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Module 17: Students with Severe Disabilities

Current discrimination laws promote inclusion for students with special educational needs and disabilities. This means that schools have to do everything possible to include these students in the general classroom environment when appropriate. Students with mild disabilities may spend their entire school day in general classrooms, while others may be removed briefly to work on study skills or to get extra help in a specific subject. Sometimes, students may have severe disabilities that make inclusion, in the general classroom, inappropriate and potentially harmful. These students need smaller environments, adjusted academic instruction, and/or increased behavioral instruction to progress and prepare for adulthood. In this module, we will discuss some of the more severe disabilities that students may be suffering from, as well as how to design and implement instruction for students who are struggling with severe disabilities.

What you will learn in this module:

17.1 Potential Disabilities

17.2 Identification of Needs

17.3 Planning and Instruction

17.4 Learning in Different Subject Areas

17.5 Assessment of Teaching

17.1 Potential Disabilities

Classifying an individual's disability as "severe" is not an exact science. **An individual with a severe disability is someone that requires constant, extensive support with either their mental and physical faculties, or both, in order to be a functioning member of society.** The individual's severe disability can often be accurately described as multiple disabilities, because the individual has more than one disability contributing to their physical and/or mental struggles. In this section, we will discuss some of the common severe disabilities that educators and school officials will need to understand in order to better serve their students.



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17.1.2 Severe Genetic and Brain Disorders

Pervasive Developmental Disorders

This is a fairly broad term that refers to several different disorders that are ongoing, and affect a student's ability to develop basic skills. Students with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PPD's) are developmentally delayed, and will only be able to learn basic skills (if ever) much later in life than is typical. Here are some of the more widely observed Pervasive Developmental Disorders:

- **Autism: Autism is a developmental disorder that affects different people in different ways (experts refer to this as a spectrum). Students who have very mild autism are often being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.** Autistic students will typically have problems with verbal communication, social interaction, and adjusting to new environments and/or routines. Many autistic students will display intellectual disabilities, seizures, and anxiety.
- **Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (Heller Syndrome): This is a rare disorder that does not affect a child right away, but instead takes hold sometime between the ages of 2 and 10.** When the disorder does take hold, a student loses many of the abilities and skills that he or she has already developed. Most sufferers lose social and verbal skills, but some sufferers lose some of their more basic motor skills as well.
- **Rett Syndrome: Rett Syndrome is almost exclusively found in female students, and affects not only the mental development, but also the physical development of a student.** Students suffering from Rett Syndrome will typically have poor coordination, and difficulty with basic motor skills. It also affects students mentally, in a similar way to other PDD's; causing difficulty with language development, and mental progression.
- **Pervasive Developmental Disorder, not otherwise specified: This is a label used for disorders that are clearly affecting a student's mental and/or physical development, but does not accurately match any of the current labels within PDD.** This is often referred to as PDD-NOS, which simply means the student is suffering from a pervasive developmental disorder that is not one of the disorders listed above.

17.1.2 Severe Genetic and Brain Disorders

Down Syndrome

Down Syndrome is a disorder that occurs when a child is born with an extra chromosome. This extra chromosome changes the child's rate of development, and may cause a number of observable physical traits. **These may include less toned and defined muscles, eyes that are slanted upwards, and a smaller body.** An individual who is living with Down syndrome will have



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slower development of motor skills, and intellectual development. There are a few different types of Down syndrome:

- **Trisomy 21 (Nondisjunction):** This is the most common type of Down syndrome in which the body produces an **extra copy of the 21st chromosome**. This extra chromosome is replicated throughout the body.
- **Mosaicism:** This is a rare type of Down syndrome in which the distribution of the extra 21st chromosome is not uniform. **Some cells will contain the typical 46 chromosomes, while others will contain 47 chromosomes** (the latter including the extra 21st chromosome that is consistent with Down syndrome).
- **Translocation:** In this type of Down syndrome, the total chromosome count in each cell remains at the typical 46, but an extra 21st chromosome has attached itself to the 14th chromosome, thereby having the effects of Down syndrome without increasing the overall chromosome count.

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy, like many other disorders, can affect students in many different ways. Some students may only suffer from mild cerebral palsy, and are able to function in a general classroom. For others, the loss of motor function is too severe for them to be successful in a general classroom. Cerebral palsy is caused by brain damage that is either incurred, as a result of a brain injury, or abnormal development in students when they are very young (as their brain is developing). Young children who suffer from cerebral palsy will often show difficulty with typical landmarks of motor development such as rolling over, crawling, walking, and standing.

