Asperger's Syndrome in the Classroom

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

A German doctor, Hans Asperger, first described Asperger's syndrome in 1944. Asperger's syndrome, AS, has been classified as a type of autism, which itself was first described in 1943. Although no two children that suffer from AS are alike, “typically [they are] viewed as eccentric and peculiar by classmates … [they] lack understanding of human relationships and the rules of social convention; they are naive and conspicuously lacking in common sense” (Williams). However, children with AS are noted to be of average to above-average intelligence and are characterized to have rote memories of high capacity.
Asperger's Syndrome in the Classroom

By: Erin Ells

A German doctor, Hans Asperger, first described Asperger's syndrome in 1944. Asperger's syndrome, AS, has been classified as a type of autism, which itself was first described in 1943. Although no two children that suffer from AS are alike, "typically [they are] viewed as eccentric and peculiar by classmates ... [they] lack understanding of human relationships and the rules of social convention; they are naive and conspicuously lacking in common sense" (Williams). However, children with AS are noted to be of average to above-average intelligence and are characterized to have rote memories of high capacity.

Recently the practice of inclusion (placing children with special needs in a "regular" classroom) has attempted to address the difficulties of placing a student with AS into such a classroom. I will be discussing the various characteristics of a student with AS and the treatment that psychologists utilize in order to enable the child to be successful in the classroom. With the introduction of AS into the World Wide Web and Internet, the support for those suffering and their families is rapidly growing.

The main obstacle that AS students encounter is resistance to change. The smallest change can throw an AS child into complete distress. According to Karen Williams from the Medical Center at the University of Michigan, "Children with AS are easily overwhelmed by minimal change, are highly sensitive to environmental stresses, and sometimes engage in rituals. They are anxious and tend to worry obsessively when they do not know what to expect; stress, fatigue and sensory overload easily throw them off balance." In the classroom, most educational professionals develop a strict schedule for their students; however, change is not unusual and should be expected in such forms as a field trip, an assembly, or a fire drill. Williams suggests that AS children be provided with a safe, predictable environment and a consistent daily routine. If change is inevitable, the student should be allowed adequate time to explore the new situation before having to enter into it.

As mentioned previously, persons with AS vary on a scale of affectedness. There have been classifications made rating AS children from low-function to high-function. AS seems to affect each of its victims differently. "As a result, there is no exact recipe for classroom approaches that can be provided ... just as not one educational method fits the needs of all children not afflicted with AS" (Williams).

According to an article from the Los Angeles Times on October 23, 1995, scientists have had little success "in unraveling the mysteries of Asperger syndrome ... There is so much overlap between Asperger symptoms and those of the 'high functioning' end of autism" (Kowsky). The number of AS cases is also in dispute; some estimate 1 in 250 people, others guess 1 in 650 people (Kowsky). The same Times article focuses on a married couple, the Newports, both suffering from AS. Kowsky begins her observation of the Newports by noticing that there are particularities about each of them. One of the most obvious is Jerry's obsession with whales and dolphins. Two years ago he had constructed a killer whale costume for Halloween and he now stores it next to his sofa and "strokes [it] during conversations."

Jerry explained: "We could do silly things together, like reading billboards backward and guessing what it said. Or I would turn license plate numbers into dates. Like if I saw the number 20,013, I could tell you that October 17, 1955, is the 20,013th day of the century" (Kowsky). This type of odd behavior characterizes students with AS. Not all AS students can perform complex mathematical problems in their heads, but many do...
have one particular activity that they can excel at. For Jerry's wife, it was art and music. She is currently a guest actress on Star Trek: Deep Space Nine.

If an AS student is "burdened" with the ability to perform complex mathematical equations in their head, for example, he/she can not turn that ability on and off. It is difficult for that student to concentrate if there are colorful bulletin boards that focus on math problems around the classroom. If these students are easily distracted toward the bulletin boards (for example), a new plan is needed to help keep them focused. Susan Jakel discusses the plan of incorporating "brief, precise, concrete instructions and [16] make sure they understand." Leave them no room for their eyes to wander from the class-work. She says to "consider isolating the student for short periods to teach new concepts or build on pre-existing knowledge in a distraction-free setting."

Another problem that AS students come across is taking conversation and figures of speech literally. Mae, a twelve-year-old student with AS, explains a problem she had in her classroom. "When I was in sixth grade my ... teacher said that we should be quiet and not even breathe. I thought he was trying to kill us. I knew that most of us could hold our breath for only a minute or two. I thought we would all suffocate" (Williams). Teachers need to realize that AS students are unable to generalize instruction and do take direction literally.

Currently a program entitled "Whole Language" is making its way into the classroom. Speaking from my own schooling experience and that of my mother's classroom, I can infer that students with AS would have difficulty with their English skills if taught with this program. The main idea behind Whole Language is encompassing English as a whole, not separating phonics and spelling and parts of speech and other concepts related to writing a story. A teacher practicing Whole Language would assign a writing activity with very little direction and would praise the child no matter what the result. The goal of this approach is to enable each student to work at his or her own pace without the danger of falling behind. This concept would not be successful with an AS student. AS students are most successful with smaller, more specific tasks. Jakel writes that teachers must "state clearly what is expected." If there are no specific instructions and any result is acceptable, the objective of the assignment is lost on the AS child. Also, the art of building upon concepts already learned is important for AS students. Whole language has no improvement capacity. Yes, a student's writing skills may eventually improve; however, there is no indicator.

