Teaching Strategies for Autistic Students

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Abstract

This article explores teaching and the educational environment with the Autistic student in mind. It begins by approaching the medical and social models of disability and discussing the implications of their use in an educational setting, focusing on why a social model of disability best supports the learning of Autistic and neurodivergent students in order to be as inclusive as possible in the education setting. The article then goes into detail on the strategies found within the support tiers of Communication, Visual Aide, and Environment in a classroom setting to bolster the success of Autistic and neurodivergent students. This includes a comprehensive breakdown of best ways to support students in these areas, and why this is important. Focussing on the idea that all behavior is communication, the article discusses the importance of inclusivity in the classroom, and preserving the agency of Autistic students. This article aims to give educators the tools they need to support students who are Autistic and neurodivergent, so that they are experiencing less stress and an improved school experience across their learning journey.

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Resumé

Cet article explore l'enseignement et l'environnement pédagogique dans l'optique de l'élève autiste. Il commence par aborder les modèles médicaux et sociaux du handicap et discute des implications de leur utilisation dans un cadre pédagogique, en se concentrant sur les raisons pour lesquelles un modèle social du handicap soutient mieux l'apprentissage des élèves autistes et issus de la neurodiversité afin d'être aussi inclusif que possible en contexte pédagogique. L'article décrit ensuite en détail les stratégies utilisées en classe dans les domaines de la communication, de l'aide visuelle et de l'environnement pour favoriser la réussite des élèves autistes et issus de la neurodiversité. L'article comprend une analyse détaillée des meilleures façons de soutenir les élèves dans ces domaines et de leur importance. En se concentrant sur l'idée que tout comportement est une forme de communication, l'article discute de l'importance de l'inclusion dans la classe et de la préservation de l'autonomie des élèves autistes. Cet article vise à donner aux éducateurs les outils dont ils ont besoin pour soutenir les élèves autistes et issus de la neurodiversité, afin de réduire le stress des élèves et de leur offrir une expérience scolaire améliorée tout au long de leur parcours d'apprentissage.

Keywords
neurodivergent learning, school-based learning, autism, learning, teaching, educational support
Mots-clés
apprentissage neurodivergent, apprentissage scolaire, autisme, apprentissage, enseignement, soutien éducatif

I received my autism diagnosis ten years ago as an adult, having grown up in a small town in BC at the base of a provincial park, where we hiked often, and had a musical, close-knit family. I have lived in many cities and towns and attended post-secondary school in Calgary. I am a parent of two sons in middle and high school, respectively, here in the Okanagan. One of my sons has an autism diagnosis, and the other self-identifies as Autistic but does not require the same support as their brother.

As far as working goes, I have done many different things in my life. Now I am a chair of the Autism Alliance of Canada and founding editor of the recently award-winning Canadian Journal of Autism Equity through McMaster University. The Autism Alliance of Canada is a national alliance working together for the rights of Autistic people and their families. We address priority issues that Autistic people and their loved ones face across their lifespan. We do this by facilitating dialogue, advancing research, and working with governments to develop and implement a National Autism Strategy.

Autism is a brain difference that is fundamental to who Autistic people are. Autistic people develop differently compared to non-Autistic people. Autistic individuals think, move, interact, sense, and process differently than what people might expect. They are atypical in a world that expects people to be typical. Autistic people have qualities that make them similar to other Autistic people.

These qualities include differences in communication. Many Autistics communicate with others in ways that aren't typical or usual - in how they experience and display their feelings, interact with others, form and understand their friendships and relationships, engage in the things they are passionate about or experts in, imagine, and play, see patterns and connections, and perceive or sense the world around them. I try never to use the word 'disorder' to describe

Autism - Autistic people talk about themselves as different, not disordered. Autism is not a disease or an illness. So, it is not curable or treatable.