17.1.3 Severe Genetic and Brain Disorders

Spina Bifida Cystica

Many children born with spina bifida suffer manageable symptoms that will not affect their ability to thrive in the general classroom. Children with spina bifida cystica, **if it is not caught quickly enough, can develop an overgrown head, and suffer brain damage. Spina bifida cystica occurs when an individual's spinal cord and nerve endings protrude through openings in the spine.** This causes damage to the nerves, and potentially blocks fluid from reaching the brain and spinal cord properly.

Traumatic Brain Injury

A traumatic brain injury occurs when an individual sustains a severe injury to the brain that alters who they are as a person thereafter. Because your brain controls everything in your body, a TBI can have any number of different effects. **TBI's may cause loss of motor function, loss of reasoning,**



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loss of memory, regression in mental development, altered personality, and many other lifelong injuries that you typically will not recover from (at least not fully).

17.1.4 Severe Psychological and Mood Disorders

Psychosis

Psychosis can sometimes be misunderstood to be the same as schizophrenia. In reality, schizophrenia is a form of psychosis. **Students who suffer from severe psychosis will have a difficult time telling the difference between right and wrong. This is due to the delusions, and hallucinations they are dealing with.** Psychosis can often be characterized by antisocial behavior, and the individual not understanding what he or she did wrong, as well as mood disorders such as depression.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a very widely misunderstood disorder. When people think of schizophrenia, they think of violent people with multiple personalities. This is not accurate, as there has never been a proven link between schizophrenia and violence. Schizophrenics do not typically have split personalities. **Someone with schizophrenia, however, may be suffering from delusions, hallucinations, disordered thinking and speech.** They may not always know the difference between right and wrong. **If a student has severe schizophrenia, then the general classroom is not going to be a helpful environment for him or her.** There are several types of schizophrenia:

- **Catatonic Schizophrenia:** A type of schizophrenia in which the individual acts withdrawn or antisocial, rarely talks, and has a very negative view.
- **Disorganized Schizophrenia:** The individual may not be delusional, but his or her thoughts and speech are often unintelligible.
- **Residual Schizophrenia:** With this type of schizophrenia, the individual may no longer be showing the symptoms of schizophrenia, but his or her mood and motivation are still affected by it.
- **Paranoid Schizophrenia:** This is probably the most talked about type of schizophrenia. It causes an individual to feel paranoid, suspicious, and victimized even when there is no cause to feel as such.
- **Schizoaffective Disorder:** This occurs when an individual is showing signs of schizophrenia and a mood disorder.

17.1.5 Severe Psychological and Mood Disorders

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



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We often associate PTSD with soldiers returning from war, but **post-traumatic stress disorder can affect anyone who has had a traumatic experience**. Individuals who are suffering from PTSD **may experience flashbacks, nightmares, and high levels of anxiety** as a result of a traumatic event from their past. Very severe PTSD may make it difficult for a student to function in a general classroom.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive disorder, is a brain disorder that is characterized by drastic shifts in mood, energy, spirits, and functionality. For someone with severe bipolar disorder, something very small can set him or her off-track and affect his or her ability to function for the rest of the day. Many people believe they show signs of bipolar disorder because they feel mood swings, much in the way that many people believe they experience depression when they feel “down.” However, true bipolar disorder can be a crippling inability to move on, mentally or physically, from a trigger.

Panic Disorder

A severe panic disorder is characterized by crippling and debilitating anxiety that arise often, and without logical reason. This anxiety can manifest itself in students as any number of phobias including school phobia, social phobia, agoraphobia, and others. In its most severe form, a panic disorder can make it very difficult for a student to function in a general classroom.

17.2 Identification of Needs

When we talk about identification, in terms of special educational needs, we focus on educators, parents, and other childcare providers. They observe and identify a potential disability or areas of special educational needs in children. Students with severe needs will most often be identified and tested long before they get to school. Most of the severe disorders that we previously discussed begin showing symptoms early.

Identification of needs refers to being able to understand what each student needs. That involves being knowledgeable about severe disorders, their symptoms, their causes, and their effects, as well as being patient and adaptable. Most of the severe disorders we have discussed will land a student in a restricted classroom. A smaller environment will provide them with more adult attention, and more individualized education. In settings like these, educators need to be prepared to help a wide variety of students with different needs, different struggles, and different strengths.

