**Engaging Students with Disabilities**

The activation of what students already know or have experienced is a component of all good lessons. Techniques such as K-W-L charts, simulation activities, prediction, and videos are commonly used (Gersten, Baker, Smith-Johnson, Dimino, & Peterson, 2006). It is particularly essential in special education lessons because students’ disabilities students often cause them to have difficulty making connections.

*Emily, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sees a new chart related to the Civil Rights Movement when she walks into her history class. But it looks complicated to her, and makes no sense. She moves quickly around the room checking in with all her friends, finally sitting down and rummaging in her backpack. She hopes that she can make it through class without dying of boredom. But then her teacher surprises her by asking all the people with blue eyes to move to the back of the room. By the time the activity on discrimination is concluded, Emily’s attention is fully engaged. She begins to remember her parents talking about civil rights issues and can’t wait to find out more.*

Effects of Disabilities on Task Engagement

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| **Disability** | **Effect on Task Engagement** |
| Learning Disability - Reading | May get little information from reading books or worksheets. Will benefit from role plays, lectures, class discussions, and partner work. |
| Learning Disability – Language and Auditory Processing | May learn little from lectures, especially if note taking is required. Will benefit from written notes, graphic organizers, drawing pictures and diagrams. |
| Learning Disability – Visual Processing | May be confused by diagrams and graphic organizers. Will benefit from verbal explanations, role plays, and class discussions. |
| Autism | May learn little from social activities such as role plays and from verbal instructions. Will benefit from written notes, visual schedules, and consistent routines. |
| Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) | Will have difficulty performing sedentary tasks, concentrating on lectures, and reading long passages. Will benefit from role plays, structured partner work, experiments, and flexible project assignments |
| Intellectual Disability | Will have difficulty participating in class discussions, drawing conclusions, understanding terminology, and retaining information. Will benefit from simplified vocabulary, partner work, and memorization strategies. |
| Emotional Disturbance | May become overwhelmed or over stimulated by class activities, projects, and partner work. Will benefit from clear boundaries and expectations, prompts, and tight structure.  |

The successful teacher finds ways to engage all of her students at the beginning of each lesson. She is aware of the individual needs of each of her students and knows that they will be successful if she grabs their attention and fires up their desire to learn more. According to the information given above, however, this may seem to be a difficult task. Most of the students seem to benefit from role plays, but the observant teacher knows that Alex, who has autism, will shrink from the social exposure. She worries that Maria, with intellectual disability, will only become confused; and she fears that Henry, who has emotional disturbance, will lose control. So she assigns different tasks to those students when role plays are involved. Alex is the record keeper, Maria is in charge of materials, and Henry is her co-director, with specific responsibilities. Those same roles also work well when cooperative learning activities are scheduled. Everyone participates and everyone is motivated to engage in the new material.

Reference

Gersten, R., Kaker, S. K., Smith-Johnson, J., Dimino, J., Peterson, A. (2007). Eyes on the prize: Teaching complex historical content to middle school students with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 72* (3), 264-280.