Autism affects communication and interaction with others and can often have many other significant factors that impact an Autistic person's life, such as sensory challenges or other co-occurring conditions. I am usually non-speaking when I feel overwhelmed or am under stress. I experience many sensory sensitivities in my day-to-day life that fluctuate with my stress levels. These include sensitivity to smells, sounds, and too many people, as well as difficulty processing my environment and channeling the expression of my thoughts and ideas. I also have quite a few co-occurring conditions along with being Autistic. This is common and ongoing and it's a part of being Autistic.

Many of the strategies in this paper have worked for me personally. They have helped foster the success of my children and my colleagues. These are evidence-based strategies with research behind them that demonstrate they work. I want to acknowledge that I know teachers work hard with very little support and that there are many students in the classroom. Still a teacher can make a massive positive impact on the confidence and sense of self of neurodiverse students.

In this paper, I use identity-first (Autistic person) language to describe Autistic people and students, rather than person-first language (person with Autism). This is intentional. When we think about identity-first language, we recognize that we use it all the time! We use identity-first language for positive and neutral descriptors without a second thought. For example, I could describe myself by saying: "I am white." "I am Canadian," "I am intelligent." "I am a parent." "I am a hockey fan." What we don't often do is describe ourselves using person-first language. That would be quite awkward: "I have whiteness," "I have Canadianness," "I have intelligence," "I have offspring," or "I have a fan interest in hockey." I use identity-first language to talk about parts of myself, and I feel that my disability deserves the same treatment.

What do we often use person-first language for? Well, we say things like: "I have a cold," "I have the flu," "I have measles," or "I have cancer." It's important to recognize that we often use person-first language for describing undesirable situations. You can also lose things that you can have - they can usually go away at some point. Autism is not like that.

For a long time, professional fields were using person-first language to talk about certain people, saying "person with autism," "person with a disability," and so on. They felt this need to separate autism, or the disability from the person - to appreciate the person separately from their being Autistic or disabled. But we know now this is harmful; it is stigmatising. It negatively casts Autism by extending so much effort to disassociate the person from their autism or disability (Botha et al., 2021).

It's perfectly appropriate to ask people which language they prefer, or if not, use the language that is the consensus in that community. The Blind, Deaf, and Autistic communities all prefer identity-first language (Zola, 1993).

There is much empowerment that Autistic people and their families can receive from using strength-based language, and I encourage you to use this type of language when communicating with Autistic students in the classroom (Zola, 1993).

This paper briefly introduces the differences between the medical and social models of disability. It also includes some strategies that can be employed in the classroom to improve the learning environment and student experience.

In my opinion, autism is not a medical condition, not a disorder. There is no correct way to develop neurologically. Finding out that I am Autistic brought me an overwhelming sense of relief. I could look back on many of my childhood and adolescent experiences in a way that was

clarifying. Autism is a different way of thinking (and more), and Autistic people contribute to the diversity of cognitive thinking. These differences in neurology should be respected, celebrated, and given as many opportunities as those who are not Autistic in their neurology.

There are two main lenses through which people in the professional and medical sectors tend to look at autism. They are the medical and social models of disability.

In the medical model of disability, disability is diagnosed as the disabled person having an abnormality or a deficiency. Typically, this deficiency needs to be treated, cured, or otherwise requires a plan to be put in place for the individual. In this case, autism is seen as something that needs to be treated and cured, and autistic behaviours are seen as symptoms that should be reduced or eliminated (Waltz, 2008).

In the social model of disability, however, disability is seen as neutral; it is considered just a difference. The person is not disabled by their Autism, for example, but rather by the barriers in the environment and society around them. Disability Rights advocates, including autistic advocates, are trying to move the world towards the social model of disability. In the social model of disability, barriers are removed, rather than disabled people needing to be changed. When barriers are removed, people are more independent and have equal societal opportunities.

Jac den Houting is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, where they investigate structural and systemic inequities in autism research. In a TEDx talk, Jac described a shopping mall to compare the social and medical models of disability in the context of autism (den Houting, 2019). They describe being Autistic in a shopping mall. The malls are loud, they're brightly lit, they're unpredictable, and they're full of people.