17.2.1 How to Meet the Needs of Your Students with Severe Disabilities

Do your homework: **When you get a new student in your classroom that has severe disabilities, study the student’s file.** This will allow you to learn as much as you can about the individual. Also,



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make sure that you are properly educated on his or her disorder(s). If you are properly prepared, you will not be caught off guard or in a situation where you are not able to help the student.

Inclusion, when possible: The severe disabilities of your students will vary greatly. It is important to remember that you want to include your students in the general classroom as much as you can. This can manifest in a number of different scenarios:

- **Your student can function in a general classroom** (especially if it is team taught), and just needs to spend some time each day (or on an emergency basis) in a restricted environment.
- **Your student can function in a general classroom for a good portion of the school day but only for certain subjects, and only for a limited amount of time.**
- **Your student's disorder(s) and/or disability are too severe for the student to be able to function outside of the restricted classroom.**

It is important to understand what each of your students can handle, and to challenge them to grow each day without pushing them beyond their means, and causing a potentially dangerous or traumatic situation.

17.2.2 How to Meet the Needs of Your Students with Severe Disabilities

Communicate with your students, their parents, and other adults who have gotten to know them: Proper communication is the key to causing a real change in the life of a student with a severe disability. When you first meet the student, communicate with him or her and find out more about the individual. You do not have to talk about the student's disability; build trust. Discuss the student with his or her parents, and get as much information as you can from other adults who have worked with him or her. Throughout the time you have with the student, continue communicating with everyone to make sure that the student is getting the best help that he or she can possibly get.

Teach more than just the curriculum: Many of the students in your classroom, who have severe disabilities, are going to struggle with the course material that is being taught in general classrooms. So, remember that your overall goal is to prepare them for adulthood. That means education that is not just about English and Science, but also about life skills like getting a job and paying bills. Your ultimate goal is to help these students be able to function reasonably on their own, or at least be as independent as they are capable of being.

Hold your students to high standards: Just because your students have severe disabilities, does not mean that you cannot set your expectations of them high. You want to communicate expectations to your students that are going to challenge them, but that they can ultimately accomplish. If you help them set goals that are too high, they may lose their confidence and not gain much. If you help them set goals that are too low, you are not helping them grow at all.



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Treat them with respect: Students with severe disabilities are people, and they deserve to be treated like people. Even though they are struggling with physical and mental disorders, they still have feelings, and need human compassion, friendship, encouragement, and respect.

17.3 Planning and Instruction

Students with severe disabilities will often spend the majority of their time in a self-contained classroom. We will discuss planning instruction for team-taught classes in this section. When we discuss planning and instruction for students with special educational needs, we often discuss differentiation, and how teachers need to be prepared to improvise. While that is important, relying solely on that would diminish the amount of work that teachers put into planning their lessons effectively so that instruction is differentiated, and more individualized. Yes, a teacher needs to be able to think on his or her feet and improvise. A teacher also needs to learn from experience with his or her specific classes and students, and design instruction that will appropriately differentiate the class they are currently teaching. Let us take a look at the work that goes into planning and instruction in the general (team-taught) classroom, and the self-contained classroom.

17.3.1 Planning and Instruction in A Team-Taught Classroom

In a great team-teaching model, the classroom teacher and the special educational teacher have equal control of the classroom. They work together to plan, and implement instruction that is effective for everyone in the classroom. In this perfect model, the classroom teacher brings his or her curriculum to the table with recommendations for how to best help the class understand it.

Similarly, the special educational teacher comes to the table with potential modifications that will help make the material more palatable for his or her students who need special educational considerations. The two teachers plan together, coming up with a lesson that combines elements of both of their ideas, and differentiate the lesson so that it will be effective for all of the students in the class.

When instructing students with severe disabilities in the general classroom, here are some questions you need to consider. Whether you are the classroom teacher or the special educational teacher:

- **Is the lesson addressing the needs of every student in the class,** taking into account each SEN student's EHC?
- **Are there any ways that you can help all of your students understand the material better?** Are there any ways that you can help your SEN students specifically understand the material better?
- **Am I addressing the skills that I need to address in this lesson?** In other words, is my differentiation still requiring the students to display their abilities in the same skills, and address the same standards?



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- **How can I group the students effectively to facilitate growth during the lesson?** How do I ensure that I am not just separating the SEN students from the other students when we do group work in my classroom?

These are all important considerations that you, as the classroom teacher or the special educational teacher, need to take into account when you are planning and implementing instruction in a team-taught classroom.

