Instructional Strategies for Young Adolescent Students with Asperger’s

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| In BriefThe idea that each person is unique has become a pillar of society. This idea has bled into the educational system. Though it is greatly understood that most students have certain characteristics in common, they are each distinguishable and unique in their own right (Armstrong, 32). This is equally, if not more true for students with Asperger’s Syndrome or similar autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). As with any other student, there are multiple instructional strategies that an educator may employ to better educate a student with Asperger’s Syndrome or similar ASDs.  |

Summary of Findings

Implementing various instructional strategies is a long process; even seasoned veterans of the educational system are still finding new and better strategies to educate their students. However, finding instructional strategies to better educate students with Asperger’s or similar ASDs may seem daunting to a teacher, especially those who teach young adolescents. This is likely due to the multiple changes in the diagnosis of such disorders. Originally, there were two diagnoses for Asperger’s Syndrome; both came from Viennese men, Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. Kanner described children who had symptoms far more severe than those with classic autism. Asperger, on the other hand, described children who were actually more advanced than their non-disabled peers. For whatever reason, Kanner’s description became the more widely accepted (Attwood 15). Then, over twenty years ago, the DSM-IV officially categorized Asperger’s Syndrome and other pervasive developmental disorders as separate diagnoses from ASDs. Then, in 2013, the diagnosis was changed. Instead of identifying Asperger’s Syndrome, pervasive developmental disorders, and autism as three unattached conditions, they are now categorized under one diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism Society). These many changes in the identification of such disorders have contributed to a general misunderstanding of them as a whole, and may have something to do with the fact that teachers may believe that they cannot employ traditional instructional strategies with students with Asperger’s or other similar ASDs. Two words, provided by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, better describe such students than “different.” Kurcinka describes these children as “more…spirited” (2). In her opinion, describing students with Asperger’s and other such disorders as more intense is a method for better understanding these students and empowering the students, their caregivers, and their educators.

A Fresh Perspective

Most educators will encounter a student with Asperger’s or a similar ASD in their career, whether or not they realize it. These children often go on to shape the future, gaining world renown. People from all over the world are associated with the disorder, from Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of Pokémon, to Albert Einstein, the father of the theory of relativity (Synapse, 2002). Presumably, it is the desire of every educator to see each and every one of their students to become so successful, including those with Asperger’s Syndrome and other similar disorders. The question still stands as to which of the accepted teaching strategies will work well for these students. Many teachers go unaware that their students have this disorder, and thus have no purpose to amend their teaching methods; despite this, their students with Asperger’s thrive. It stands to reason, then, that any of the accepted teaching strategies are acceptable. Perhaps, it is merely a question of learning how they will benefit the uniquely functioning mind of a student with Asperger’s.

Teaching Strategies and How They Apply to the Student with Asperger’s

 Focus Activities

* Designed to help the learner focus on the material, while giving them an outlet for choice and self-directed learning.
* Students with Asperger’s have a scope of inquiry that tends to be very one-track. Focus activities can allow the student to investigate information they find interesting, as well as creating mental pathways and connections between areas of interest. As a young adolescent, this will help them develop the areas of interest into functioning career paths.
* Example: Exit Slips are a great focus activity, especially at the end of a lesson. Including questions to be handed in such as “Name one thing you learned today,” “What part of the lesson intrigued you the most,” and/or “What did you learn today that you would like to learn more about,” maintain the student’s focus on the task at hand, while still allowing them to identify the information they thought most critical and have a say in the material taught to them.

Cooperative Group Learning

* Method in which students gain social skills through the use of higher order thinking, and can practice with the information they have learned.
* Thinking is built into the procedure. The various tasks are adjusted to each student’s level and capability, as well as to areas of interest. These can be divided amongst the various intelligences.
* At such a liminal stage, this can help the student with Asperger’s, as well as their non-disabled peers, to identify the way in which they learn; this will help them down the road.
* Cooperative group learning also allows for the growth of social skills.
* Students with Asperger’s tend to be viewed as aloof, and working in a group can help them learn to work with others.
* Cooperative group learning gives everyone a task for which they are accountable.
* The student with Asperger’s is allowed then to focus on an area of interest to them, while also ensuring that they do not become disinterested, or lose motivation.
* Example: Setting group goals are a classic example of cooperative group learning. This not only promotes socialization and teamwork amongst students, but it adds a encouraging incentive to the task, creating a positive association.