The medical model of disability says that people are disabled because there's a problem with how their brain processes that input because that person is Autistic. In the social model of disability, the person doesn't struggle in a shopping mall because there is something wrong with them. They struggle because the shopping mall is not designed in a way that meets their needs. If we started designing shopping malls that were quiet, dimly lit, predictable, and sparsely populated, people would still be Autistic. Still, they might not be disabled by shopping malls anymore.

Why should people be thinking about the social model of disability? There are a few main reasons. One of them is that when we approach autism from the social model of disability it empowers the disabled person and promotes their independence.

We should strive to create an inclusive environment for disabled students every day. An inclusive environment happens when we address how disabled students are being denied **full participation**, exposed to **prejudicial attitudes**, and inaccessible **social activities**. These are real issues that create the current barriers that disable Autistic students.

Education and training are important to reduce stereotypes of autism and to increase understanding of the complex needs of Autistic students to include students in school settings where proper accommodations are currently not in place. Inclusion is about offering the same activities to everyone while providing support and services to accommodate people's differences. What inclusion means for any one student will be different because autistic people are different. Autism affects our communication and interactions with others. Although Autistic students can share common traits, strategies that work on one Autistic student *may not work* on all Autistic students. **Therefore, it's important to find support strategies that fit each student rather than trying to fit the student into a support strategy.**
The strategies that we apply in the classroom for Autistic students can work for all

neurodiverse students, even students who are not yet diagnosed, and they help everyone in the classroom. That makes strategies like these even more valuable for students and teachers.

A great strategy is to use the student's focused interests to benefit learning. Many autistic people have one or more interests that are very important to them, and often a teacher is able to motivate the Autistic student to work on classroom activities relevant to their focused interest and increase their learning. Working with focused interests can help the student be more engaged, complete a larger volume of work, stay motivated, and hopefully focus across a range of subjects. It helps teachers to establish relationships with the student and encourage student engagement. It's helpful to talk with parents to determine what focused interests the student might have. These focused interests **should** be written into the individualised education plan, or IEP, and not just forgotten about but utilised in lesson planning.

For example, suppose the teacher is doing a unit on Japanese culture and the student has a focused interest in trains. In that case, the teacher might encourage the student to explore the rail systems of Japan. Or if the teacher is teaching about Ancient Rome and the student's focused interest is the Marvel character Thor, have the student write a script of Thor interviewing Julius Caesar.

Teachers can also use focused interests to motivate the student by allowing them to experience their focused interests after getting some classwork done. For example, if there are ten questions in a textbook to get through, and the student likes trains, perhaps at the end of the ten questions, they can watch the YouTube video on the trains they like.

We can break down support into three broad categories: Communication support, Visual Support, and Environmental Support.

When we think about **communicating** with students, we must remember that each student will process information at their own pace and in their own way. This is especially true for Autistic students. For most Autistic students, receiving information verbally can be challenging, especially for extended periods. Oral communication is a powerful tool, but it can be draining to have to consciously interpret what another person is saying and decide on an appropriate response. In addition to the verbal content, one must consider tone, vocal inflections, facial expression, and body language and filter out confusing sensory input. Some students will find it helpful to give themselves extra time to process verbal information or have some of their interactions take place in less overwhelming environments.

To best support Autistic students, teachers should limit lecture times if possible. Giving too much verbal information at once is difficult for any student to process; for an Autistic student, this difficulty is magnified. Allowing the student time to respond is important, as Autistic students will often need more time to process and form a response to questions. Inserting breaks or the use of visual supports can help a lot. Some Autistic students find it helpful to doodle or stim (physical motions that reduce stress and aid in sensory regulation) while listening to a teacher speak, as that helps to process verbal input. It's important to find out what works for the individual student in processing verbal information and make accommodations.

