

# PROVIDING A MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

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*This article examines how general education teachers can incorporate strategies for teaching students with visual impairments about multicultural education. Students who have visual impairments do not have the same learning advantages as other students, so it is imperative that teachers understand how to differentiate instruction for these students. Students with visual impairments may have minimal vision while others may be completely blind, so teachers must learn about the students' backgrounds and specific characteristics of their disability. Aural and tactile strategies are important for improving these students' conditions for learning. Utilizing multiple senses during instruction improves the quality of education that students receive. Students with visual impairments fall into one of the twelve disability categories of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Hulett, 2009); therefore, teachers must follow legal guidelines for satisfying the educational and developmental needs of students with visual impairments. The following article specifically lists strategies for teaching students with visual impairments and suggests a lesson activity that relates to multiculturalism. Teachers can implement this lesson idea as well as the general teaching strategies when providing an appropriate education to students with visual impairments.*

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, American schools are representative of this trend. It is more common today for there to be multiple ethnicities, races, religions, and languages present in a single classroom than in past decades; therefore, it is imperative that general education teachers consider how to educate their

students to become more culturally aware and responsive. As a way to accomplish this recommendation, teachers can include aspects of a multicultural education into the general curriculum that further students' understanding of cultures other than their own. It is also crucial for teachers to consider the students' learning styles and abilities present in their classrooms. Even in the

general education classroom, it is highly likely that teachers will have students with disabilities and exceptionalities. Teachers must prepare their lessons and create learning environments that are conducive to all students. Especially when observing and analyzing differences from one culture to the next, many of the obvious characteristics of a culture are visually identifiable. How do students with visual deficiencies witness cultural differences without their vision? Teachers should incorporate strategies to ensure that students with visual impairments are receiving equal opportunities as other students to learn about multiculturalism.

## Multicultural Education

Before teachers can differentiate instruction to account for students with visual impairments, the class must understand what multicultural literacy means and the importance of obtaining a multicultural education. Being multiculturally literate requires individuals to gain knowledge on characteristics, attitudes, and skills associated with other cultures. Multicultural education is an education reform that challenges pre-existing notions, discourages racism, and rejects discrimination of cultures within society (Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Lott-Collins, 2005). It is a teacher's responsibility to instill these mindsets into her students at the elementary level to ensure that students have numerous opportunities to form positive attitudes toward those who are culturally different (van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). By including multicultural perspectives in education, teachers allow students to become more culturally aware and accepting of other cultures. All students should receive equal educational opportunities as a result of accepting cultural pluralism in school communities. Multicultural education involves

both understanding differences within cultures of students in the classroom as well as cultures throughout the world. To encourage the acceptance of different perspectives throughout the whole school year, teachers should integrate aspects of multicultural education within the general curriculum so students can expand their knowledge and acceptance of other cultures locally and globally.

All students should equally inherit influences of a multicultural education. As a result of the push for inclusion in the general education classroom, students with disabilities may likely spend their school days in this environment; therefore, teachers need to take into account the ways that instruction should be adapted for students with visual impairments. Additionally, teachers need to acknowledge that many cultural characteristics are commonly noticed using one's vision. Teachers should consider utilizing the following tools, which are supported as effective strategies for teaching students with visual impairments, to enhance the quality of education for these students: auditory tools, large-print materials, and Braille while simultaneously integrating technology.

## Strategies for Teaching Visually Impaired Students

According to the conclusions made in the studies conducted by Lee (2006), one's memory can successfully store information and stimuli when this individual has the opportunity to utilize multiple senses (Lee, 2006). For all students it is important that they participate in activities that incorporate visual, auditory, and tactile forms of learning. For students with visual impairments, they rely on a greater use of auditory and tactile strategies for learning to compensate for their difficulties with

visual learning. Unfortunately, many textbooks are created to allow readers look through text and pictures quickly to gain understanding. This is more for visual learners. (Lee, 2006). Additionally, teachers add visuals to support and further explain the material in their lessons. Students with visual impairments should not be disadvantaged by this reliance on pictures and other images.

