

Chapter 7

Visuals in the Special Needs Classroom



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Abstract This investigation is centred around my personal reflection on the usefulness and positive effects of visual stimulation in special needs classrooms. This document provides a journal entry and personal recommendations for teaching methods and classroom practice using visual stimuli and prompts. Through observations of students with additional needs in their classroom environment, I was able to perceive how and why visual stimulation can make a difference to students with special needs and how my own opinions changed throughout the research process. This chapter discusses how visual stimuli and prompts can enhance student engagement and improve students' emotional well-being in the classroom.

Journal entry—April 10th, 2017—Discovering Visuals

Looking around, I can see that all the children are focused on getting their daily schedules correct – this is important to them. They are all listening so intently and putting their pictures in the right order. I wonder how much of a difference it makes to their day ... I can understand why they [visual schedules] might be so important to them. The unknown is where anxiety stems from, and these kids already have enough to worry about without having a lack of direction.

Introduction

I am Brooke. I am a daughter, a girlfriend, a sister, a homeowner, a student, an educator, and currently, a pre-service teacher. I am completing my final teaching placement at a reception to Year 7 primary school. During my placement, I developed a personal, professional learning journal based on the effects visual stimuli have on students in a special needs class.

The focus group who was observed as a part of this investigation included 13 students ranging from ages 9 to 12. Each student had been diagnosed with a learning

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disability, and a number of the students also have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This investigation is not based on traditional, mainstream classrooms, but focuses on students who are considered to have special needs.

This investigation was carried out over a three-week period during Term 2 of the school year. During this time, a number of scheduled observations were made and recorded while I was still fully engaging with the students.

The purpose of this investigation was to develop a deeper understanding of teaching strategies and understand how a range of visual prompts and stimuli could influence students at the school. Through this investigation, I was also able to develop my own understanding of students' additional needs and, ultimately, use this understanding to become a better educator.

Who Was I?

I grew up in a big family. I have an older brother, two younger brothers, and two younger sisters. We are very lucky that we are all healthy and able. None of us has grown up with a disability or any serious illness of any kind, so I really did not know much about these kinds of things as a child.

At the age of 18, I moved away from my home in Adelaide and started a new chapter in the city of Melbourne. This was the first time I had ever really seen disability up close. I dated a man whose younger brother had Down syndrome. At first, I was hesitant because I did not know how to act or what to say to this young boy. I had no experience and felt inadequate when communicating with him, but that all changed over the next few months. Soon I realised that, although this young boy was different, he was still just a young boy. I began to build a relationship with him that I had previously thought was impossible and I began to cherish the time we spent together.

At the age of 19, I moved back home and completed my Certificate III in Home and Community Care. I knew that helping people was important to me, so I pursued the avenue of caring in people's homes. During the time I worked in this field, my eyes were opened to a whole world of people living with illness and disabilities. I had never considered how many people needed help just getting through their daily routine; how much assistance some individuals required just to get by.

At the age of 20, I enrolled at Charles Darwin University and began a Bachelor of Education, Primary degree. Over the next four years, I completed my teaching practicums in schools, volunteered in several organisations, and worked as the Assistant Director of an Out of School Hours Care program. In each of these situations, I met children with additional needs: some with autism spectrum disorder, and others with extreme allergies.

I did not have much exposure to or involvement in developing learning opportunities for children with a disability until the beginning of my final school practicum. I was someone who had seen disability from a distance, even worked with people who lived with disability, but I had never completely understood it. I was unaware

of what factors could affect people with disabilities; what could make the difference between a great day and a complete breakdown.

Who Am I Now?

Sometimes, new knowledge provides me with answers to questions I never even thought to ask. Originally, I planned to research how visual stimulation affects curriculum-based learning in the classroom but, after observing the students, I realised that was not the question I needed to ask. I began to notice that, in the special needs classroom, there were other priorities that I had not considered in previous mainstream experiences. I found that simply getting through an entire day without particular individuals in the class having a breakdown or shutdown was a huge achievement in itself, and that is where my questions began. I considered that learning can only be done when the students are attentive, involved, and calm enough to focus. Through pondering this, I observed what made the difference for these children: what made them have a positive day and what their triggers were.

When I first began observing the visual prompts that were used with the students, I was very focused on the learning side of things. I looked at how visual stimulation during teaching affected students' interest in activities. I wanted to see how pictures, images, or word visuals could fit with the teaching and learning cycle. I know now that something much bigger was happening for the students regarding their visual experiences within the classroom (Bryan and Gast 2000). I began to see that the students relied on visuals to help them feel less anxious, more prepared, increasingly motivated, and more engaged in all classroom experiences.