Working one-on-one with students to keep them engaged will benefit the student's learning experience. **I understand that working one on one might feel next to impossible in the classroom when there are so many students per class, and so much content to get through. It must feel like there is a lack of resources to apply the strategies needed to provide the proper support for the students, and for this, I don't have an answer.** I just know that the times when teachers are able to engage with the student one on one, those times are much more productive and less stressful for the student, and provide an opportunity to build a relationship

between the student and teacher which helps in future interactions and the student's learning.

Before beginning to communicate with the student, make sure their name is used. Often, Autistic students will be so engaged in what they're doing that simply talking to them will not turn their attention to you. So, first, use their name to secure their attention, and wait for their attention before saying what you need to say.

When giving instructions, understand that for most Autistic students, it can be hard to process oral directions. What can make it easier for the student is to receive instructions one step at a time. **This might feel overwhelming for the teacher because of the time it takes to deliver classroom instructions this way, but if possible, give steps out one by one because it will allow time to process the information and allow the student to respond if necessary,** such as if the student gets stuck on the first step.

This looks like instructing the student and allowing them to complete the step before going on to the next instruction or step. Let the student ask questions during this time. It can be overwhelming otherwise, and the student can lose interest in what they're doing – all the steps at once are simply too much! After this, you can move on to subsequent instructions similarly. **Again, a strategy like this in the classroom will help not only the Autistic students but all those neurodiverse and those who are yet to be diagnosed.**

Using concrete language is important, especially when describing abstract concepts. **Autistic students have a difficult time understanding abstract ideas.** For example, a teacher saying to the student something like "I will be with you in a minute" can easily be misinterpreted, especially if it takes the teacher longer than a minute to get back to the student. Saying instead, "I will be with you as soon as I finish this task" is going to be processed and understood much more easily.

Another example of when something should be worded more concretely is when my Autistic son had some instructions for an assignment that said, "Type your answers in full sentences." When I looked at his work, I noticed that this is what he did. He bluntly answered each question, sometimes just saying "No." Or "They were always there." My son didn't realise the teacher meant for the answer to be worded in a way that included part of the question so that whoever was marking it would understand both the question and the answer in the sentence. Some students might know that this is what the teacher meant when they said, "type your answers in full sentences," but for my son, that was not clear. He was following the instructions and answering properly. What would be more helpful is to have the instructions be worded more clearly, saying exactly what was expected in the assignment.

One way to create communication opportunities for students is by assigning classroom roles. Roles in the classroom promote independence and empower the Autistic student. Another technique is giving the student an option of choices in communication, like saying, "would you like this or that?" A sense of choice and control empowers an Autistic student in the classroom because so much about the school environment feel the opposite! School can feel like an out-of-control experience.

It is important, however, to never pressure or insist on a verbal response. In fact, if possible, it's very helpful to learn to use alternative ways of communicating. **For me, the less I have to communicate verbally during the day, the less I am drained by the end of the day,** so I really appreciate it when people allow me space to communicate non-verbally. I'm typically fine being spoken to, it's responding verbally all the time that I find particularly draining. The use of waves, a thumbs up or down, or other uses of concrete body language, and using texting apps are all helpful communication tools for me. Unfortunately, I never learned sign language. This is

something I can improve upon, but as I said, I typically use texting platforms when I am non-speaking as well as basic gestures.

Visual supports are important because, as I just explained, verbal processing information can be exhausting! Anything that helps a student with processing that input is important in managing stress levels and increasing learning outcomes. As I wrote earlier, oral communication can be a powerful tool. .However, most Autistic students have difficulty understanding spoken direction and instruction, which is why visual supports are so important to integrate into the classroom.

Visual supports can effectively address social, behavioural, cognitive, communicative, academic, and outcomes surrounding school readiness. **They can provide students with an alternative mode of communication, often reducing frustration for the student because it improves their understanding in the area where visual support is used.**

Visual supports help with changes and transitions and help students make choices and express their needs. Visual supports provide structure for students who need it and help all students, not just Autistic students.

When I talk about visual supports, I am talking about photos, drawings, symbols, and lists. I am talking about objects, written words, visual timetables, now and next cards, and the arrangement of the environment. **I am talking about anything that removes the need for verbal language.** The more visual supports like these are used in the classroom, the more engaged your Autistic students can be and the less stress they are likely to experience during their day.

