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Teaching Special Needs Students by Jonathan Saraga

Working with special needs students is as mentally and physical demanding as it is stimulating, regardless of the pupils age, physical attributes, or mental condition. Depending on how many SN students are present, the classroom environment, and the time of day, managing the many different energies and behavioral tendencies at once can be a complex task that requires planning, dedication, and love. There are many different types of SN individuals, some naturally easier to work with than others. In this document I will outline some of the most common types of SN students, and how to approach working them, specifically.

MENTAL DISABILITY

Being the uncle of two autistic children, and having been a camp counselor to kids with disabilities, I have been accustomed to a plethora of behaviors, as well as mental and physical states than can compromise the growth of an individual, and those around him or her. However, with this comes their unique abilities, strong personalities, and beauty of mind, and with the right teacher, these qualities can be enhanced and strengthened. The discovery of self within a child is an amazing thing, and it's something that can be extra rewarding when achieved in a special needs classroom.

Everyone has gifts, and many people discover and learn about them with the presence of a teacher. It is my job to create opportunities and situations where my students can find out what these gifts are. By creating a curriculum that features lesson plans which cumulatively involve all aspects of human expression, I can ensure that eventually all of my students will have found at least one thing that they truly are interested in. I believe that developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each special education student is important, and by working closely with parents to inform them of their child's progress and by suggesting techniques to promote learning at home, my students will have the support and attention they need to grow.

Helping SN students develop emotionally, and to feel comfortable in social situations will often take precedence over the actual material they are learning about. But, by playing games and including fun morning rituals that draw attention to awareness of behavior, good habits will develop, and there will be more opportunity to focus on activities. Every kid, regardless of mental or physical challenges loves showing their family what they are working on, and what they have learned. One thing I would include in each class is an opportunity to create something, in the form of art, poetry, or a gift for someone special. By doing this my students will acquire new skills sets, recognize the joys of presenting their own unique creations to others, and how being unique is beautiful and important to the world and to themselves.

I believe that every human being innately has the desire, whether conscious or

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not, to realize their own special gifts. We all want to find out who we are, and these kids are no different. That understanding, coupled with faith in this process, persistence and compassion, gives me the drive and renewed energy in helping these children to uncover and realize who they are, each day. Finding creative ways to guide them to these realizations is a self-rewarding process, and is only enhanced by seeing the results. The more open our mind is, and the more able we are to accept them for who they are, the more focus we can have on being a friend and role model for them. The more we can lead by example with a genuine respect and honor for this work, the more genuine and lasting the rewards are for both the student and their loved ones.

LOW INCOME FAMILIES

Having worked with students from low income families and neighborhoods, both in group and private settings, I am well aware of the kinds of issues and hardships that can present themselves, both culturally and socially. Behavior that stems from the impact of various stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues that arise in the home, will get carried into the classroom, and can present an extraordinary challenge to achieving academic and social success. With a better understanding of these challenges we can better suite ourselves with actions and solutions that can be taken to help our less-advantaged students succeed.

Often, I believe we can narrow down the root of most issues, by broadening the microscope. Emotional and social challenges are two major issues that often present themselves in kids that are born into low income families. Any weak or anxious attachments formed by infants in poverty can manifest into insecurities during their early childhood years. Very young children require healthy learning opportunities as well as chances to explore in order for optimal brain development to occur. In impoverished families there tends to be a much higher prevalence of adverse factors such as teen motherhood, depression, and inadequate health care, all of which lead to decreased sensitivity toward the infant from the care-taker. This lack of attention can lead to the child exhibiting poor academic performance and inappropriate behavior in school.

Students with emotional dysregulation may get so easily frustrated that they give up on a tasks when they were only moments away from success. Their ability to work well in cooperative groups is inhibited, quite possibly leading to their exclusion by group members who believe they aren't doing their part. These students may begin to feel they aren't respected by the other kids, which needs to be avoided at all costs. To help this situation, we can actively show respect to students first, by avoiding orders, sarcasm, and keeping calm, while encouraging them in front of their group members, until they are able to contribute. Then, as a teacher, we can make that response into an award winning idea, to show the other students that this person is worthy of their respect. It will also show boost that student's confidence, to know that the teacher likes him, and that he is capable of fitting in socially and academically.

