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Strategies for Including a Student with an Attention Problem in the General Education Classroom

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Abstract

A student with an attention problem may meet with academic problems when she is placed in the general education classroom. The general education teacher with assistance from the special education intervention specialist should collaboratively develop curriculum and environmental adaptations that will allow the included student to meet with greater academic and social success. This observational study offers strategies for working with a child with an attention problem for both the general education teacher and the special education intervention specialist. Academic and curriculum strategies are presented to proactively address the social and academic strengths of a student with attention problems who is being instructed in the third grade general education classroom setting.

In the third grade classroom at Tylerwood Elementary School, Jasmine, who has been diagnosed with an attention problem is quietly sitting at her desk. The teacher, Mrs. Jernigan is working with a reading group in the back of the classroom. She looks up and notices that Jasmine appears to be daydreaming and not doing her language arts assignment on punctuation. Jasmine looks around the classroom at her peers and then plays with an eraser on her pencil. Five minutes have gone by and Mrs. Jernigan notices that Jasmine has not even begun to read the directions for her assignment. Mrs. Jernigan points to her instructional assistant, Ms. Brown, to move in the direction of Jasmine and offer assistance. Jasmine looks down at her paper after Ms. Brown speaks to her but then she returns to staring and daydreaming. Jasmine's consistent behavior of appearing distracted from her work has been a cause for concern for Mrs. Jernigan who worries that Jasmine will not be prepared to move on to the next language arts chapter if she cannot work productively by herself. Another concern is that Jasmine has difficulty working cooperatively with her classmates. Mrs. Jernigan is unsure about how she might better assist Jasmine to stay on task and complete her work.

Inclusion and the Law

In 1975, P.L. 94-142 was passed by Congress and reconfirmed in 1997 (IDEA). This law mandated that all children with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Eleven years later, the regular education initiative (REI) was proposed to promote a general education system that was more inclusive and thus, through accommodations, was able to better serve the needs of students with special needs in the general education classroom (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). While P.L. 94-142 has mandated to more adequately meet the needs of children with disabilities through the continuum of special education services, the real litmus test comes in the elementary classroom where children with disabilities are now being served with their nondisabled classmates.

Although the expectation that teachers will serve the needs of all children has been promoted since the passage of IDEA, elementary education teachers who have children with attention problems in their classroom can be at a loss with regard to effective teaching practices for this population of children. In this example, Mrs. Jernigan sought assistance from the special education intervention specialist on how

to direct Jasmine to gain confidence, show more independence, and demonstrate greater academic and social success in the classroom. This article offers some of the curriculum and environmental strategies Mrs. Jernigan found useful when working with a student having an attention problem in her general education classroom.

What is Attention Deficit Disorder?

Attention deficit disorder, predominantly inattentive type, comes under the DSM-IV classification of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD. An attention deficit disorder is defined as developmentally inappropriate inattention (American Psychiatric Association, 1995). Attention deficit disorder is one type of ADHD; the focus is on inattention and does not include hyperactivity-impulsivity. Inattention can become evident in a child's inability to: (a) attend to a specific task, (b) give attention to details or (c) complete a school task due to external distractions. These characteristics make acquiring behavior skills and academic knowledge more challenging for this population of students.

On a national basis, between 5% and 10% of children are affected by attention problems (Hoise & Erk, 1993). While attention specific behaviors can be observed at an earlier stage of development, the majority of children with attention problems are not diagnosed until the third grade (Copeland & Love, 1991). School age children who are tested and identified as having attention problems, are often prescribed the medicine, Methylphenidate, most commonly know as Ritalin. Teachers are often aware that while the medication Ritalin might allow these children to remain more focused in the classroom, other educational strategies must be implemented to facilitate their academic and social success.

Facilitating the Learning Style of a Student with Attention Difficulties

In conjunction with the special education intervention specialist, the general education teacher can develop strategies that will allow a child with an attention problem to gain social and/or academic skills over time. This might require the general education teacher to change her methods of instruction. The general education teacher should be cognizant of the particular learning style of the student with attention difficulties who is being instructed in the general education classroom. Teachers often instruct their normally achieving students using an analytical instructional style. This style addresses a learning process that proceeds in a step-by-step manner (Braio, Breasley, & Dunn, 1997).

