

Notes from interviews with teachers who teach at autistic schools

Interview 1

Prepared by: Rachna Gajre

Date of Interview: 25th Oct 2014

In the interview Teacher highlighted on certain points are as follows:

- Her family friend's son was autistic and watching him going to school and problems they faced earlier to get into school inspired her to do something for children similar to him.
- She said every child is unique and each one has one distinguishing feature in which they are expert. She said there are 2 boys in her class who can type very fast using laptop than normally kids do.
- There are some kids who make cartoons or vegetables or animals using play dough or clay.
- Some cases of autism are severe and some are mild. In severe cases there are students of type who cannot walk and they are on bed all time or wheelchairs. Mild cases students can walk but most of them face the problem of socializing or mixing with people. The behavior which usually they show is inappropriate for their people or different from the persons of their age.
 - Difficulty in mixing with other children.
 - Inappropriate laughing and giggling.
 - No actual fear of danger, because they don't understand actually.
 - No eye contact and sometimes no response to actions and questions.
 - Repeating words
 - throw the objects
 - Spit on person
 - Difficulty in expressing needs
- About teaching them, she said there each class activity is of 15 minutes. The class strength is nine in which there are six boys and three girls.
- When they are teaching the students they never give negative feedback or neither shout at them nor punish them even if they are wrong or misbehaving.
- The students have to be tackled with great amount of patience and by showing love and care towards them.
- About medication, she said there is no actual cure for autism. The only way is we can improve them little bit so that they can become independent.
- About technology, she said many students like cell phone, ipads, tablets and laptops.
- She shared one file with me which they got on their teachers training and she allowed me to take picture of one page which is about ten things every child with autism wants to know. The picture is shown below.

10 Things Every Child With Autism



Wants You to Know...

1. I'm first and foremost a child. Autism is just one aspect of my character.
2. Ordinary sights, sounds and touches of everyday life that are normal to you, can be painful for me.
3. It isn't that I don't listen to you...it's just that I can't understand you.
4. I like routines because I know what to expect.
5. Don't compare me with other children...I'm special in my own way.
6. It's hard for me to tell you what I need when I don't know the words to say it.
7. Be patient and consistent; I learn better when you tell, show and do things with me.
8. Focus and build on what I can do rather than what I can't do.
9. I want to be with others, but I don't know how.
10. Love me unconditionally cuz I promise you...

I'm worth it.

Interview 2 and Visit to Autism Center

Prepared by: Aditee Nagle

Date of Interview: October 31st, 2014

It was Halloween day. Everybody in the office was dressed in pirate theme.

Interview notes:

This is what the interviewee (teacher at school) said during the interview:

- Autistic people can be on a wide spectrum. Some could be like Temple Grandin who are very smart and show tremendous progress. Some have severe disabilities and not so smart. They may never get to be independent.
- Most of our students have problem with cognitive delays. When you talk to them very fast, they cannot process the incoming info very fast and respond.
- They cannot do listen and understand at the same time. They may read an entire biology book with heavy words, but understand nothing from it. They may be looking at you while you talk to them, but won't be processing those words in their mind. Some people, if they are trying to listen to you, they will turn their eyes away and only listen.
- They have problem with socialization. They display extraordinary/aggressive behavior like biting, scratching, spitting, kicking in response to fear, confusion or stress. They can be very loud.
- They cannot handle too much change in their regular schedule. Slight changes are ok like if one of the teachers is absent but all the others they know are around. On days like this (halloween), when the schedule is different than other days, they don't understand why are we not doing classroom activities and doing something else like trick or treat etc. Why are you making me wear this dress.
- They get anxious if they don't know what is coming next.
- Many of the students are non-verbal. They just don't have those motor skills that allows us to talk. Cannot talk at all. Cannot express themselves verbally. If there are people around them constantly asking what's wrong with you, what do you want etc and they are not able to reply, they get stressed and start inflicting pain on themselves or throwing tantrums. They don't know how to say things like : "I like it", " I don't like it", "I want more of this..." . One student used to get very nervous when she was not able to tell (had feeling of suffocation),

we taught her how to type and tell what she wants to say, now she is much more calm and settled.

- Most of them are here because they were not able to adjust in the regular schools / public schools.
- Some of the reasons why they behave in irregular way are:
 1. seek attention
 2. escape something they don't want to do or don't understand
 3. try to get something that they don't have
 4. sensory regulation
- We have 68 kids, 8 class rooms. About 8 kids per classroom. We have 1 as to 1 ratio between students and teachers. Each kid is accompanied by 1 teacher all the time. Teachers take turns with 15 mins slot. Students come to school. Every day the same teacher goes to the bus and brings him/her in. After 15 mins, next activity starts with a different teacher. Some kids are easier to work with (sometimes even fun to work with) than others. Taking turns helps the teachers.
- Some kids may have attention span less than 30 seconds. It is a challenge to keep them engaged for 15 mins.
- We, teachers, can never get angry with kids. Don't take disciplinary action or give negative response to their behavior. We have to be very patient. Sometimes have to calm the students down by massaging his/her hands, talking to them.
- Each 15 min slot is spent on different activities like: counting, words, math, flash cards.
- The learning time varies. Progress is very slow. When we learnt multiplication tables, we learnt 2's table for certain time. We remembered that and then went on to 3's and so on. For these kids, it is very difficult to retain what they learnt before and move to next level.
- Each student can have different likes / dislikes. We have to modify the way of teaching based on their likes and dislikes. Example: one student did not like math. But she liked the story of Alice in wonderland. So everyday, some counting / addition / time related counting was inserted in the story. Like.. Alice was falling very fast. The rabbit was falling three times as fast. / It was 8:00 AM in the morning... Or reading the rest of the story after we finish solving these math problems. Due to this approach, the student started taking interest in the math. Another example: One student was taught about the english prepositions like above, under, in-between by putting Ariel (cartoon) above the desk, under the desk, in between two books. Took pictures of them. And rehearse the words.

