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Adapting Instruction to Individual Learners: Special Education

Special Education Law

The history of special education in the United States cannot be understood without understanding the students and individuals that worked to get students with disabilities simply into mainstream, public classrooms. Before the passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, "children with disabilities were often segregated or warehoused in state institutions with no guarantee of proper assessments or schooling"[1]. These children were hidden away in schools and institutions not suited to their needs or forced to stay home, meaning more than a million kids had zero access to public schools and all the services that come along with it. After 1975, IDEA mandated that all "children with disabilities were entitled to a 'free, appropriate public education' in the 'least restrictive environment'"[2]. To ensure the promises of this legislation, students with disabilities are entitled to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to accommodate children's specific needs and is maintained by a team of teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and oftentimes the student. After being revised in 1990, IDEA expanded the categories of disabilities covered under the act and ensured that all children could receive services, regardless of their disability.

Over the decades, IDEA has expanded its original framework from ensuring a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to encompass the greater needs of special education students. In addition to these original promises, schools are required to conduct appropriate evaluations on students that show signs of having a disability[3]. If students show during evaluation signs of having a disability, the parents or guardian of the student are brought into the loop to discuss options and accommodations for the student. Not only is it important for parents to be involved in these decisions being made on their children's behalf, but they can also help form a strong support system for that student to be successful. While there is always the possibility of disagreement between parents and school personnel over the best course of action for the student, there are systems in place to protect the privacy of students and parents. The ultimate goal is to devise a plan that best serves the needs of the student throughout their education and give them the tools to be successful after school.

As a social studies teacher, I find it incredibly important to keep students with disabilities in mind while I teach and craft lessons. Being someone who studies history, the grassroots organization and work that it took to make IDEA a reality are the very thing I want to highlight and teach to my students. For those of my students that have disabilities, the work of very real and inspiring people had to advocate for such a change. Those are the kind of lessons I want to emulate and share with all my students and show them that coming together for these changes has a lasting effect on people and is worth the work.

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[1] https://ed.lehigh.edu/theory-to-practice/2016/IDEAs-impact#:~:text=The%20Individuals%20with%20Disabilities%20Education,no%20law%20before%20or%20since.&text=Before%20IDEA%2C%20children%20with%20disabilities,of%20proper%20assessments%20or%20schooling.
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.smartkidswithld.org/getting-help/know-your-childs-rights/your-childs-rights-6-principles-of-idea/

Disability Glossary

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

ASD is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder "that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges"[4]. Students with ASD often have trouble with social, emotional, and communication skills, meaning that their experiences in the world and in the classroom may be a lot different than their peers. Early signs of ASD include abnormalities with "eye contact and body language… understanding and use of gestures… difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts"[5] among a vast range of other symptoms. According to the CDC, around 1 in 44 children in the US is diagnosed with ASD, with boys being four times more likely to be diagnosed than girls[6].

The nature of ASD means that there is no "cure", but there are a lot of support options, treatments, and accommodations that can be made to aid students. ASD is a spectrum, so the support options for students can vary from individual to individual. With this in mind, it is important for school personnel to involve the parents or guardians of students with ASD to best meet their specific needs. In a classroom setting, however, there are adjustments that can be made to make students feel more comfortable and encourage them to be around their peers. Giving clear and direct instructions, having a daily routine, maintaining a walkable and navigable room, and ensuring that other students are conscious of their volume level are easy ways for those with ASD to feel welcome and a part of the classroom environment. In addition, having conversations with those students and other support staff about how they can best be supported is an easy way to accommodate.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD "is marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development"[7]. Students with ADHD may have difficulty staying on task and being organized, or they may be restless, fidgety, and have trouble controlling their impulses. Symptoms of ADHD are broad, so the way they present in individuals can very from person to person. While ADHD in boys may present more hyperactive and fidgety, girls with ADHD tend to have more difficulty staying on task and keeping focused. Because of this difference, girls tend to go undiagnosed. This is reflected in the statistics showing that boys are twice as likely to be diagnosed over girls[8] .

