

Draft by Mirta Mihovilovic , Ph.D.
Edited by Mitchell Anscher, M.D.

Working towards an appropriate school environment for high functioning autistic children and others with related handicaps.

Preamble

As parents of high functioning autistic children we are confronted with inadequate school programs serving our children. Problems arise from a high ratio of students to teachers in traditional classrooms and a lack of trained school personnel to serve the needs of high functioning autistic students. Lack of understanding towards the autistic student jeopardize the expectations placed upon his/her academic progress. To achieve the full academic potential of the student it is imperative to balance, through school programs, periods of needed support with those of challenge. Structured classrooms served by trained personnel offering an academic curriculum parallel to that of the average classroom should exist for this population of students.

Targeted Population

High functioning autistic students that need individualized attention to achieve academic potential on par with peers of the same age group. Children should have communication skills (verbal, sign language, written, expressive) to perform at grade level but show social skills deficits.

Classroom Characteristics

Highly structured environment in which all rules of behavior are clearly specified and implemented at all times with age grouping not exceeding a difference of four years between the oldest and the youngest student.

Size of no more than ten students/trained teacher and one trained teacher aid (from here on referred as teacher assistant), however based on the class composition this ration should be as low as six students/teacher/2 teacher aids to provide for a semi-tutorial environment. Different trained teachers may teach in the classroom (junior high and high school level) but the teacher assistant should be the link between teachers and also between school and home. The teacher assistant role should be viewed as that of a counsellor with as much responsibility as teachers themselves. Teacher and teacher assistant have to be aware of the particular needs of each student and have training through a resource like TEACCH. They must have a basic working knowledge of the handicap they are dealing with and of the type of communication impairment that their students may have.

Teacher without a background in Special Education -to teach in this classroom- should be selected on basis of their willingness to deal with children that present with social/behavioral handicaps and

should take time to review the nature of the handicap for each of their students. Candidates should be selected after interviewing with the participation of TEACCH, school and parent representatives.

Curriculum Content

To give structural continuity to the academic program, the ideal curriculum should stretch through four quarters a year. This curriculum should consist of core classes in Math, English, Sciences and History to fulfill requirements from grades K through 12 and daily sessions of Study and Social Skills. Small classroom setting served by a trained teacher working in conjunction with one or two teacher assistants (see above) should be available for curriculum implementation. Environment should be academically and socially rich and should exploit visual and auditory approaches tailored to each individual student.

Satellites services (speech therapy, physical and occupational therapies) are not part of the academic curriculum but if needed must be available to the students.

Elective courses are taken based on interest and ability of the student.

Community experiences could take the role of elective activities or be incorporated as part of the curriculum when pertinent (visit to museums, nutrition facts reinforced with visit to farmer's market or grocery shopping, plays, visit to public service facilities, visit to historical sites, etc...)

For grades 10 through 12. Flex Work/Volunteer Program (in which work within the community is considered as part of the curriculum) should be offered. If necessary a job coach is provided by either the school or the working place.

Teaching Approach

Core subject matter must be highly individualized, but assignments and teaching approaches are tailored to the intellectual capability of the student. Thus student A may be doing Math at 8 grade level and English at 6 grade level while student B is performing Math at 8 grade level and English at 7 grade level.

Problems are recognized as they developed and addressed through the intervention of trained teachers and one teacher assistant thus avoiding student anxiety towards a particular situation. Individualized learning is achieved through one on one interaction between the student with the teacher. Students should have daily homework.

Parents/Guardians or an adult responsible of the welfare of the student must commit themselves to offer support to the student as well as the program (teacher, teacher assistant). If necessary, they should initiate communication pertaining to both academic and affective issues with the school classroom. For the program to be effective, placement into the program requires this participation. If this support is non-existent and jeopardize the progress of other students within the class,

alternative setting for students lacking "out-of-school" support should be thought. Home-School communication may take the form of short written notes or phone conversations. It is expected that each teacher assistant should review communication notes on daily basis (see below).

Promotion/Advancement within the Program

Promotion to higher level of difficulty is based on mastering with at least 80% accuracy each successive level of instruction. Students are promoted through levels of achievement rather than by grade. This provision is intended to allow for extra time that some students may need to meet his/her requirements for graduation, while allowing for students that excel to complete their graduation requirements in shorter times. Students should take State Competency test when ready for them.