A valid, yet false, conclusion is drawn when educators realize that AS students are of average intelligence. Why then did Mae think her teacher was trying to kill her? Shouldn't she have known better? The answer: No. "In fact, because of the social-emotional and communication deficits, as well as the presence of symptomatology unique to Asperger's syndrome, these children can't 'know better' until they are taught simply to know (i.e., to understand)" (Twachtman-Cullen). And most of these students will never learn to learn in the same way as "regular" kids.

Another obstacle AS students meet in the classroom is the tendency to be reclusive. This creates a burden on the teacher to create bonds between the students in order for the AS child to feel included and purposeful. Several sources say that some type of partner or buddy system would benefit the older AS child. This would allow the AS student to be protected from merciless bullies and would allow the buddy to get the AS student involved in extra-curricular activities. Only so much of a teacher's time can be spent on one student. This allows the AS student to receive the treatment for a successful educational program and allows another student the joy and responsibility of helping the AS student succeed.
In 1991, F.G.E. Happe published an article on AS and declared that those students with AS cannot understand or see why something is relevant. AS students notice the things that are interesting to them, not necessarily what is important. This may defeat the purpose of having them in a regular classroom where the focus is to build upon old ideas with new relevant ideas. Williams gives many tips on how to keep the AS student on task. She believes that "Severe concentration problems benefit from timed work sessions ... Children with AS can sometimes be stubborn; they need firm expectations and a structured program that teaches them that compliance with rules leads to positive reinforcement (this kind of program motivates the child with AS to be productive, thus enhancing self-esteem and lowering stress levels, because the child sees himself as competent)." Also, the use of a buddy, again, will help if the buddy is allowed to keep the AS student on task.

A lack of concentration can create a huge uphill battle for the AS student and the teacher trying to teach him or her. A teacher must realize the qualities and characteristics of an AS student and build curriculum around them. If an AS student is obsessed with animals, as is Jerry Newport, the educator must not ignore that fact, but build upon it. One example of a successful assignment allowed the AS student to study the home of the animals that he was most interested in and this, in turn, kept him on task as he also learned about rain forests. "The teacher must actively encourage the child with AS to leave his or her inner thoughts/fantasies behind and refocus on the real world. This is a constant battle, as the comfort of that inner world is believed to be much more attractive than anything in real life" (Williams).

For a long time, educators have believed in the idea that inclusion and mainstreaming is necessary in order for their classrooms not to be limited. Only recently have those thoughts been put on the chopping block for discussion. Five years ago I was placed in a heterogeneous English class. Until that point I had been in the upper-level regents track (homogeneously grouped) of a small public high school in New York State. I was forced into a situation of development levels much different from my own. The teacher spent so much of his time trying to include and accommodate the students with special needs that he left the rest of us to fend for ourselves. I had no challenge in that class; the standard acceptable behavior had been lowered in order for those students who could not work at a rapid pace to be allowed to feel as though they were successful. Although my mainstreaming experience did not focus upon AS students specifically, the idea remains constant. Is it worth the effort to include students of special needs in classrooms of students with no learning or behavior difficulties?

I was forced to sit through hours of aloud reading that was monotone and below-average (both characteristics of AS). The reading assignments outside of class were much shorter than my previous classes in order for everyone to stay on task (another difficulty of students with AS). I was pulled down to the level of those students. We were not able to continue building upon our knowledge base and expanding our abilities to work. The difficulties I faced were based on the fact that special needs students were placed in a regular classroom. If mainstreaming is to be successful, the classroom must not remain "regular." It must be allowed some exceptions in order for each and every student to be successful. A classroom that considers only special needs is losing out on a large part of the educational process and, at the same time, using a large chunk of the teacher's energy and taking up large amounts of time.

Twachtman-Cullen, a speech-language pathologist with a Ph.D. in special education, quotes Haim Ginott: "I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom ... As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous ... In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a
crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized." Although this may hold true in a regular heterogeneous classroom, Twachtman-Cullen says this "theory doesn't always translate into practice, at least not for children with the enigmatic and complex disorder know an Asperger's Syndrome." A student that does not understand what is happening around him or her can not be taught by a person who thinks he or she can control their behavior.

Although there are many problems associated with it, AS is not an entirely negative presence to have in the classroom. Some teachers may find it successful to incorporate some of a student's obscure interests into the curriculum. Mae, the same little girl who thought her teacher was trying to kill her by having her hold her breathe, has a goal to find the cure for AIDS. She also has a knack for computers and takes notes in class on her own notebook computer. An educator could easily incorporate a lesson on AIDS or computers into almost any curriculum. And, the teacher can have the student with AS help prepare for and teach the lesson. This practice has many benefits. First, it keeps the AS student on task and involved with his/her class work. Second, it allows new material to be presented to the class without too much difficulty. Last, the regular students in the class will see the AS student as normal and maybe even "cool." AS students have difficulty maintaining peer relationships because they appear to be odd and eccentric; this would help them be accepted.

Success is something not taken for granted with AS students. Each victory is a step forward, no matter how small. Although parents, therapists and doctors play an essential role in an AS student's life, the position of teacher is just as important. Asperger's syndrome is not easily understood and affects each person differently. However, this is not a reason to give up. Educators must keep fighting to have these students educated and not generalize about where they should be placed. The decision should be made on a one-by-one basis whether the student is mainstreamed or not. Teachers can play a vital role in helping children with AS learn to negotiate the world around them. Because children with AS are frequently unable to express their fears and anxieties, it is up to significant adults to make it worthwhile for them to leave their safe inner fantasy lives for the uncertainties of the external world. Professionals who work with these youngsters in schools must provide the external structure, organization and stability that they lack. Using creative teaching strategies with individuals suffering from Asperger syndrome is critical, not only to facilitate academic success, but also to help them feel less alienated from other human beings and less overwhelmed by the ordinary demands of everyday life.
Works Cited


