

honoring & including students with communication differences

Adapted from "You're Going to Love This Kid!": Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom by Paula Kluth

I have a new student coming to my sixth-grade classroom and I am stumped. Ben does not speak very much but he sometimes uses an electronic device to make choices and greet people. He also knows some sign language. I am not sure how to include him in the class or how to build a relationship with him. HELP!

This note came to me in the form of an e-mail. It was sent by Rachel, a teacher who has never had a student with these communication differences in her class before. Rachel's concerns are understandable. Having a student with such a unique learning profile can certainly be a challenge to a teacher in an inclusive classroom.

what is a teacher to do?

ideas for including those with communication differences

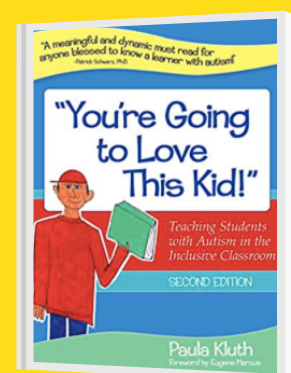
My advice to Rachel was to begin by looking at what Ben could do, build from his strengths, and increase opportunities for all learners to learn about communication differences. Specifically, I recommended that she communicate with her student, attend to his abilities, teach and model augmentative communication and create communication opportunities for all.

communicate with students and expect them to communicate with you

Teachers working with students who do not have reliable communication sometimes ask me, "What should I say to her? How can I tell how much she understands?" The truth is, teachers may not know how much a learner understands if he or she does not have a way to communicate. In these situations teachers should assume that the learner can learn and is interested in socializing and learning. As Donnellan (1984) reminds us, this is the "least dangerous assumption." For reasons of respect alone, teachers should converse with students and be sure to extend those interactions beyond questions, directions, and commands.



@paulakluth
www.inclusionrules.com



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In other words, students with the most significant disabilities often have too much “teacher talk” in their lives and not enough personal interaction. These students will benefit from teachers who tell them stories, offer observations, and share experiences since these types of exchanges may be too rare in these learners’ lives.

pay attention to communication abilities

Too often professionals focus on what students cannot do instead of what they can do. All students with disabilities have some ways of communicating even if they do not use spoken words. Does the student point to objects she wants? Does she use facial expressions to indicate distress, pain, or happiness? Can she use an object to make a request (e.g., grab her lunchbox when she is ready to eat)? Can she accurately use a gesture to communicate a need, a want, or a feeling (e.g., clapping hands when she wants to hear music)?

While a teaching team will certainly want to help any student build on and enhance his or her communication strategies, support should begin with an exploration and honoring of the skills and abilities students already have. Teachers may not be able to accurately identify ways in which learners are communicating after knowing them only a few days or weeks. Therefore, families must be interviewed and consulted about their child’s communication strategies.

teach all students to use augmentative and alternative communication

If a learner with disabilities uses a picture board to indicate choices, the teacher might ask all students to use a picture board for choices at some point in the day. Or she might consider giving all students a spelling test using finger spelling (sign language). Or instead of having students shout out answers, she could ask them to write answers on paper or provide a signal for “yes” or “no.” In teaching all students to use alternative modes of communication, teachers create a more dynamic learning environment and introduce students to a wider range of choices they can make when communicating, creating, composing, and expressing.



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create communication opportunities

To ensure that all students have opportunities to communicate, teachers need to put structures and activities in place that allow for interaction. In one classroom, the teacher started every morning with a “whip” (Harmin, 1994). She pointed to each student in the class, one by one and asked them to give a 3-5 word phrase related to her prompt of the day. One morning for instance, she asked students to report on something they learned on the previous day’s fieldtrip to an art museum. Responses ranged from “Picasso was a sculptor” to “dancing is art”. Teachers can also simply ask students to “turn and talk” to each other at various points in the day. Or educators can ask students to respond physically instead of verbally when answering questions. For instance, instead of asking, “Who can tell me what H₂O is?”, the teacher might say, “Stand up if you think you know the common name for H₂O”.

Another way to engage all students in whole-class work is to prepare the student with a communication difference for his participation. The teacher might give the student a question before the class starts so he can form a response or so he can simply feel more relaxed and confident when his turn comes. While this type of preparation is often helpful for any learner, it can be especially useful for individuals who use some type of augmentative communication

conclusions

Giving students the right communication supports is key to realizing other successes in the classroom. For instance, the more complex a student’s communication becomes, the more meaningful the curricular adaptations will be and the less likely the student will be to share needs and wants through challenging behavior. For this reason, teachers like Rachel (the educator who sent me the email about her sixth-grade student) are wise to focus on communication as a central focus of a learner’s program. With careful planning, the needs of Ben, her students with disabilities, can not only be met but can be a catalyst for honoring and including all voices in his inclusive classroom.

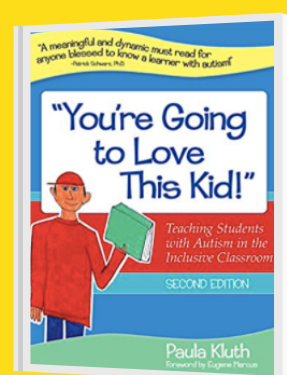
references:

Donnellan, A. (1984). The criterion of the least dangerous assumption. *Behavioral Disorders*, 9, 141-150.

Harmin, M. (1994). *Inspiring active learning: A handbook for teachers*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.



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