Admission to the Program

Placement in the classroom is based on the ability of student to master life skills appropriate for their age and their level of academic accomplishment. Applications are reviewed by the TEACCH trained teacher and teacher assistant(s) in charge of the classroom with the participation of parents/guardians and one School representative for Special Services. If student is new to the school he/she is attending, a TEACCH representative or equivalent professional should also be present to assess the placement.

Individualized Educational Program (IEP) development.

IEP should be a dynamic set of goals that should be reviewed periodically and must contain the input of parents, classroom teacher, classroom teacher assistant, regular teacher (when indicated) and professionals directly working with the student (TEACCH counsellor, physical therapist, etc.), It should be based on an initial academic testing given in a setting that allows for the best response of the student and the psychological profile of the students. Goals shouldn't be set for more than 6 months, but be subjected to revision whenever necessary.

Approaches to reach to each student should be drawn with the participation of parents/guardians at the beginning of each school year and reviewed in regular basis. At least every three month (quarter), if necessary daily (see below, daily structure)

Integrative Opportunities

Complete mainstreaming (without the need of a teacher assistant) for subject matters in which the student is proficient for the school level he/she is mastering. This complete mainstreaming however

is done in agreement with the regular teacher receiving the student and will require a transition period in which the student visits the regular classroom to become acquainted with its structure and the teaching mode of the instructor. Core classroom remains as safe heaven when problems develop within the school mainstream program. In this core classroom the root of the difficulties encountered by the student are tracked down with active participation of mainstream teachers involved and, if necessary, to facilitate conflict resolution, TEACCH counsellor and/or parent/guardian of the student is contacted (trained teacher assistant role).

Home classroom is also a resource for mainstream teachers that instruct high functioning autistic students.

Daily structure/ Communication between home and school

A daily briefing should be implemented before each school day Teacher assistant communicates with each students and reviews any notes coming from home or received from members of the school community. Specific needs for the day should be addressed, particularly for students that are mainstreamed into a regular classroom. If necessary teacher assistant should send with the student a written note to the regular teacher explaining sources of anxiety. These briefings will require that the classroom meets earlier than any other within the school setting. Alternatively, mainstreamed students are not part of first period in regular classrooms.

Formal communication (phone, FAX, e-mail) should occur at least weekly between home and school classroom. Communication on regular basis will insure that a similar approach towards behavior modification will be implemented at home and at school. Daily notes are indicated when particular problem lingers.

Preparation for Transitions into the Workplace, Apprenticeships or College.

Program should establish for each student his/her area of strength and direct student to contact Colleges or working place of choice. Volunteer work or job training are encouraged at grades 10 through 12 (see above, Curriculum Content) as part of preparation for the future.

Personnel Accountability/ Program Evaluation

Personnel accountability is measured through the academic progress that the student makes, in so far as parent or responsible adult for the student has committed his/her efforts into the program.

Program is evaluated likewise by teacher, parents and students. Results are discussed every quarter and modifications to the IEP are made in individual basis.

Program Housing/Implementation

Ideally the program is housed within the public school system in separated, self-contained classroom(s). First year is initiated with one classroom for the age group which is the most numerous. Program then grows serving different age groups covering grades K-12 and representing a minimum of four classrooms (each classroom spanning three school year periods).

Better screening procedures at par with the benefits associated with early intervention indicate that the first classroom should serve grades K through three. However it is also recognized that in early adolescence high functioning autistics require support and services that are lacking from the public and private school sectors, thus a seven through nine grade classroom should also be considered as a possible starting point for the proposed program.

Numbers of Classrooms/Locations

Number of classrooms are based on number of students requiring the placement. If the number is small to start with the program may require the "one room schoolhouse" approach. With higher number of students more classrooms should be available.

Ideally two classrooms serving different age groups should operate within a given school system at the same physical location : tentatively elementary school for students up to the age of 13^(*) and high school for students 13 years of age and older . Middle school years are the most difficult in the schooling of a child and thus elementary and high school settings appear more appropriate for these student-tailored classrooms. Within the high school age group it could be envisioned that four teachers could rotate through four independent classrooms to teach the subject matter of their expertise (Math, English, Sciences and History). If the student population is not large enough, the number of classrooms is limited to one or two and core instruction is limited to Math and English, incorporating Science and History as part of the English curriculum.

Classrooms should have access to audiovisual equipment, computers , art and science supplies as any regular classroom.

^(*) Mainstreaming to Middle School Classrooms, when indicated, will require transport service for the student.