Adaptive Learning and Special Needs All Grades Overview

General Introduction

The purpose of catechesis is communion with Jesus (see National Directory of Catechesis, 19), so fostering relationship and community is central to our task as catechists. Therefore, in the spirit of the purpose of catechesis, the Adaptive Learning and Special Needs strategies seek to further connections among all the learners, emulating a small Christian community. While most adaptations reference a specific learning or special need, there is value for all learners in using these adaptations because they promote an interactive environment and expose the children to different ways of learning and living our Catholic faith.

The alternate activities are suggested to compensate for particular skills that an individual learner is either lacking or needs support in developing. Particular diagnostic labels for specific disabilities are not listed because they are not particularly helpful for the purpose of these adaptations. For example, activities that require drawing from memory will be challenging and can be frustrating for learners who struggle with fine motor skills or for children who think very concretely, have cerebral palsy, or face other similar cognitive limitations. Likewise, children with autism may also struggle with this type of activity, or they may be very good at drawing.

The following learning support needs are specifically referenced:

- Learners who have difficulties with attention or impulse control

- Learners with writing or fine motor difficulties (such as dysgraphia)

- Learners with reading difficulties (such as dyslexia)

- Learners who are blind or visually impaired

- Learners with language difficulties

- Learners with intellectual/developmental delays (such as autism)

The alternative adaptations are suggestions to enhance participation and interaction of learners with different support needs. However, as a catechist and catechetical leader, you should always seek to get to know all of the children you walk with in faith. In doing this, you will also learn other strategies that are particularly helpful for individual children. As you look for the specific support needs of each child, you will also get a sense of the variety of gifts and interests that each child possesses. This will guide your preparation and ability to match peers in pairs and small groups to enhance learning and participation.

Impact of Disability on Learning[1]

It is important to be aware of possible impacts of a disability on learning. This helps us to prioritize our focus and task, so we can maximize the opportunities for learning our Catholic faith. Remember, we do not diagnose. Also know that sometimes symptoms of disabilities may be present, but they may have a different cause, such as family stress due to unemployment, divorce, or death. Challenging behavior in the catechetical environment or liturgy can be an opportunity for pastoral engagement if approached with the right heart. Challenging behavior should not be approached as something to be judged. It needs to be evaluated, so it can be understood and dealt with appropriately.

Learning for individuals with learning disabilities will typically impact some or all of the following areas: attention, hyperactivity, memory, perception, cognition, fine and gross motor skills, general lateral

orientation (cross body movements), emotional development, and maturity.

Learning for individuals with developmental disabilities will be impacted similarly, but typically more profoundly. Implications for the learning environment emphasize routine, concrete concepts and smaller increments of time for attention expectations. Children with developmental disabilities may be more apt to form strong attachments. While their interests may be more in line with "functional age" (which is typically related to IQ testing) rather than chronological age, there is still a similarity of basic needs as typically developing peers. One example of a consideration that relates to this is the type of pictures used as illustrations. You should not use pictures appropriate for a four-year-old with someone who is ten, even if that is his or her reading level.

Some Strategy Suggestions[2]

- Attend to Communication: Receptive, Expressive, Combination

  - Is it happening?

  - What are the capabilities?

  - Use shorter phrases

  - Avoid speaking in the negative

  - Wait before repeating yourself

  - Visualize sequenced directions

  - Avoid misunderstandings

- Preparation for Transitions: Advance Warning Systems

  - Verbal countdown

- Picture or word schedule

- Concrete language

- Use visuals to reinforce what is said

- Write stories to help anticipate new situations

- Think alongside the person; understand how he or she learns and interacts with the world

- Behavior Supports

  - Schedules, text, or pictures: promote independence; provide predictability; allow self-management

  - Make routines comfortable

  - Task analysis

  - Shaping

  - Prompt and fade

- Ask for suggestions/guidance from parents and school teacher/catechist.

Communication and Behavior Across All Abilities[3]

Communication and behavior are critical considerations for all learning. Rather than worrying about all the possible disabilities, focus on what supports are needed for communication and behavior management. In trying to be inclusive, catechists and parish catechetical leaders often over concern themselves with all the possible different types of disabilities that the learners in their group may have: learning, developmental (including all the possible expressions of intellectual and/or developmental disabilities), autism, and so on. Yet, it is much more beneficial for you to focus on just two critical pieces

of learning: *communication* and *behavior*.

Communication

Communication is an *active process* of exchanging information and ideas among people. Communication is more than speech. Speech and language include articulation, length of utterances, semantics (meaning), and syntax (grammar). Communication involves managing information: taking it in, processing, storing, retrieving and sending it, and establishing and shifting attention. It includes speech, sign language, gestures, picture systems, augmentative devices, writing, and the use of visual symbols.

We do so much of our communication without thinking or being aware of all that is involved. However, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, particularly autism, need to apply more time and attention to the process of communication. Also, realize that communication happens within the context of a relationship. The quality of the relationship will influence the quality of the communication. Both or all parties need to be engaged for communication to happen, and it requires effort.