As a strategy for dealing with the format of textbooks and lessons, special recorders with high-speed playback assist students in aurally receiving information. Students can record lectures and discussions that occur during class, and with much practice using the recorders, students with visual impairments can acquire the ability to hear speech and comprehend the language without having to be visually coherent during lessons or discussions (Lee, 2006). After the first time students record a lesson, the segments on the tape must be timed and carefully annotated so that they can refer back to the desired segments for review and study. Teachers must provide extra detail and explanation for visual aspects to presentations and stop frequently to review what the other students observed. The goal is for students with visual impairments to create a mental picture of what their peers are able to experience visually.

While audio recorders are one option for students to receive additional support when teachers are lecturing, music and other sounds also enhance the abilities of students with visual impairments to learn and to understand. Sound is a supplemental tool for text that allows students to obtain information by listening rather than reading or looking at pictures. Incorporating sounds and music into lesson activities not only benefits the students with visual impairments but also the rest of the class. Children connect well with music and

are able to attach meaning and emotion to the mood and tune of the music. They may better remember information from lessons if they utilize aural cues to spark their thinking and creativity.

When students have disabilities, teachers must resort to alternative teaching practices to provide effective and accessible instruction. Tactile teaching strategies also help to satisfy the learning needs of students with visual impairments. In order for a teacher to communicate with students who have vision problems, she must direct student behavior and relay her feelings using physical and direct contact with students (Chen & Downing, 2003). Students who do not have good vision need opportunities to feel the teacher's actions by touching parts of the body or objects involved in the actions. Physical contact is necessary for increasing the level of communication between students and teachers. Students without visual impairments may be paired with those that do to encourage mutual exploration with peers through tactile shared attention.

#### **Adhering to the Law**

For educators to teach students with visual impairments successfully, they must first become aware of what changes need to be made to their instruction to ensure these students are receiving an appropriate education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) under the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) provision. Students who are identified as having developmental, physical, or emotional disabilities that may affect one's day-to-day functioning must receive an education equivalent to that of a student without special needs. IDEA requires schools to provide the necessary services for students with disabilities to make progress in obtaining their ed-

ucational goals. In an effort to prevent students from being "left behind," this legislation protects the educational rights of those students with disabilities from being ignored and brushed aside within school systems throughout the nation.

#### **Altering Instructional Strategies**

Once modifications are put into practice, the teacher is able to monitor their teaching habits and ensure that students with visual impairments are responding positively to instruction. Based on the teacher's progress in providing an appropriate education for all students, she can better modify her tactile interactions from the student's perspective. Chen and Downing (2003) recommend that general education teachers utilize special educators who are experts at which strategies and resources are most effective and efficient for support in teaching elementary students with visual impairments. (Chen & Downing, 2003).

For students who have visual impairments but still have some visibility, large-print materials help students better obtain information provided in books and other forms of printed text (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012). The purpose of illustrations in storybooks is to enrich a story line by adding pictorial assistance to further develop ideas established in the text (Lewis & Tolla, 2003). Teachers must question how students with visual impairments can still interact with books and stories even if they are not able to clearly view the illustrations. Students who have difficulties with seeing printed materials may need the large fonts to fully experience the books. Teachers should make sure to purchase and have available "free reading books" as well as required texts in large print so that students with visual impairments are able to experi-

ence similar materials as other students. In general, the more students can learn through tactile strategies, the more likely they absorb the information presented to them. Chen and Downing (2003) argue that teachers "must allow extra time for presentation of tactile information so the student has the opportunity to touch, handle, examine, and eventually synthesize and understand information" (Chen & Downing, 2003, p.58).

Braille may be the most obvious communication system between students with visual impairments and the environment around them. Although only a small percentage of blind students use Braille as their primary reading method in today's time, teachers need to check that all resources and locations within the school are properly labeled with Braille (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prevents schools from discriminating against individuals with disabilities, such as those students with visual impairments. Similarly, the ADA also requires the inclusion of Braille in public buildings to guarantee accessibility for people with visual difficulties around these places. For people with an impairment of either the physical or mental nature that is severe enough to affect day-to-day life, the ADA prohibits schools and the work place from favoring and offering advancements to individuals without impairments. A school must respect the educational needs of all its students and offer protections against discrimination for students who have visual impairments as well as many other disabilities.