Classmates judgements and immaturity can be a factor, and we don't always have

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the chance to stop a child from speaking inappropriately in regards to a clear indication of another students disadvantages or differences. When kids from low income communities are given the gift of freedom from thinking about what they might be lacking, even if it is just during their class time, I believe that their awareness expands, and their confidence builds. Because of lack-of-guidance, abuse, neglect, or any of the many hardships that a child of these sorts commonly faces, there often is a deep subconscious force present that directs them toward trying new things. If we can steer them in the direction, these experiences will contribute to a more purposeful over-all self image. From lack of resources also comes an appreciation for things that many take for granted. Whether it's being grateful to have food on their plate each day, or being happy to have even one toy, the kids that are culturally or socially disadvantaged often place more value on the simple things in life.

For this reason, when I expose these students to information, art, and resources that they have not had the means to behold in the past, their wonder and amazement is that much more substantial; a perk to keeping these specific types of students engaged, and away from bad influences that could sway them. When I teach, bring a sense of infinite possibility and the divine right to abundance and glory that each child is entitled to. That abundance I bring to each class, will in turn lead to growth, knowledge, interests, and maturation that is conducive of successful learning and academic achievement.

LETHARGIC, DISRUPTIVE, or OTHERWISE UNDISCIPLINED STUDENT

It's hard to say what may cause a student to have lethargic, un-motivated attitude in a specific class or in school in general. Of course, we can use information we already know about the student to make an educated guess, which when done early enough, can allow us the chance to help change the students poor classroom habit patterns before they become a serious issue. Either way, in this case, it would help to find out whether certain inappropriate behaviors are showing in any of his or her other classes. That way we can see if there is something specific about the class or environment there-in that is causing him or her to disengage.

From prior experience, there are commonly two strong possibilities for a student exhibiting inappropriate classroom behavior. One, is that they receive lack of attention at home, in the form of passive parents or guardians. When a pre-teen feels neglected, or doesn't receive proper guidance, it becomes difficult for them to feel important and wanted, thus their desire and participation in activities that contribute to their personal growth matters less and less to them. Another possible reason for a student's lack of focus and discipline, is stemming from the fact that they have no sense of responsibility. Of course the younger the individual the less responsibilities they will have, (in most cases, not all), and they not only expect things to be done *for* them, but they are also in a constant state of dis-satisfaction, as a spoiled child develops less and less appreciation and gratitude for what they have been given, thus creating short attention spans and lack of awareness of personal poise. Along the same lines, a students' impatience can lead to anxiously awaiting the end of the school year, if they are expecting to graduate soon; or

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even a state of rush to finish the school day, class, or even individual lesson itself. Many students that are currently breezing through school, and not applying themselves can acquire a general state carelessness, and lack of interest. Of course, there are many reasons that could justify the behavior, and can include a host of social, familial, or personal issues, that are causing her to either rebel, or just stop caring in general.

It is important to determine whether an individuals' issue is due to physiological illusions, actual trouble comprehending the material, or a problem with the teacher. The following remedies are not determinant by why the problem is occurring, but are based on what the problem may be. If the student lacks self confidence, a teacher can work to disprove that image, with non-disputable evidence of her achievements, and be ready to point out when she makes a good choice, both in class, and if the opportunity arises, out of class as well. Setting up a situation in class for them to do well, and then recognize their success, or try devising opportunities to say positive things about them, accompanied by recalling an instance in the past when they were also deserving of praise. These are only some of the many steps that can be taken to repair a student that has some mental misconceptions about themselves. However, if the problem is subject matter related or a student-teacher relationship issue, the following methods can prove helpful: Modify assignments so that the student has the chance to express themselves or their knowledge by removing the need for an acquired skill set. Once the student receives a good grade, they might gain some motivation and self confidence.

It could also be likely that due to lack of interest, comprehension, and absorption of material in class, chances to earn good grades from homework assignments are squandered, and tests, and quizzes are a lost cause. By telling a specific student that most of their grade is dependent on class participation, and that I just want to see them try, I can make it clear that all I require is their best effort in determining their grade, not just on their written responses. This can also lead to renewed or new-found interest in the class and/or subject matter, and even may foster an increase in effort put forth in and out of class.

Whether working with a student with a cognitive disadvantage, or a limited financial or love supported upbringing, there are ways of reaching every person. The more we learn about the student, and the more we can relate to them, and make them feel comfortable in our presence the easier it is to help them to have an experience of true learning, joy, pleasure, and so many emotions and states of mind, that can drastically shift their consciousness. Of course these experiences, while extremely beneficial to any student, can be especially life changing for a student with special learning needs.