Effort involves the cognitive processes and work to learn language. For example, to learn a word, a person must have a mental representation of the word—associating the word with the object, person, or place it represents. The person must learn to express *and* interpret the word. Researchers have observed MRIs that reveal that in a classroom setting, significantly more energy is used by the students than by the teacher. It would be helpful for us to remember this with all our learners in order to fully appreciate the work that is involved, particularly when we expect them to sit quietly for ninety minutes after a full day of school. Are we seeking to actively engage them in the catechetical process?

There are many more layers to the different types of communication, but for now it is enough to recognize the role of communication in the catechetical process; know what supports its occurrence; the types of communication; and when it isn't happening.

Language skills have three modes: receptive, expressive, and combination. Receptive language refers to understanding what we hear. Expressive refers to our level of spoken language. Combination refers to a mixture of both.

Tips for clarity in communication:

- Use shorter phrases

- State instructions in the affirmative

- Wait before repeating yourself

- Illustrated sequenced directions (pictures/picture schedules)

- Avoid misunderstandings

- Use concrete language

- Alternative/Augmented Communication Devices (if available)

- Repetition of concepts in a variety of ways

- Active engagement (involve as many modalities as possible)

- Use music (live and recorded)

- Communicate with parents

Behavior Communicates

Behaviors communicate much about what a person is feeling. While some behaviors are inappropriate for the catechetical setting, if you understand their root cause, you can be more effective in dealing with them. "MEATS" is a helpful mnemonic to remember. Speaking within the context of "misbehavior," it can help you understand the possible causes of a particular type of behavior by factoring in different variables, including physical well-being. While it may not be the only variable impacting a child's behavior, disregard for his or her well-being can frustrate progress.

"Misbehavior" usually happens for five reasons:

1. Medical: meaning the child does not feel well.

2. Escape or avoidance: meaning the child is frustrated from lack of understanding or from the need for a break.

3. Attention: meaning they want you to pay attention to the work that they are doing.

4. Tangibles or activities: meaning the child wants something, whether it's a particular object or to do a particular activity.

5. Sensory stimulation: meaning that a particular action, such as hand flapping, is enjoyable or provides comfort to the child.

To illustrate an example of *escape* motivation, a child may try to escape when the environment feels overwhelming. If there is a celebration of some sort or other change in schedule, and the individual was not prepared for the change in routine, he or she can become anxious. When individuals are not able to calm themselves, they may become agitated and either try to escape or do a repetitive behavior that is calming, like hand flapping. They may even adopt

inappropriate behavior, potentially hurting themselves or someone else. This is why it is important to have a relationship with the individuals you share your faith with. You will recognize when something isn't right, and your relationship with the child will help you to work out a solution.

The preferred action in the above case of changed routine would be preventative, by notifying the parent and the child about the change ahead of time and explaining what will be happening. It would be perfectly acceptable for the parent and child to decide to cover the material at home that day rather than putting the child in an uncomfortable situation. Or, give the parent and child time to prepare for the change so that the child is able to anticipate this change. This may help the child to feel prepared instead of anxious.

Behavior Management

Conditions that may occasion a problem behavior:

- Task demands

- Denied access to desired activities/materials

- Lack of adult attention

- Disorganization/lack or delay of materials and supplies

If expectations are too high or unclear, or if the catechist is unprepared or does not provide adequate attention to children who need it, problem behavior can occur. For example, consider how a child who is accustomed to learning in a classroom setting might react if you take him or her into a church to practice appropriate behavior for Mass. The change in environment can be a challenge. The child will be likely to behave as he or she does in a classroom. The child may speak in a loud voice or even run around. To avoid a

difficult transition, such as moving from a classroom into a church, prepare the child by instructing him or her to walk beside you as you make the transition. Also, share in advance where you are going and what you would like for the child to do when you arrive there.

Another strategy that can be helpful is to identify a *reinforcer* for desired behaviors. Providing access to certain objects or activities can help to promote desired behavior, while denied access to these objects or activities can be the cause of problem behavior. More information on reinforcers will be provided in the section on Applied Behavior Analysis.

General guidelines for behavior management:

- State instructions in the affirmative

- Do not provide alternatives, when all alternatives are not acceptable

- Ask once and follow through

- Limit "down time"

- Stress positive, meaning "catch" him or her being good

- Focus on strengths

By stating instructions in the affirmative, we say what behavior we want, rather than what behavior we don't want. For example, say "walk to your seat" rather than "don't run."

Only offer acceptable choices. Many of us are guilty of asking a child if he or she would like to do something, when "yes" is the only acceptable answer. For example, say "it's time to do puzzle" rather than "do you want to do a puzzle now?"