Research has demonstrated that a student who is an at-risk learner is likely to demonstrate a global learning style in the classroom (Braio et al., 1997). Global learning refers to the examination of the whole picture before addressing the incremental steps that lead up to the end result. A student with an attention problem can find it more difficult to remain focused on separate steps unless he or she can see the whole picture first. In Jasmine's case, she benefited by working on a subtraction with regrouping problem using supplemental unifix cubes. Jasmine was allowed free time to explore manipulatives before the lesson took place. A student with an attention problem might need additional time becoming comfortable with a math concept concretely (i.e., through the use of manipulatives) before being able to begin work on a problem successfully.

While all children can benefit from the use of concrete manipulatives, a student with a global learning style might process information much more easily when it is presented through strategies that allow for greater peer involvement (Campbell, 1997). For example, a student with an attention problem might begin to comprehend a math concept when working in pairs or in cooperative learning groups. In

Jasmine's case, during a math review lesson on word problems, she was able to remain more focused when she was paired with another peer. Jasmine and her classmate worked on solving a math word problem by drawing a corresponding picture and writing how a solution to the word problem was determined. In conclusion, lesson engagement for a student with an attention problem can be further facilitated through the implementation of the following strategies. Teachers can:

Examine environmental and curricular modifications in the general education classroom that will allow for fewer student distractions and greater teacher-student involvement when needed.

Environmental modifications should take into account the student's social or academic needs. In terms of seating arrangements, the general education teacher may place the desk of students with attention problems near the periphery of the classroom. This allows the teacher and instructional assistant more opportunities for student teacher interaction. In addition, horseshoe seating which has more open areas, allows the teacher greater access to all students. To facilitate greater lesson engagement, the general education teacher placed a series of sequenced picture prompts on Jasmine's desk that showed her working independently on homework or working appropriately in the context of a group activity. With regard to instructional materials, the general education teacher also color coded Jasmine's folder for work that was to be done independently or completed with teacher assistance.

Make appropriate changes in instructional style for the student with attention problems, which focus on student strengths.

Students with attention problems often need teacher directed verbal/non-verbal cues and/or physical prompting that will allow them to be brought back on-task. Such prompting can allow students with attention problems to become refocused on the academic task. For example, the general education teacher can raise her hand and wait ten seconds and ask to see the student's eyes. If the student does not respond during initial prompting, the general education teacher can repeat the question or ask the student to repeat the question. If there is still no response, the general education teacher can add additional information that is relevant. Teachers can also encourage increased student comprehension when they state why a procedure is being performed, what will be the final product, and how to assess their own efforts through this process. These strategies also encourage the other children in the class to remain focused as well.

Create and develop both global and analytical work areas in the classroom to meet social and academic needs of all students.

Realistically, students with attention problems need to become comfortable processing information that is given in either a global or analytical format. The general education teacher should set up the classroom so that both "incidental" global and analytical learning take place. A section of the carpeted floor in the back of the classroom can be converted into a reading corner with pillows and various high interest books. This approach was helpful for Jasmine because she liked to read with her peers. A mnemonic poster was placed next to the reading corner to inform Jasmine of the specific behaviors that were needed to maintain on-task behavior and meet with academic success. During group reading time, the general education teacher allowed Jasmine and her peers to develop a story map for "A gift for Tia Rosa." This story map contained the story characters, setting, conflict, major events, and outcomes (Mathes, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1997). Each group member was responsible for examining and clarifying a major story event. Jasmine and the students in her cooperative learning group were each given a strategy card. Strategy cards served as a self-monitoring tool that assisted Jasmine and her peers with

staying on task (Eldridge, Goor, Mallen, Schwenn, & Stauffer, 1996). Questions written on the card pertained to specific academic or social goals that were to be monitored by the group.

Facilitate self-esteem for students with attention problems through strategies that promote greater student self-motivation and increased on-task behavior.