Special books and printed materials can be ordered for students with visual impairments that include Braille on the pages so these students have the opportunity to read the same materials as their peers (Hulett, 2009). Special education teachers are good references for

retrieving materials that are appropriate for students with visual impairments. To understand the best communication systems within a classroom that has students with visual impairments, teachers can video record their daily teaching practices. They can then observe and examine the teaching methods that commonly include visual cues and how these visual aspects can be modified to provide equal opportunities for all students. In addition to helping students learn effectively, teachers can effectively learn about their teaching styles and patterns through visual and auditory assistance. Teachers can evaluate which teaching practices should be altered for students with visual impairments and find patterns in student behavior that indicate how these students learn best.

Not only do these teaching strategies benefit the needs of students with visual impairments but also the remainder of the class. The strategies that focus on auditory and tactile cues help all types of learners better retain and understand material. According to Lee (2006), when teaching students with visual impairments, teachers think more clearly about how the information should be portrayed and created, how long it should be presented for, and how long it takes for students to grasp concepts. When teachers get into the habit of analyzing their practices in relation to how the students with visual impairments respond and progress, they may examine their strengths and weaknesses of teaching to all their students as well.

### Implementing Strategies to Teach Multiculturalism

Teachers can combine their desires to teach about multicultural education with strategies to instruct students with visual impairments. As discussed above, tactile strategies are important to include when teaching students with

visual impairments. Literacy skills are essential for students to learn in order to succeed in future schooling and in the professional world. One lesson activity that promotes the learning of different cultures is through the use of experience books. Students can work in pairs to develop their books that focus on one particular culture; each pair of students will be assigned a different culture to investigate. When a student with sensory impairments works with another student, clearer communication is possible and the teacher can instruct students using visual and auditory strategies without much difficulty (Downing & Eichinger, 2011). Lewis and Tolla (2003) discuss their experiences with these books and believe tactile experience books can improve many necessary skills, such as hand movements and social interactions, when students turn pages, orient books, explore objects, use hand movements associated with Braille, and experience independent pleasure reading.

Each student can divide the work based on his abilities. For instance, the student with visual impairments can be responsible for aurally describing the book to the class and putting together some of the tactile resources into the book while the other student does research on the computer and focuses more on the text of the book. In tactile books artifacts from each given country are actually included onto the pages of the book so that the student with visual impairments can better understand a country's culture based on what he experiences through touch and his other dominant senses. The teacher should encourage the students to place one cultural item on each page so that the students with vision problems does not become overwhelmed and can better connect his thoughts and emotions to its culture.

Lewis and Tolla (2003) shared additional ideas for implementing the experience books in their classrooms. Although they utilized the experience books to reinforce concepts of travel with Mary [Joan's student], her book ideas are applicable to ones that present various cultures (Lewis & Tolla, 2003). Joan also included a mounting of the short Braille sentences at the bottom of each page. This way the student with visual impairments can more fully interact with the text of the book and be able to understand the culture as a whole. Because the books allow for creativity and flexibility, each book may have visual as well as academic differences. The book belonging to the student with visual impairments will likely have fewer illustrations since this student may not be able to witness visual representations and examples of their culture. This pair may have more 3D objects mounted in the book so the students can use tactile strategies for learning. Upon completion with this project, students may be able to describe and analyze similarities and differences from their own culture to that of another one. Each group of students will present its project to the rest of the class about its research and findings and how this information may affect future interactions with diverse groups of people (Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Lott-Collins, 2005). All students will "show and tell" their assigned culture in order for everyone to learn more about a variety of cultures that the school population represents. Creating and displaying these tactile experience books help educators to accomplish a phase of culturally responsive teaching (van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006).

### Conclusion

Because schools today include representations from a variety of non-White,

cultural-ethnic groups, it has become increasingly important for teachers to include elements of a multicultural education into the general curriculum. If students gain understanding and knowledge about diverse cultures in elementary school, they will more likely accept individuals who are different from them. While it is important that students obtain aspects of multiculturalism throughout their years of schools, it is imperative that teachers differentiate this education for all learners. Students with visual impairments may not be able to witness differences in cultures visually, so they need to have alternative means for receiving the same level of education as their peers. Educators can include teaching strategies involving the use of aural and tactile teaching methods as well as Braille and other communication systems. These strategies will ensure that students with visual impairments have equal opportunities to learn about cultures that embody the world.

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