

# **Appreciating and Accommodating Cognitively Challenged Students in the Inclusive Classroom**

**By Dr. Kathryn dePlanque**

In every classroom, even within Full-Circle Learning's positivity-based system classroom management, there may be students who divert the teacher's attention because of their special needs. This is where the school leader's role becomes especially important. By training teachers to identify and appreciate the unique challenges of these students, and perhaps even to visit the classrooms and model the strategies, the principal or headmaster can help the teacher better understand how to help each learner and gently bring each one the sense of family inherent in the Full-Circle Learning classroom. I thank each of you for your interest and caring to learn and understand about the challenges that exist for those with special needs.

Here are a few diagnostic signs to observe, to notice who needs extra understanding in the classroom:

ADD-Attention Deficit without hyperactivity

ADHD-Attention Deficit with hyperactivity

Such a learner often has an overflow of energy, but an undersupply of self-esteem.

In reality, this could be called "Attention Inconsistency", as an individual with Attention Deficit can be hyper-focused at times-where everything else is tuned-out entirely.

## **CHALLENGING CHARACTERISTICS of ADHD**

- Trouble paying attention-especially in larger group
- Trouble focusing-especially if has little interest or difficulty in subject
- Trouble thinking before acting (impulsivity) May blurt of answers, has difficulty
- waiting to be called on with hand raised.
- Trouble keeping still (keeping legs still, sitting for long periods of time, stop talking
- or making noises
- Trouble keeping track of things (organization)-may forget or lose homework
- Trouble learning in school-often better in smaller group or one-to-one
- Trouble with planning or time management-does project last minute, makes errors
- Trouble with getting started with assignment

- -Trouble putting in the right order so it can be understood or recalled more easily

There may be a delay in processing information auditorily or visually, which can also be influenced by a learning disability discussed later.

SOME ADVANTATAGES such a learner brings to the learning process:

- HIGH ENERGY
- INTUITIVENESS
- CREATIVITY
- ENTHUSIASM

Of course, there are other traits specific to individuals, but these characteristics, when noted and encouraged, can help a child feel success-playing on his/her strengths

ADD (without hyperactivity) often presents the same challenges without the constant movement, restlessness, impulsivity. However, the child with ADD can be overlooked in the classroom or assumed “not to be trying” when it is just difficult for the child to concentrate. He/she often is daydreaming. The child’s mind may be completely off-topic while the teacher is talking or the class is discussing. The learner may appear to be “in a cloud,” not present, or tuned out.

It is very important to remember this disorder in itself is NOT a measure of inability to learn or LOW intellect. On the contrary, often those with Attention Deficit are very bright, capable people.

However, ADD may be accompanied by other learning disorders such as dyslexia, reading or math disability. The attention disorder itself can manifest as a learning problem. Again, learning problems do not mean low intellect. There is a wide spectrum of severity-some with mild symptoms that can be more easily overlooked or misinterpreted, and other learners who can barely function cognitively in a classroom setting.

Some students may difficulty in negotiating these challenges—as it is more stimulating to argue. A person with ADD must bear frustration and sometimes would rather just walk away or just conclude too quickly the answer to a problem. This especially occurs among older children, tired of facing difficult group learning situations. This often leads to emotional difficulties such as:

- poor self esteem/self confidence
- irritability-sudden mood changes
- loss of perspective in a certain circumstance
- depression** - not only brought on by a sense of failure but sometimes a physiologically inherited depression.

Depression and Attention Deficit often co-exist due to:

- feelings of insecurity- possible fearfulness of others and/or mistrust of self
- poor social relationships
- anger
- difficulty to retrieve words or concepts due to stress
- shame

Of course, All of these above characteristics may not be present in any one person with Attention Deficit, but they are common challenges within this population.

How educators can help:

- Understanding- Educate yourself and express understanding
- Stress that child's difficulties are nobody's fault
- Younger children especially need structure and consistency
- SAY CHILD'S NAME first to get eye-contact to ensure attention when speaking to child.
- CATCH HIM/HER WHEN HE/SHE IS BEING GOOD
- Notice when he is quiet, waits his turn, lets someone go in front, or waits and raises
- His hand. REWARD POSITIVE BEHAVIOR
- Color code words, numbers or parts of words to note beginning or ending sounds
- Allow music, if at all available, during individual, quiet work time. (For example, the teacher's humming may be a soothing influence.)
- Give opportunities to use special interests or talents
- Keep a sense of humor
- Emphasize nobody's fault, but need to work together to help to do best the best they can
- Giving extra time for taking tests or projects
- Reminders for homework and designated place to hand it in (Parents help too)
- If possible, providing a separate space for help with concentration or re-grouping
- Giving smaller quantity of work (i.e. 6 math problems vs 12 to measure under-
- standing of a specific concept)
- Offer periodic breaks for movement (Go outside to run, walk or deliver a message, give errand of some sort or maybe just standing up and stretching may be enough)
- Repeat oral directions at least twice and/or provide written highlighted instructions

- Since misspelled words are more common, Give separate grades for content and spelling. Don't load paper with red marks for errors. Instead, pencil in words or encourage child to write the word correctly to get full credit. This provides encouragement in writing. Give a template or model for structure of written assignments for older students
- Encourage taking deep breaths before taking a test for all students
- For older students especially, asking their ideas of what may be helpful for the present problem or concern, and supporting their efforts in trying

The previous suggestions for helping are a resource for you as educators, and it is up to you to determine what may work for the individual child with unique needs.