Visual supports are so beneficial because they present information in a way that helps Autistic students focus on key elements. They can increase on-task behaviour and the independence of Autistic students.

When presenting visual support, it can be more helpful to stand behind the student than be in front of the student so that they are looking at the visual rather than the teacher. The language the teacher uses to describe the visual support should be clear yet concise so that the use and function of the support are well understood.

Some visual supports that are used in the classroom **could** be accessible to all students, and some visual supports might be just for the individual student. The teacher should discuss the visual with the student or students by introducing the visual and explaining what they're going to be using it for. I don't recommend having visuals in the classroom with no explanation of them.

I would recommend having a timetable for the day displayed in the classroom and now and next board. These are incredibly helpful on a couple of levels. They are visual reminders and are easy for the student to access in times of forgetfulness. They ensure a routine, order, and schedule of the day, which can help the student self-regulate.

For visual supports for social outcomes, having a word list of simple conversation starters can be helpful for Autistic students who find it difficult to communicate with their peer group. An Okanagan group of high school students created a deck of cards for just this purpose – and called it Basecamp Cards. They sell them through Amazon, and there are two levels - depending on whether your student is in higher or lower grades. Such a tool may be appropriate for a visual prompt for social engagement.

When thinking of the classroom **environment**, and how to structure it to be inclusive for Autistic students, a key consideration is how much or how little stress the student will be exposed

to. For example, even a little bit of negative reinforcement can make an Autistic student **shut down**. Employing positive reinforcement strategies instead of negative reinforcement strategies is therefore paramount. Punishing the student will often make the situation worse. **Teaching strategies of affirmation, validation, and praise are key in Autistic students recognizing where their strengths lie and how best to continue applying them to maximise their educational experience.**

One of the keys to productive learning outcomes is reducing stress for the student. Stress can come from many different sources. An Autistic student can become stressed by sensory stimuli, the classroom environment, physical comfort levels, hunger or tiredness, and input from other people. Even a little stress can create larger problems with the learning environment and information processing. Stress makes learning difficult and reducing it should be a priority.

Teachers should be asking themselves, how inclusive is my classroom environment? Are the students getting equal access to activities in the classroom? Is the Autistic student being denied participation in anything, or does the classroom environment limit their independence? **I'd like to see disability rights and inclusive attitudes taught into the curriculum so that all students can learn how to be inclusive and mindful of those different around them, as well as learn about the prejudicial attitudes that might be creating barriers for those who are different.**

The student needs to avoid sensory overload because this is an experience that negatively impacts the Autistic student. However, as much as I've discussed how it's helpful to have visual support in the classroom, there can be a limit to that in terms of how posters and visual displays can create sensory overload. I also recommend including a quiet space in the classroom and considering seating arrangements around loud students or noisy equipment.

Since routines can change, teachers should give time for the student to process these changes and transitions. Transitions need to be as stress-free as possible. For small transitions, referring to a now and next board is appropriate, or verbally referencing the activities and transitions that need to occur prior and giving time for processing would be appropriate.

For major transitions, like class changes, the student should be aware of any transitions or changes happening in their academic or school life as soon as the school has decided that transition is to take place and before the transition is to occur. The student would then be given the appropriate space, time, and accommodation to adjust and respond to the transition. That could look like meeting the previous and new teacher with the resource teacher and appropriate others (such as potential caregivers) to go through the change in class. Discuss what the situation was like before, what it will be like now, and why it needs to change, including how the change will be better. **Lastly, explaining to the student what they can expect after the transition is key.** This process goes a very long way in adjusting to the significant change and moving forward. **Autistic students need to know what they can expect in their environment and what's expected of them.**

Understanding behavioural expectations are important for the learning experience. Teachers can help Autistic students in this area by establishing classroom rules early on and ensuring they are clear and understandable. These classroom rules **could** be available online, visually, or individually handed out to the student.