17.3.2 Planning and Instruction in Self-Contained Classrooms

Instruction in a self-contained classroom is different than instruction in a general classroom because of the diverse amount of severe disabilities that will be represented by your students. In a general classroom, the student body will be diverse. If there are any students with severe disabilities in the class, there will only be one or two. This higher variance of severe disabilities among the class population changes the way that you need to plan and implement instruction.

As we have discussed previously, self-contained classrooms are designed as a least restrictive environment for students that cannot function entirely in a general classroom. As a self-contained classroom teacher, your instruction needs to be properly differentiated, and individualized to meet the varying needs of your students. There are a couple of strategies that you can use to address the needs of everyone in the room.

The following strategies work best when they are traded in and out to avoid a stale routine:

- **Sometimes**, it can be helpful to **group students based on need**. Once students are working on their assignments, you and the other teachers, or aids in the room, can circulate and deliver small-group instruction on focused skills and topics, addressing the needs of these small groups directly.
- It can be very **helpful to have a few back-up plans**. You should be prepared for when students are able to complete tasks and improve skills faster than you anticipated, and for when they are not able to complete tasks and improve skills as fast as you had anticipated.
- We mentioned this previously, but **be prepared to teach more than just the curriculum**. Life skills are also very important.
- Give your students a sense of accomplishment by using **abridged versions of the materials** that general classrooms are using. Students will feel good about reading the same materials as their peers.
- **Have copies of EHC Plans out when you are planning**, just to make sure you are abiding by all mandated interventions and accommodations.
- **Always be aware of what each student in the class is doing**. Because of the severity of some of your student's disabilities, you will want to make sure that you know what is going on at all times. For some of your students, it may take something very small to set them off course. It can be a mammoth task to bring them back.



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17.4 Learning in Different Subject Areas

As students get further along in their education, they will need to learn how to differentiate how they apply their basic skills to different subject areas. For example, reading and writing are extremely important skills in every subject area. As students progress through high school they will begin to learn how reading and writing are different in each discipline.

Writing an essay for an English class is much different than writing a lab report for Science class. Both require strong writing skills but different writing styles. It can be especially difficult to help students with severe disabilities understand these nuances. There are some basic ways you can help them succeed in all subject areas.

- **Help your students build and hone their basic skills.** They may not be ready yet to differentiate between reading and writing in one class, and reading and writing in another. However, if you help them continue to strengthen their skills in the basics they will be more prepared to succeed.
- **Help the students get organized.** You can do this by helping them physically organize things into different folders and/or binders. Be consistently clear and distinct about what subject area you are working on at any given time. If the students in your class can learn to switch from one subject to another, by picking up the cues that you are giving them, and physically switching to a new folder or binder; they will be better able to adjust to the change in their minds.
- **No matter what subject you are in, try to make the material relatable.** Our minds work on schemas, or categories, and if we can categorize new information into something that we already know, we are more likely to retain the information we learn. So, do your best to make math problems out of real world situations, or give your students real life roles when they are doing writing assignments. This will make it easier for them to get invested in the subject matter, and they will be more likely to learn and grow.
- **Teach the students to help each other.** It is important for you to teach social skills and appropriate behavioral skills to your students. Moreover, encouraging them to help each other out will accomplish two goals at once. If you create an environment where the students want to help each other succeed, then you will create an environment where students are more efficiently able to learn in different subject areas.

While students with severe disabilities often, depending on the nature of their disabilities, have difficulty adjusting and switching gears; they are still able to with the right encouragement.

17.5 Assessment of Teaching

Great teaching is always reflective. **Reflection** is even more important when teaching students with severe disabilities. No teacher has 100% success with every lesson that he or she teaches, and



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failure is a part of the job. Do not be afraid of a lesson failing. If it does fail, make sure you learn from your mistakes.

The only way a good teacher becomes great is if he or she is able to constantly identify what is working, what is not working, and accordingly adjusting instruction for the next day.

The worst thing that you can do as a teacher is to teach the same lessons; the same way; every year regardless of the students who are sitting in front of you. Even the best teachers constantly need to adjust, react, reroute, and reteach throughout a unit, or even throughout a lesson. **When you are reflecting on your lessons, consider the following questions:**

- **What was successful about that lesson?** What was not successful about that lesson?
- **Was that the best way to deliver the material?**
- **If I were to teach that lesson again tomorrow, how would I change it?**
- **How can I differentiate more during that lesson?**

It is important not only to think about these questions, but also to use your answers to inform your future instruction. You should use your answers to adjust that lesson if you ever teach it again, and adjust all future lessons using what you have learned during that lesson. No teacher is above the power of reflection. It is only through assessing ourselves that we get better, and continue to truly help our students.

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