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[4] https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html
[5] https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-diagnosis-criteria-dsm-5
[6] https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics-asd
[7] https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd
[8] https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html

While there is no cure for ADHD, there are many tools to help these students mitigate the challenges they fact at school and in their everyday lives. Students may use different medications, but that goes hand in hand with therapy and counseling as well. In a classroom setting, students with ADHD may benefit from having creative outlets or fidget tools to help keep their attention during class instruction, having frequent mental breaks and opportunities for students to move, and other sorts of organizational tools to keep them on top of assignments and important information.[9] All of these and more are not meant to cure students of ADHD, but to have them develop skills to help them cope with their individual challenges.

Language Impairment

Under IDEA, a LI "means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance"[10] LI encompasses a broad range of impairment, including problems with articulation, fluency, voice, and language, and effect up to around 11% of all the population[11]. Having an LI "is not the same thing as a learning disability, but it is a risk factor for learning disabilities"[12]. LI is developmental disorder with symptoms usually arising in early childhood, and those symptoms change and develop as children get older. "They may struggle with translating letters into sounds for reading. Their writing skills may be weakened by grammatical errors…[and] difficulties with language comprehension can make mathematical word problems challenging"[13].

There are several forms of treatment available for students with a LI, however not all LI are exactly curable. While early treatments with young students can bridge some deficits in language abilities, a LI may continue to be an active part of their life despite those interventions. Most treatments students use are a part of different speech and language therapies, which include different muscle and vocal exercises, counseling, and more[14]. In a classroom setting, students with a LI benefit greatly from clear and concise communication, as well as working to reduce anxiety in the classroom and giving students the space to form responses. While LI covers a range of disabilities, making students more comfortable around their peers will help them develop their communication skills to take outside the classroom.

Emotional Disturbance

Emotional Disturbance is an umbrella terms that can encompass a variety of conditions including anxiety, depression, bipolar and eating disorders, obsessive-

[9] https://www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/teaching-students-with-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm
[10] https://www.parentcenterhub.org/speechlanguage/
[11] http://www.staceylbuckltd.com/statistics-on-speech-language-disorders
[12] https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/specific-language-impairment
[13] https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/specific-language-impairment
[14] https://www.healthline.com/health/mixed-receptive-expressive-language-disorder#prevention

compulsive disorder, and other psychotic disorders [15]. Students with an emotional disturbance may have an inability to learn not explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, trouble buildings or maintaining personal relationships, display inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings, and tend to show physical symptoms or fears. There are several factors that contribute to students with emotional disturbance, both environmental and genetic. According to the CDC, around 14.5% of school aged children suffer from some sort of emotional disturbance, with over a quarter of those students being prescribed medication for those difficulties[16].

Treatment for students with an emotional disturbance depend on the specific type of disorder, but they can range from prescription medication to different therapies and counseling. In addition to outside treatments, students can benefit from accommodations in the classroom to help students build their self-esteem, support growth, and reward desirable behavior[17]. Allowing students the opportunity to make their own choices and adjust instruction to better fit their individual needs lets them move at their own pace and take autonomy over their learning.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

A Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, read, speak, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations"[18]. These include disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, but SLD may also be a result of perceptual disabilities, brain injury, and developmental aphasia. Nearly 5% of people have a SLD, which accounts for one third of students receiving special education services[19]. Ultimately, students with SLD just process information differently, making it difficult for them to learn in ways that seem easy to their peers.

While there is no cure for a SLD, there are several accommodations available to students to aid with their learning. These include providing students with extra time to complete assignments, allowing tests to be read to them, altering the font on assignments geared towards students with dyslexia to make reading easier, and allowing verbal responses to questions[20]. Building up reading comprehension skills and note taking abilities to meet the individual needs of students will give them the tools to not only cope but thrive in a classroom setting.