A structured and routine classroom environment as well as setting time limits on activities

throughout the day is beneficial in reducing this stress and making things move smoothly. This is usually more successful when reminders are given surrounding transitions or the end of certain activities. **Autistic students can become very involved in what they're doing, and when this happens, it can be difficult to transition them to the next subject.** So an emphasis should be placed on early detection of this level of engagement and preparing the student to move on.

The classroom needs strategies around communication, visual support, and an environment to reduce stress and increase learning outcomes. I've been referencing this throughout the session because reducing stress means reducing potential meltdowns and shutdowns that a student might have in the classroom.

When an Autistic student is experiencing a meltdown, it can look like yelling, crying, lashing out, growling, more than typical stimming, and running away, among other things. Meltdowns can be particularly disruptive to the classroom environment. Still, it is important to remember that the experience is especially draining and difficult for the Autistic student, who most certainly does not want to be experiencing a meltdown.

When a student is experiencing a shutdown, it can look like losing focus, becoming detached, losing the inability to express themselves, or being unwilling to continue. These can be less disruptive in the classroom but are not conducive to getting work done and are again, a very draining and a negative experience for the student.

Because both meltdowns and shutdowns are extremely physically and mentally taxing on the Autistic student, they should be avoided if possible. Suppose one of these is occurring for the student. In that case, the teacher must be empathetic and acknowledge their experience without judgement. Autistic people are wired differently, which is part of how they interact with the world.

A meltdown or shutdown is not the time, to address the negative behaviour occurring because, at that time the behaviour is far from the control of the Autistic student. Efforts should be made to address what is causing the meltdown or shutdown. Only then can the behaviour be redirected, and only after the student is regulated should the negative behaviour be addressed, in terms of recommitting to classroom rules if they were broken, and so on.

All behaviour is communication. Meltdowns and shutdowns are forms of communication. Even behaviour that is difficult to understand, that doesn't come verbally, or that is aggressive is communication. It's important to know that for many Autistic students, what they want most is to be understood by those working with them.

Some Autistic students have more support needs than others, the spectrum is very large, and some students will experience a lot of behaviour that requires support from teachers and staff. These Autistic students still deserve their agency and independence to be appreciated, as well as the opportunity to attend school in a low-stress environment.

Low-stress teaching should be included as a part of the IEP for each Autistic student. Describing and including a list of characteristics and triggers for meltdowns and shutdowns in the IEP is also recommended. I would suggest liaising with parents to determine these triggers and recording them in the IEP. In addition to updating it as the year continues teachers and staff become more familiar with the Autistic student.

Part of a low-stress teaching environment is the flexibility for the student to determine how they will participate in roles and activities, giving them a sense of power and control. As I

said before, there is so much about the school environment where Autistic students feel like they are not in control, just swirling about, or performing, or just surviving, and so giving back some sense of empowerment and control will go a long way with the educational experience of the student.

Part of this flexible environment is also giving more social distance and allowing for refresh and rest breaks when needed. When I write about giving more social distance, that's just what I mean. The constant interaction socially at school can be a lot for Autistic students, who often go home and mentally collapse afterward, unable to do much of anything. Some encouragement to socialise at school should occur. Still, it is my recommendation that this should never cross over into a demand or pressure to socialise.

A refresh break is where the student might be distracted for a few moments. For example, they could take a few deep breaths, wiggle their arms and legs, stretch, or make funny faces, or any activity that helps relieve tension for the student would be acceptable in a refresh break.

A rest break should be given when all other attempts to reduce stress have failed and should be as neutral and non-judgemental as possible. This is not using toys or distractions, but it can be as simple as having the student put their head down on the desk. If a shutdown or meltdown does occur, the student should be given a safe, quiet place to process.

Hopefully, this article is insightful or thought-provoking. As I was developing the article, I knew I wouldn't be able to fit everything I wanted to write about into it. There is always more that we can talk about when thinking about the complex needs of Autistic students, especially those with higher support needs.

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