Teachers can provide encouragement to children with attention problems when they are observed working independently. It is important to note that happy face charts or stickers may become artificial as a means of boosting student attention or motivation; however, teachers encouragement of all students should incorporate "behavior specific" praise. For example, with Jasmine, the teacher stated "I really like how you're using your strategy card to assist you with your story comprehension." The general education teacher also modeled the use of affirmations so that her students learned to react positively to academic and social challenges. Both the general education teacher and the special education intervention specialist placed the emphasis of grades on the quality of performance and persistence as opposed to merely "getting through" the assignment. Students became more focused on the process of developing and creating good work. Teachers can also allow students to "visualize" their final product prior to beginning the steps that lead to work completion.

Incorporate student-centered lessons that are multi-sensory in nature for the entire class, with necessary adaptations for the student with attention problems.

Lessons that incorporate bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, for example, can be created to allow a child who may be fidgety to display "body movements" or "chatter" in the context of an academic or social lesson. An eight-day lesson on punctuation (i.e., see figure 1) was created for Jasmine that incorporated multiple methods of learning (Emig, 1997). The special education intervention specialist also incorporated two other adaptations for Jasmine. The first adaptation (i.e., time) allowed Jasmine a less restrictive time frame in which to complete her language art lesson. The second adaptation (i.e., level of support) promoted academic/social skills by allowing Jasmine to teach what she learned to another peer or adult.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Explain the concept of global versus analytical learning styles to parents who have a child with attention problems in your classroom and be willing to work with them to better address their child's needs.

Both the general education teacher and special education intervention specialist should have a working relationship with parents of their "included" and normally developing students that is built on mutual respect and earned trust. Teachers should incorporate strategies that allow parents to become more active participants in their children's academic and social development. Jasmine's general education teacher created a four point rubric scale that allowed her parents to assess Jasmine's academic and behavioral progress during each marking period (i.e., see figure 2). The rubric was signed by the parent and then sent back to the teacher.

Figure 2. Teacher created scoring rubric to assess a student's academic lesson engagement and cooperative peer social interaction.

	LESSON ENGAGEMENT	ASSIGNMENT COMPLETION	EXTERNAL REINFORMCENT	COOPERATIVE PEER INTERACTION
4	Express interest in lesson and participates 90% to 100% of class period.	Completes assignment 90% to 100% without any teacher prompting.	Remains on-task without any need for external cues for 90% to 100% of class period.	Demonstrates effective social skills and is cooperative with peers 90% to 100% of class period.
3	Provides answers when asked questions, but remains focused only 75% of class period.	Completes assignment 75% without any teacher prompting.	A checklist and mnemonic poster is use to help Jasmine remain on task for 75% of class period.	Demonstrates effective social skills and is cooperative with peers at least 75% of class period.
2	Receives verbal prompts from teacher 50% of class period to remain focused.	Completes at least 50% of assignment with teacher verbal prompting.	Intermittent stickers or tokens are use to help Jasmine remain on task for 50% of class period.	Works cooperatively with peers for approximately 50% of class period.
1	Receives verbal prompts from teacher 75% of class period to remain focused.	Completes less than 50% of assignment with teacher verbal prompting.	Intermittent stickers or tokens are use to help Jasmine remain on task for 75% of class period.	Initially works with peers and then becomes distracted for 75% of class period.
0	Looks around and plays with objects at her desk. Remains off-task during class period.	Did not attempt to complete assignment.	External reinforcement is given to Jasmine every 5 minutes in order for her to remain on task.	

In conclusion, proactive strategies can be used to better address the social and academic needs of the child with attention problems who is included in a general education classroom. The general education teacher and the special education intervention specialist can collaboratively develop these strategies. This collaboration must take into account the learning style of the child as well as possible curricular and environmental adaptations that focus on the child's strengths. Parents who have a child with an

attention problem should be seen as allies who can offer additional assistance when their child is learning in school or at home.

Jasmine has made academic progress in the classroom and at home through the use of these interventions. Jasmine has also increased her ability to complete her homework independently and with greater accuracy during each marking period. Jasmine's grades in reading and math have improved at least ten percent each marking period. She is also receiving consistently higher grades each marking period for her increased level of participation in her peer cooperative learning activities in both science and social studies. While these curriculum and/or environmental strategies were effective for this particular third grade student with an attention problem, they also benefited the academic/social development and motivational level of Jasmine's classmates as well. Learning has become fun in this third grade inclusionary classroom and will continue to be engaging for everyone involved.

