



What Do I Really Need to Know?

Contributed by Kim Davis

Many students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are included in general education classes. In some instances, the general education teacher may be comfortable with having a student with ASD enrolled in his or her class. Yet, some general education teachers may feel a sense of discomfort or fear, or maybe even overwhelmed and unsure. These are all legitimate feelings which may lead to undesirable behaviors or attitudes from those teachers. Let's take a minute to begin to understand those feelings and behaviors.

When a student with ASD is included in a general education class, that student can enter with a preconceived *reputation* based on past experiences between the student, the student's family, and other school staff. In many cases, if the reputation is positive; the inclusion process can move forward smoothly. In other cases, where the reputation is not so positive, the process can be filled with resentment, discomfort, and even anger. These feelings can also be generated when a teacher suddenly feels unsure or inadequate in his or her skills. The anger and resentment may have nothing to do with the student at all, but be a very personal response to the situation.

Most of us have been in a situation in which we felt incompetent or not skilled enough to complete a task well. In those situations, our emotions may get the better of us, and we may become very defensive in our response, standoffish in meetings, present negative body language, and appear angry. It is uncomfortable after teaching for many years to be seen as someone who can't accomplish a task. It diminishes self confidence and therefore one's whole demeanor may be in jeopardy. Even if the task (in this case, its inclusion) is completed, it may not be done well. We can feel as if *everything* has been tried to complete a task or teach a student when in fact, the discomfort and feelings of incompetence can mask any ability to look more completely at the situation.

These feelings are not new. Teachers have felt unprepared to have students with an autism spectrum disorder in their classes for years. There are reasons for that discomfort and also solutions to help them feel more involved and capable. Those of us who have supported individuals with an autism spectrum disorder, and feel confident in our abilities, can lend support to our fellow teachers as well.

As we all know, knowledge is power; this is especially true when teaching students with ASD. There are several questions that general education teachers can ask that may assist them in preparing for their new student. One question that is not always helpful is "when will an assistant be assigned?" Having an assistant for the student will not relieve all of the stress because the assistant is not the teacher. The general education teacher is the person ultimately responsible for the student's education.

Every child with autism should have a folder that includes all of the various test results, behavior plans and IEPs, etc. These materials can be somewhat useful but they do not really give a clear picture of the child. There are other questions that the general education teacher can ask that can be more helpful when planning to include a student with ASD in a general education classroom. Some can be answered simply and others may take more time and energy.

The first question to ask is if your school has an autism consultant. A list of autism leaders/mentors/coaches can be found at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageID=340>. In Indiana, the IRCA has trained teams from every special education planning district. This team was created and trained to be the local support to teachers in

their area. This team could provide you with general information about autism and perhaps assist when difficulties occur.

The following questions can help you get to know the specific child with autism and allow you insights that are different from test scores and IEP goals.

- How soon will I have a copy of the IEP?
 - Who will explain all the jargon and special education language to me?
- What is a behavior plan?
- If there is a behavior plan; when can I see it?
 - If necessary, who will explain it to me?
- Is there a transition plan (to enter into a classroom)?
 - What does it say?
 - What is my role?
 - Can the family visit me and/or the school before the first day?
 - What would be best to do on that visit?
- Is the student learning at grade level?
- Who has worked successfully with the student in the past?
- What has worked in the past for the student to be successful?
 - Accommodations?
 - Modifications?
- What are the student's strength's, interests, and preferences?
- What are the student's fears and frustrations?
- What are the student's learning needs?
- What motivates the student?
- What reinforces the student?
- Where should the student sit to maximize participation in each class?
- What environmental changes might be needed?
- Does the student need a quiet place to go to regroup?
 - Where should it be?
- What are the student's sensory issues related to lighting, sounds, smells, space, and other issues?
- How does this student communicate?
 - Is the student verbal?
 - Does the student have an augmentative system?
 - If so, how is the system used?
- What can this student do independently?
- Does the student have any friends?
- How do I talk to other students about the challenges of this student?
- What is the best way to provide support or suggestions?
- What is the best way to communicate with the parents and the rest of the team?
- How often will we meet?
- Who else will need to know this information, (e.g., lunchroom monitors, recess supervisors, 'specials' teachers)?
- How can we share the information with others?

- Can I ask for a meeting if I need support?
 - Who do I see to make this request?

All of these questions may seem overwhelming, but it is useful to learn the answers.

Other valuable questions to ask are of a different nature. While it is sometimes true that having a student with an autism spectrum disorder can challenge teachers, it is beneficial to turn the situation into a positive one; it is not all *hard*. Seek the answers to the questions as well.

- What are the opportunities for teachers for professional development when teaching a child with autism?
- What particular qualities or skills does the student bring?
- How does the entire class grow together?

Teaching should be a dynamic process that allows teachers and students to constantly challenge themselves to learn and grow. Too often we, as teachers, can feel we are 'in the groove' when it all comes so readily and "we've always done it this way." Perhaps we need to rethink the 'groove' and realize it might be a 'rut' instead. The longer we are in a *rut* the harder it is to climb out and try something new.

Thus, rather than looking at having a child with an autism spectrum disorder as a chore or something that can make you appear incompetent, see the situation as an opportunity to learn new ways of looking at old problems: a chance to rekindle the challenges and pay-off that teaching can give. Take the time to enjoy each of your students, and be a teacher who realizes there will be bumps along the way on the road to learning. These bumps may be viewed as growth opportunities rather than roadblocks to accomplishing your goals.

For more information, visit the Indiana Resource Center for Autism website at www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca.

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