Visual Impairment

[15] https://www.parentcenterhub.org/emotionaldisturbance/
[16] https://debh.exceptionalchildren.org/behavior-disorders-definitions-characteristics-related-information
[17] https://www.positiveaction.net/blog/teaching-strategies-for-emotional-and-behavioral-disorders
[18] https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Special-Education/Students-with-Disabilities/Specific-Learning-Disability
[19] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg
[20] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg

A Vision Impairment (VI) is an impairment where "a person's eyesight cannot be corrected to a 'normal' level" and may be caused by a loss of visual acuity or visual field[21]. While there are different categories of VI depending on the severity of sight loss, "legal blindness" is used to indicate someone is eligible for educational or federal programs. Students that meet to qualifications for legal blindness may not experience total sight loss, but corrective means can only bring their visual acuity up to 20/200[22]. According to National Federation of the Blind, about .8% of school aged children are considered legally blind. While these students are not a huge part of the student population, there are easy accommodations that can be made to support these students.

Recording class lectures and lessons for students to review is incredibly helpful and easy for teachers to implement, as well as giving descriptive instructions and providing appropriate visual aids. Also, if applicable, requesting Braille books or specific computer programs can allow for visually impaired students to read independently[23]. Because the nature of a VI is so diverse, specific accommodations should be made in conjunction with input from parents and the children themselves to best meet the needs of the student. The goal of aiding students with a VI is to grant them the same range of independence over their learning experience as any other student.

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[21] http://ophthalmology.pitt.edu/vision-impairment/what-vision-impairment
[22] http://ophthalmology.pitt.edu/vision-impairment/what-vision-impairment
[23] https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-are-typical-accommodations-students-blindness

Instructional Differentiation, Accommodations, and Modifications

For Students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The resource I would modify for a student with ADHD from my curricular resource assignment would be the CrashCourse video on Imperialism. Because student with ADHD often have trouble staying on task and maintaining focus, a near 15-minute long video may present students with difficulties. John Green also talks quite fast, and blazes through the lesson at a consistent pace. To get students through the duration of the video, I would make sure that they are prepared by letting them use a fidget or do something during the video to keep their hands and minds occupied, facilitating person coping skills and strategies[24]. Also, closing window coverings and turning off lights are easy ways to limit outside distractions to help students keep focus. While this video is meant to be supplementary and provide good background to the lesson, taking comprehensive notes and writing responses to the questions posed is not the totally necessary. Instead of having students write answers to the questions I have provided, I would ask students directly and have them share their ideas out loud.

Students with Emotional Disturbance

The resource I would modify for a student with an Emotional Disturbance would be the at home interaction of finding examples of clickbait with a parent/guardian. Because emotional disturbance is an umbrella term and can mean something completely different depending on the individual, for this assignment I am specifically thinking of a student with an anxiety disorder. Because students with anxiety may struggle interacting with others, even their parents/guardians, completing this assignment independently may be a better option for those students. That way, they have personal choice in the clickbait they find and interact with, reinforcing their individual choice and autonomy over their interests that they then can work on sharing with those around them[25].

Students with a Specific Learning Disability

The resource I would choose to modify would be the textbook selection. A student with a SLD, particularly those with dyslexia, have trouble reading and decoding information, particularly long texts. To help a student with a SLD, I would first copy and modify this selection from the website to make it shorter. There are also dyslexia-friendly fonts designed geared towards students that struggle with reading by spacing out the letters. If they continued struggling to reading the text, I would also offer the option for the student and a partner – particularly one that they could pick – to read together out loud. That way students have the ability to practice reading aloud while

[24] https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/self-regulation/coping-skills-strategies/coping-skills-strategies
[25] https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/recruiting-interest/choice-autonomy

taking some of the pressure off by giving them the change to work with someone they are more comfortable with, which fosters a greater sense of collaboration and community[26]

[26] https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/effort-persistence/collaboration-community