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Eight Day Lesson

Figure 1. Lesson plan on punctuation for a student (i.e., Jasmine) with an attention problem.

Theme: Language Arts

Content Area: Grammar

Learner's Background: This unit is a language arts/grammar plan, which integrates Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. It was created for a third grade student identified as having an attention problem. The student is in the general education classroom and receives supplemental services from the special education intervention specialist.

Written Objectives: To understand the function of and differences between four punctuation marks: question mark, period, comma, and exclamation mark with 100% accuracy.

Materials

Paper/pencils

Sample sentences

Four compartment boxes

Marked punctuation cards

Overhead projector

Student notebook/journal

Day One: (*Linguistic Intelligence*): Students listen to verbal explanation of the function of punctuation marks, read sentences with examples of punctuation marks, and write their own punctuation marks in their notebooks, and on the chalkboard.

Day Two: (*Spatial Intelligence*): The teacher draws on the board graphics images which correspond in meaning and form of each mark (? = a hook since questions "hook" a person into giving an answer; ! = a staff which you can pound on the floor when you want to exclaim something; . = a point, since you've just made your point, plain and simple; , = the pedal on a brake, since it requires you to stop (temporarily) in the middle of a sentence). Students can make up their own images and then place them as pictures into sentences.

Day Three: (*Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence*): The teacher asks students (i.e., in pairs) to place their bodies into the shapes of the different punctuation marks as she reads sentences requiring these marks (i.e., a curved body posture for question mark, etc.)

Day Four: (*Musical Intelligence*): Students make up different sounds for the punctuation marks and then make these sounds in unison, as different students read sample sentences requiring the use of the four punctuation marks.

Day Five: (*Logical-Mathematical Intelligence*): Students are divided into groups of four. Each group has a box divided into four compartments and each compartment is assigned a punctuation mark. Student

groups take sentence cards with punctuation marks missing (one per sentence) and sort them into the four compartments depending on the punctuation needed.

Day Six: (*Interpersonal Intelligence*): Students are divided into groups of four. Each student has four cards and each card has a different punctuation mark written on it. The teacher places a sentence requiring a given punctuation on the overhead projector. As soon as the students see it, they are to toss the relevant card in the center of their group's circle.

Day Seven: (*Intrapersonal Intelligence*): Students are asked to create their own sentences using each of the punctuation marks. Sentences should relate to their own personal lives (i.e. a question they would like somebody to answer, a statement they feel strongly about, a fact they know that they'd like to share, etc.).

Day Eight: (*Naturalistic Intelligence*): Teacher will take students outside on a nature walk. During the nature walk, the teacher will ask the students to pick up small nature objects such as a leaf, a rock, etc. that resemble the four punctuation marks learned in class. Once the students return to class, have them show and explain their nature objects to peers in their groups.

Evaluation:

- At the end of the eight day lesson, the students will give an oral and/or written presentation to the teacher. The teacher will use a ready made rubric to score the student's final product as well as score group participation.
- The students will write a self-evaluation of their final participation and product in their writing journal. Such questions as, What I learned? What I liked/disliked about the activity? What I think could be changed to make the activity more successful for me as an individual?

Adaptations:

- Time: Instead of using this lesson in a week's duration, allow time to be expanded for Jasmine when needed.
- Level of Support: Allow Jasmine the opportunity to teach what she has learned to another peer and/or the teacher and then give appropriate feedback to Jasmine.

Jasmine's Scoring Rubric

TEACHER'S COMMENTS _____	
PARENT'S COMMENTS/INITIALS	

Sources of Information for Persons with Attention Problems

Attention Deficit Information Network National Office
475 Hillside Ave
Needham, MA 02941
(617) 455-9895

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorders (CHADD)
499 NW 70th Ave, Suite 109
Plantation, FL 33317
(305) 587-3700

Health Resource Center
One Dupont Circle NW Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20036-1193
1-800-544-3284

University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning
3061 Dole Center
Lawrence, KS 66045
(913) 864-4780

SERRC- Special Education Regional Resource Center
1301 Bonnell, 3rd Floor Suite
Cincinnati, OH 45215
(513) 563-0045