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Accommodating a new student with a disability in your primary classroom

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Introduction

Although legislation underpins the rights of the disabled (Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act, 1992; NSW Anti Discrimination Act, 1997) to an education in the neighbourhood school with peer and community interaction, teachers may experience anxiety when a new student with a major disability enters their class.

Enrolment and attendance

A new student may give the teacher cause for apprehension as they wonder how to ensure the smoothest transition to the new school for all involved (Wills & Jackson, 2000).

If possible, the class teacher should interact with the student and the family throughout the enrolment process. This is a time when warmth and loving acceptance are needed and appreciated. Families feel vulnerable at times of transition, possibly leading to stress and frustration. They often have a host of questions as they seek to determine whether their child will be fully accepted. Information and assurances from the class teacher are thus highly valued.

The teacher needs to project confidence, acceptance and genuine interest as they get to know as much as possible about the family and the child's disability, strengths, needs and interests. Due to funding requirements, the school may need new tests and reports for verification purposes; this needs to be handled with sensitivity.

Once enrolment has been confirmed, schools may, in certain circumstances (such as a student under the age of six), suggest a gradual attendance process or a delayed starting date. In kindergarten it is common for a student with a disability to attend mornings only to ensure a stress free transition.

A delayed start allows the teacher to adjust the environment, apply for funding, access support personnel, and give greater individualised attention to the student with a disability. Few parents resent a short delay if they can see that everything possible is being set in place for a successful inclusion.

A smooth transition for the student will minimise behaviour difficulties and reassure all concerned.

Orientation period

The student needs a thorough orientation process as familiarity and understanding of the new environment will help dispel fears and build confidence. There are a number of ways to achieve this.

- Assign a 'buddy of the week' for the student and extend this to one or two other children who may also like a capable peer to sit with them. Take the student and buddy on a tour of the school, looking at each area and the associated rules of use. Meet relevant adults, such as the teacher's aide, librarian, school counsellor and principal.
- A photographic display of all staff members makes it easier to become familiar with the new environment.
- Use photographs to make a photo book, "My new school" or "A day in our class". After the first week of daily reading, send it home, as the family will find it useful too.
- Use photographs to make a class book, "A day in our class", for each student.
- Make individual posters, "All about me".
- Play bonding games with the class. A favourite is to sit in a circle and roll a large ball of wool to a student who says something they like about another student and then rolls the ball to that person. The wool forms a patterned web, joining the class in a visual bond, emphasising that everyone is different but special and that everyone belongs and contributes.

It is crucial to maintain communication with the family in this initial period. A communication notebook that travels daily between home and school transfers information about significant things occurring in both settings and provides topics to stimulate conversation.

Adjustments in the classroom

Adjusting the environment is contingent on the type of disability. A phone call or email to the student's

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previous teacher could reveal information that saves hours of 'reinventing the wheel'. Following is a list of adjustments that are commonly successful.

- The layout and contents of the classroom may need to be modified. For example, a physical disability requires advice on room layout, positioning of the student and assistive technology. A student with autism requires checking the room for areas that may cause sensory stress, such as lighting, noise, and the potential for touch aversion.
- Consider where to seat the child. A student with a disability may need to sit in grouped tables to foster communication, to sit close to the teacher, or to have a second desk in a private area in order to work with other adults or a peer.
- Make a visual timetable of the week. If needed, give the student an individual timetable and one to take home so parents can cue their child on what to expect each day.
- Have predictable rules and routines. Teach these to the new student by rehearsing, demonstrating and cueing. Photo prompts and social stories may be useful.
- Prepare the child well ahead of time for any changes to routine or to their environment, e.g. assembly, scripture time, library, or a casual teacher. A negative reaction to change is common to many disabilities.

Be prepared to examine how to deliver curriculum content using strategies that cater for the new student, e.g. use a recording device to replace written answers, or fold over the lower third of a worksheet to ensure the student is not overwhelmed.

Planned accommodations should follow a three-step approach. Firstly, seek to maximise the amount of common work done with the class, secondly adapt the work, thirdly, if required, individual work should be completed in the time slot for that subject. Withdrawal from the room is discouraged, except where necessary, e.g. intense remedial sessions—ideally in a small group.

The peer group

Respect family wishes regarding classroom discussion of the child's disability. Some families want to come and talk to the class about their child's disability. If so, assist them to structure a talk suitable for the age group. Other families do not want the disability ever mentioned to the peer group. When questions arise, the teacher must handle these with sensitivity and wisdom.

A series of class lessons on similarities and differences can fit several key learning areas. Topics may include culture, gender, disability, personal likes and dislikes, or appearance. Emphasis should be on

the positives and on the fact that individuals are all unique, highlighting that class members are a team who respect and support each other. Here are a few ways that this may be achieved.

- Have a class mascot, adopt a class pet, sponsor a third world child, make a class badge or invite people with different backgrounds to come in and talk to the class.

The playground

The school will have a system to inform teachers of the playground needs of a student with a disability. Ensure, as the class teacher, that all school personnel are informed of the special needs, especially if there is likely to be communication or behavioural issues.

- A communication key ring that has laminated playground rules or communication symbols can be helpful for the student to carry.
- A buddy may smooth the adjustment for a few weeks.
- The play environment could be signed to indicate out of bounds.
- A bench with a sign saying, "Friend stop" could be set up so a child who has no one to play with can take a seat. Children are encouraged to 'pick them up' (like a bus stop) and engage them in their play.

Conclusion

An essential aspect of successful integration is gaining hands on support within the classroom. When there is a major disability, school support systems must be implemented. This may include modifications to the environment and use of support teachers, consultants and teacher aides. Additional guidance may be sought through in servicing offered by disability support groups or other teachers who have experience with the same disability.

Time is a major challenge for a teacher facilitating inclusion. Schools need to ensure that teachers have full collegial support as they build and enact a whole school ethos toward students with a disability (Konza, 2008; Westwood & Graham, 2003). **TEACH**

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“Schools need to ensure that teachers have full collegial support as they build and enact a whole school ethos toward students with a disability”