Before this professional experience in a school, I did not know how important certain factors were to children with special needs. I can see now that having a routine helps with levels of anxiety and unease, giving individuals the chance to get through their day without the level of stress they might feel without those prompts. As someone who has struggled with a high level of anxiety throughout my adult life, I can relate to and appreciate the importance of feeling in control of daily routine, even if that just means sticking images of tasks onto a personalised folder.

Over the several weeks, I observed the class, I learned that these children, who all have disabilities, rely heavily on routine and preparation. As a part of this, I have recognised two main factors that influence students' attitudes and engagement: visual-based behaviour and emotion charts, and detailed visual displays of classroom routines.

Observing the use of these methods in the classroom, I could see that the children felt at ease and comfortable in their environment. I was able to develop my own appreciation of visual cues and prompts to help with communication between teacher and student.

Numerous times during the observation period, I was able to see how the students interacted with the teacher when they were upset. What I found especially interesting and completely new to me was that some of them did not have the words to express

their feelings or emotions in times of struggle. In order to create an opportunity for these children to express themselves, their teacher had created an emotions chart that used images and words for a range of diverse emotions.

This chart would be given to the student during a moment when they felt overwhelmed or unable to say how they felt and they would be able to move the arrow to the emotion they felt. What I found most interesting about this visual chart was how well it worked. It was incredible the change it made for the children who had been crying or refusing to do work. Suddenly, once they were able to tell someone how they felt or, at the very least, point to a picture that expressed how they were feeling, it was clear they felt relief. They could then move on with what they were doing because someone else knew what was going on.

Moments such as seeing children use the emotions chart created experiences for me that made me realise that, although the children I was observing have disabilities, their additional needs make sense. I realised that having someone understand how you are feeling when you have trouble expressing yourself is something everyone can appreciate and that feeling safe and prepared for the day ahead is something that everyone needs (McLeod 2015). This completely changed my view, not only of the power of visual prompts but also of children's special needs.

I feel strongly about bettering myself and learning new things, so investigating how to help children with special needs feel more comfortable in their environment has been very important to me. I have been exposed to new opportunities and have been lucky enough to develop some incredible relationships through my learning journey. However, most of all, I have seen things through a new perspective, gaining an appreciation and a little more insight into how these children live.

Of This Much I Am Sure

The visual prompts used on a daily basis were drawn from the TEACCH program. TEACCH stands for teaching, expanding, appreciating, collaborating, cooperating, and holistic (University of North Carolina 2016). The TEACCH program was developed by the University of North Carolina and includes services, training programs, and research, to enhance the quality of life for individuals with ASD and for their families. Implementing the TEACCH method includes incorporating visual and written information to support or supplement verbal communication, as well as structured support for social communication. The TEACCH method is not a syllabus, but instead is a framework to support the achievement of educational, social, and emotional goals (TEACCH 2018). This framework includes physical organisation, individualised schedules, work (activity) systems, and visual structure of materials in tasks and activities (TEACCH 2018).

The goal of the TEACCH program is to promote meaningful engagement in activities, flexibility, independence, and self-efficacy (University of North Carolina 2016). I have seen this in action in the classroom and, in my opinion, this program really works. It truly makes a difference to the children it is implemented for.

There is evidence that visual stimuli and prompts can be helpful for learning for children with disabilities and also (and more in line with my own research) with their emotional stability. Hodgdon (2011), in her book about improving communication, explains that visual tools can help students express themselves better and also enhance their understanding. I found that, during the research process, there were many instances where the children were able to express themselves better because of the visual aids they were provided with. I also saw many times that students were able to understand a topic or idea better once a visual prompt was introduced to the learning activity.

This research venture has definitely opened my eyes to how visuals within the classroom can really make a difference to students' lives. As with every part of learning, each child will react to visual prompts and stimuli in different ways but, as a whole, there are many benefits to these kinds of tools.

Conclusion

During my journey, I found out a number of things: I love working with special needs children, I always have more to learn, and we all think and feel in similar ways, but some people just need a little extra help (TEACCH 2018). How do visual stimuli and prompts influence special needs children in the classroom? To answer this in one sentence, I would say “in every single way”. The children use visual prompts for everything they do during their day at school. There are pictures and name tags displayed for them to remember where to put their bags as they arrive at school, they each have a daily schedule using images of activities to refer to throughout the day, and they all find it easier to go home at the end of the day once their charts are completed.

There is so much more to the purpose of visual stimulation in a classroom setting that I ever could have imagined. Curriculum learning set aside, the focus children within the classroom are happier, more confident and more able to achieve what is required of them each day because of a variety of pictures, images, words, and colours that they refer to constantly.

References

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