Our expectations need to be clear. We must make them known

verbally as well as with visual supports, such as picture schedules. When expectations are not met, there are consequences. For example, if behavior issues result due to an activity taking longer than planned, there is no longer time for a desired activity that was to follow it, such as listening to music or playing a game. It is better to use positive rather than negative reinforcement. When positive reinforcement is used, the desired event or thing is earned after completing expectations. Negative reinforcement would take away a desired event or thing if expectations were not met.

It is important to have catechetical sessions well planned with alternatives to fill in extra time that may exist during a lesson. "Down time," meaning time that is not planned for, is an invitation for distraction and "misbehavior."

Praise is more effective than correction or criticism, so that's why it's important to "catch" the children being good. By acknowledging a child's positive behavior, he is she is better able to understand expectations and learn. Praise should also be specific, such as "good listening," "good job of following directions," or "nice cutting on the lines."

When we focus on strengths, we make use of existing skills in learning. For example, if someone does not have expressive language skills, some alternative ways to reinforce learning for them would be to have them point to, cut and paste in, or write their responses. It would be unreasonable to expect a child who does not have expressive language skills to answer questions verbally.

Structure and consistency provide comfort because the learners know what to expect. Some very simple ways of providing this are:

- Be prepared

- Prepare for transitions

- Provide a verbal countdown

- Use pictures or word schedules

- Follow routines

Remembering that communion with Jesus is the primary purpose of catechesis will help us to remain centered in our task. Relationship is the basis of all we do as catechists—to nurture a relationship with Jesus, to nurture relationships among one another, and to experience what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ. The following suggestions for conversation will help you develop an understanding of an individual's needs and gifts. By doing this, you are also demonstrating interest and concern for the quality of each child's own experiences. Do not worry if you feel you are unable to provide all of the needed support at any given time. Discuss your questions with the learner's family with openness for suggested possibilities, focus on presented needs rather than what you think the learner wants, and clarify expectations to make sure you have understood correctly.

Also, you may be surprised at what talents exist in your parish community. Educators, behaviorists, psychologists, and paraprofessional educators are often interested in helping in their parish, if they know that there is a need.

Quick list of general strategies:

- Be as inclusive as possible based on the needs and desires of the child or their family and on the abilities of the parish

- Seek higher levels of inclusion and be sure to include all learners in "mainstream" catechetical group with supports

- Shadow

- "Buddy"

- Extra Assistants

- Incorporate strategies for behavior and language support

- Encourage participation among children with special needs

- Foster connections, either visibly or by reference

- Provide a combination of settings

- Allow for shared prayer and/or activity

- Be flexible and know that some days may call for breaks in learning or an alternate plan

- Establish language to help communicate the learners' needs

- Look for places where one-on-one catechesis make sense

- Provide opportunities for connection with your worship community

- Prepare for the next environment

In addition to the suggestions provided, please remember that even when religious education occurs in a separate environment, the goal is always connection with the larger community in some way. This should happen as often as possible and should include the learners' peers in religious education and the entire worship community.

"Peer Mentor" Partners for Adaptations

There are many times throughout the adaption suggestions for each grade where you will be asked to pair learners who have special needs with a partner. These partners will become "peer mentors" and will be instrumental in helping to support learners with all types of special needs. These peer mentors may help to give a voice to children who do not have expressive language skills, which includes many learners with intellectual/developmental delays (such as autism) or learners with language difficulties. These peer mentors may help learners to express ideas that relate to activity responses. Peer mentors may even be asked to be the hands of learners who have writing or fine motor difficulties (such as dysgraphia), helping them to draw lines to match correct responses or write responses for the learners who do not have the ability to do so.

The essence of what a "peer mentor" partner needs to learn is how to be a good and helpful friend to those who have a special need of any sort. In doing so, the peer mentor will learn what the other child, who has a special need, likes or is good at. He or she will begin to understand the best way to prompt the learner, what the learner does and does not need help with, what might upset the learner, and what might make the learner feel better. Yet the most important thing that the peer mentor partner will learn is that as disciples of Jesus, we are all meant to help and support each other. It is important to emphasize that the peer mentor partners are not "taking care of" individuals with special needs. Rather, they are helping them to express

themselves as they learn and grow as disciples of Jesus. Children are typically great at being effective peer mentor partners if given the opportunity and the support to do so.

As you begin to plan a lesson, it is a good idea to look ahead at the activities in the chapter and at the Adaptive Learning and Special Needs suggestions for each chapter to see where pairing children who have special learning needs with partners is recommended. Building "partnering" into your lesson plans helps to foster interaction between all of your learners, which is good for developing a sense of community. It also minimizes the amount of attention that is placed on those who need additional support more often than others. When pairing partners with each other, consider each child's personality, gifts, and specific needs. For example, as you pair children together, make sure that at least one partner has verbal expressive language, reads, writes, or has the ability to perform any other task that might be required to complete an activity.

Endnotes

1. Masters, Anne. *Pastoral Ministry WITH Persons WITH Disabilities Parish Resource Guide*. Newark: Advocate Publishing, 2013. P.51.

2. Ibid. p. 50.

3. Ibid. p. 59–63.