by sixteen months; and the absence of self-initiated, two-word phrases by twenty-four months. High-quality Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), the recommended treatment for ASD by state and federal agencies, is the recommended treatment approach. For more information about ABA, [Autism Speaks](#) houses a number of specific treatment and therapy resources for parents and educators.

I'd like to continue this discussion by considering autism from an educator's perspective. There are a few effective ways each of us can learn a bit more about the autism spectrum: either through additional coursework and certification; or via research on the best teaching and instructional methods for students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. [Arizona State University](#) cites the [CDC](#) in estimating that "about 1 in 88 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)." Moreover, "One to 1.5 million Americans live with an ASD and it is the fastest-growing developmental disability." Because of this widespread prevalence in our schools, it is of vital importance that more classroom teachers have the ability to work with a wide range of students, from neuro-typical thinkers to those who fall somewhere in the spectrum.

[The National Science Teachers Association \(NSTA\)](#) lists a few effective strategies for working with students diagnosed with autism, including the use of visual aids, direct instruction, imitation, and "structured environments that offer various sensory inputs and routines. Since most students with autism do better with specific routines, a structured learning environment can make the child feel more secure and open to learning." ABA therapists are likely quite familiar with many of these teaching strategies, which include direct instruction of social skills, visual aids, environmental considerations (e.g. workstations placed in quiet corners away from excess auditory and distracting visuals), consistency, and discrete trial teaching.

Moreover, Temple Grandin, the prominent scientist and animal behaviorist diagnosed with autism, lectures about neurological differences and teaches livestock behavior and welfare at Colorado State University. However, she is also one of the foremost experts on [teaching techniques for students diagnosed with autism](#). Along with differentiated instructional methods, [domains of accommodation](#), and [Individualized Education Plans \(IEPs\)](#), there are a number of additional ways to bolster our professional development and career options while supporting students on the autism spectrum.

Some of us may opt to get involved on the counseling and student advising side—in a school setting or elsewhere. Part of the outreach component will inevitably involve counseling parents who have been misinformed about possible causes of autism in children—still largely unknown, due to lack of conclusive research. As a result, some people still mistakenly believe it is tied to vaccines, despite the fact that [there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism diagnoses](#).

There have been a number of studies conducted in recent years, however, including [research that suggests](#) “autism frequently results from a combination of genetic predisposition and...non-genetic influences such as infection, nutritional deficiency or exposure to a toxic chemical or high levels of pollution during pregnancy.” Alternately, in states with inadequate funding levels for education, it may be more effective to get involved at the nonprofit level—for example, through a community-minded organization designed to help families of children diagnosed with autism. [A few ways to fuse not-for-profit work, counseling, and human services](#) include counseling in the non-profit sector or taking on a specialist position in child welfare, family services advocacy, legal mediation, or correctional treatment.

Significantly, the Supreme Court recently agreed to hear a case between the family of a student diagnosed with autism and the school district where he attended school—however, the case seems to pivot around the question of semantics: that is, [according to a recent article in USA Today](#), the difference between “some” and “meaningful” benefits, or between a “substantial education” or a mere attempt to educate students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), passed in 1990. What is at issue is whether the plaintiff received a ‘*de minimis*’ education—specifically, whether the education provided met the national standard for “a free appropriate public education.”

Since the standard for what constitutes an acceptable level of education seems to be up for debate, it’s crucial that those of us invested in human rights for all students, regardless of their standardized test results, push for greater understanding at all stages of the educational process for all of our children—rather than merely the privileged few. A student’s ability to rise to the top shouldn’t be dependent on their IQ or their categorization as ‘neuro-typical.’ Rather, we should be valuing all types of thinkers, regardless of whether they think in pictures, words, or numbers. Let’s continue to find ways to incorporate all our students into every lesson.

Hopefully this article has provided a few points of entry into deeper levels of understanding, regarding the autism spectrum. We can all stand to learn something new, rather than leaving the end results in the hands of fate—a notion that should be dismissed as a relic of ancient times.

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