 Technology

* Can be of assistance in any classroom, providing extra information to the students, as well as allowing for strategic planning.
* Students with Asperger’s tend to be self-sufficient, and allowing them access to sites such as [Khan Academy](https://www.khanacademy.org), [Edheads](http://edheads.org), and other such educational websites will give them an opportunity to make discoveries for themselves.
* The use of sites such as [Blackboard](http://www.blackboard.com), [MyClass](http://myclass.net), and [Funbrain](http://www.funbrain.com) can allow students with Asperger’s to set goals for themselves, as well as ask direct questions of their teachers. This also allows the student’s parents or guardians to become involved in their student’s education.

Differentiation

* Vary the levels of thinking and questioning.
* Allow a student to talk their thoughts out.
* Differentiating the levels of thinking and questioning allows time for the student to fully formulate their answer, as well as increasing the student’s social skills; they will become more self-confident, and will learn to ask questions of their peers.
* Encourage the student with Asperger’s to focus on all questions asked, not just the ones asked of them. This skill will aid them all through life, not just at the middle level.

(Gregory and Chapman, 2013: Wormeli, 2001; Armstrong, 2009)

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**Resources**

**-** Armstrong, Thomas. *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*. 3rd ed. Alexandria:

      ASCD, 2009. Print.

A guide for educators based on the multiple intelligence theory.

- "Asperger's Syndrome." *Autism Society*. Autism Society, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

     <<http://www.autism-society.org/what-is/aspergers-syndrome/>>.

A basic guide to understanding and identifying Asperger's Syndrome and similar disorders.

- Attwood, Tony. *Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998. Print.

Book designed for both parents and teachers to understand the basic characteristics and functions of a child with Asperger's Syndrome.

- "Blackboard." *Blackboard*. Blackboard, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

<<http://www.blackboard.com>>.

Allows for the management of classwork, as well as the creation of an online classroom. Membership required.

- Edheads. *Edheads*. Edheads, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016. <<http://edheads.org>>.

      Edheads is a website that provides fun games and activities, mainly based

      in the science and math fields, for students to learn outside the

     classroom. Membership is not needed to access games, though other features

      require signing in.

- "Famous Cases of Asperger's Syndrome." *Autism-Help*. Synapse, n.d. Web. 25 Mar.

     2016. <<http://www.autism-help.org/aspergers-syndrome-famous-people.htm>>.

A basic fact sheet on famous people over time who have been diagnosed with or speculated to have had Asperger's Syndrome, or a disorder like it.

- "Funbrain." *Funbrain.com*. Family Education Network, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

     <<http://www.funbrain.com>>.

Funbrain is a site that provides math games for students, as well as involving the student's parents in the educational process. Membership required to access some features, though the games are free.

- Gregory, Gayle H., and Carolyn Chapman. *Differentiated Instructional Strategies:*

      *One Size Doesn't Fit All*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2013. Print.

A guide to differentiating instruction in the classroom, which has many models

      and examples that are immediately applicable to the classroom.

- Khan Academy. *Khan Academy*. Khan Academy, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

     <<https://www.khanacademy.org>>.

Offers exercises, videos, and learning dashboards that personalize learning outside the classroom. Membership is needed to access.

- Kurcinka, Mary Sheedy. *Raising Your Spirited Child*. New York: HarperCollins,

      1991. Print.

A positive approach to raising children often labeled as "difficult" or "strong-willed."

- "MyClass.net." *MyClass.net*. Elegant Data, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

      <<http://myclass.net/pages/mk_aboutUs.cfm>>.

A fully-functioning online classroom, complete with access to assignments, discussions, and homework drop boxes. Membership required.

- Wormeli, Rick. *Meet Me in the Middle*. Portlan: Stenhouse, 2001. Print.

A book for teachers that specifically focuses on how to address various issues that may arise in a middle-level classroom.

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