All of the above is meant to help keep the windows of a child's mind free of criticism, defeatism, devaluation or the deeply painful feelings of shame. Instead, we need to provide Hope, Encouragement, and develop Mutual Respect between students, teachers and principals.

It is not easy to remain patient with a child with ADHD, but understanding and effort will pay off. MATTERS OF THE HEART TO ALL!

Discuss with PARENTS suggestions for what you have found works best for their child

Educate them on the fact that is NOT anyone's fault, but emphasize the need to work together for their child's success.

Some examples:

Reminders for completing work and patience with extra time needed

Giving some space

Providing opportunities to perform chores that reflect the child's strengths, not weaknesses.

PRAISE for a job well done.

Make parents aware of unique talents or school successes

## SENSITIVITY

When discussing individual sensitivity levels, we must be aware of the mind to body connection. That includes areas of the brain from which messages are sent, the spinal cord that connects the brain to the body, and all the nerves that are connected throughout our bodies.

Each of us has a threshold of response or minimal amount of stimulation needed to activate our nervous systems. Those who respond quickly to stimuli (sounds, light, temp, texture) will find life filled with challenging situations by virtue of their brains firing off trigger responses. Those with higher sensitivity thresholds with

not respond with arousal and will be less emotionally sensitive to stimuli. Some nervous systems may be in the high state of arousal almost all the time, which causes panic or fear without apparent cause to us.

States of nervous systems may be both in-born features and modified by experiences and are reflected in both SENSITIVITY AND INTENSITY in the responses of individuals.

More sensitive individuals may display more frequent acting-out behavior and or withdrawal.

Repeated patterns of intense emotional experiences may engrain chronic alterations in degree of sensitivity or fears.

A sensitive student can experience trauma in an even deeper way.

What may help:

Taking time out to calm emotional state and taking DEEP BREATHS

Sometimes self-talk help (i.e. child saying to his/her brain: " I know you are trying to help me , and now I don't have to be afraid," Or "I am feeling calmer now" etc.

Before we leave this discussion on sensitivity, It may be important to briefly include some information on helping children with Autism in the classroom.

Autism is a huge topic on its own and one of great challenge to all in its complexity.

Children with Autism usually have extreme sensitivity to their environment.

Some of the following may be helpful:

- Providing something with bulk or texture to sit upon
- Providing something with texture for the child to hold to soothe
- Providing a quiet place away from others
- Wrapping children in a blanket or something heavy around them to calm
- (Some may soothe by being held. Others may resist touch of any kind)
- Preparation for any changes or transitions:
- Children with autism usually need to be prepared to move physically from one place to another, changing topics or activities. It is helpful to simply tell a child, for
- Example, " in just a few moments we will be going to.... Or we will be stopping this
- Subject and moving to....
- It may be very helpful to have a daily schedule written out in front of the child,
- Reviewed at the beginning of the day, and then each step pointed to when
- verbally preparing the child for the next step
- Much may need to be repeated patiently and in a quiet voice, as often these
- children have Attention Deficit and/or are just highly distracted

- -Since many have difficulty relating to peers, they may require seating away from others, and simple social skills may need to be taught and not assumed.

There is so much more to discuss on the topic of Autism, as it is a huge spectrum disorder, meaning there are extremes in functioning and varies greatly with individuals. Some may be very bright and only have some slight environmental sensitivity and difficulty socially, and others are overwhelmed by their inner world that **OFTEN IMPEDES LANGUAGE EXPRESSION** and causes unusual behavior. It is best if these children are given extra individual help with learning how to speak and work with modification of behavior through training.

### SELF-ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION or EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

Emotional dysregulation may be caused by more serious emotional disorders such as mood disorders like bi-polar-extremes of either depression or manic states.

Anxiety disorders (panic disorder, phobias, or obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder.)

THIS PRESENTATION IS NOT MEANT TO GO INTO DETAIL ON THESE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS, but if a student in your classroom displays an inability to control emotions such as outbursts without apparent cause or emotional rage, it may be caused by sensitivity or emotional dysregulation factors that may be influenced by in-born characteristics and/or by environmental experiences.

Sensitivity, as we mentioned, to environment varies with individuals and can greatly influence behavior. Self-organization of the mind in many ways is determined by self-regulation of emotional states, and can, of course, influence one's ability to learn.

Modulation of emotions is the way the mind regulates energy and information processing, which is important to educators. If emotions are taking over, a child cannot incorporate information, learn, and certainly not recall information.

### HOW EDUCATORS CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE REGULATION OF EMOTIONS

- Voice level (calm, reassuring, soft voice)
- Giving space and time
- Opportunity to physically move about
- Supportive response, rather than punitive or critical (i.e., Just take your time, no rush OR, It seems like you are upset, You can take a break if you need it.)

- Deep breathing (Encouraging taking deep breaths) and Applying relaxation techniques to entire group using:
- Guided imagery
- Meditation
- Art
- Music, when possible or available, using a rhythm for release of emotions or
- humming softly so as not to disturb others.
- A teacher's humming or singing quietly in the classroom while children are working in a quiet activity on their own may also be helpful.

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. According to the Centres for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 54 children.