- But it is difficult for them to generalize. If we teach them like this with Ariel, they might not be able to relate to those words when used with another character / thing. Example: One student had a glass of milk in a glass and it turned out to be sour. She disliked the taste immensely. Now she never drinks anything from glass any more. Has to drink from tap / hose. Another example: If you give them apple juice in green colored glass one day. Give them apple juice in orange colored glass the next day, they won't like it. They cannot decouple apple juice from green glass.
- We use various devices that help kids to communicate. Some of the devices have really big button because some kids cannot work with tiny symbols / objects. Some of them are way too expensive.
- We display schedule of the day in class. Listing activities that they will do during the day. Like first count, then math. Also name of the teacher with whom the kid will do this activity.
- We never say "if you don't do this, you won't get this...". Such negative response / disciplinary actions don't work with them. They develop pattern of negative responses. Example: One student used to go to public school. Whenever he would start behaving abnormally, people / kids around him would run away, teacher would call his mom. When he came to this school and started behaving the same way, we all just stood there doing nothing. He immediately said "call my mom". He had developed that pattern in this mind that when I do this, they call mom. Need to break the negative pattern.
- They understand feelings. When we tell them that I am not going to leave you or get angry with you for doing this, they feel it inside. Example: When I used to go to the student and tell him that I am so sorry that you are feeling this way, he would start crying.
- They are like infants in a grown-up body.
- With time, their odd behavior / rigidity can settle down.
- Technology is very attractive for them. They like working with iPads / computers etc. They have good procedural memory. Step1 followed by 2, 3, 4. Example: One kid is very fast at browsing through the iPad icons and finding his favorite app. Even we cannot do that so fast.
- Each kid has his/her special talents. One girl is really good drawing and painting. (Teacher showed us the paintings made by her) The human figures / animals/ details that she can imagine and capture are fascinating.

- Another student had really talent for music. Music used to sooth him. He was able to play flute right - handed as well as left-handed. We used to play guitar if he got aggressive.
- Technology could be good thing, but could also make the kids isolated. If we give them iPad or something to play with, they might totally zone us out. It could be helpful to keep them engaged at home when they are alone. But at school, we want them to interact, be a part of the world, learn new things.
- Playing with other people is difficult for them. They cannot comprehend sharing / taking turns very easily. Each kid in the classroom would be sitting alone with his/her back at others and playing on his/her device.
- Giving them recipe (step-by-step procedure of any activity in general) helps them to learn to do things independently. Example: If I want to teach a kid to make his/her own tuna salad sandwich, I will take pictures of each step like take the bread, put butter, place salad leaves etc etc. Hand this series of pictures over to the kid. Initially, I would have to point out each step. Do this.. next this.. next this. But slowly they would learn to follow the recipe by looking at the pictures. Finally one day... make the whole sandwich by themselves without supervision. Need to break down the procedures in very tiny / incremental steps.

School tour

Next, we took tour of the school. Following are passive observations with some quotes from the teacher.

1st Classroom:

- A kid was playing cards taking turns with the teacher. Matching colors / numbers / icons.
- There was a huge schedule (on paper) displayed on a board. Matrix of students, teachers and time slots, who will do what with which teacher at what time.
- There was another display where activity cards for one student were stuck to a board (using velcro) in the order in which they are to be done. When one activity was over, that card was removed and dropped into a cup. This way the student would know what is coming next, what all are still remaining. Teacher said this helps them in reducing anxiety.
- There were tree-coloring activities by kids displayed on the display board. Some kids used only colored pencils, some had added colored leaves cut-out from paper to the tree.
- Hand-writing was very crude. Teacher said it is difficult for them to write by hand.
- Met a girl who is really good at drawing. Saw some of painting on display. She was wearing halloween costume. When the teacher asked why was she wearing that dress today, she said because it was raining. Teacher asked why was the teacher wearing a pirate dress, she answered “ because it is halloween”.
- Some kids were watching TV. Teacher said, they would not be sitting in one place for so long if the TV was switched off. Technology attracts their attention.
- Teacher showed us a few devices they use. Some were iPads in thick sturdy cases. The app had a lot of picture icons. Student pressed the picture icons to make a sentence and then hit

play. The device played audio reading that sentence. This way they can communicate. When they are just starting to learn, there would be very few picture icons in the app. As they learn more and more, teacher can add those icons to the display. The layout seemed difficult to remember for a new user. The teacher seemed to be searching for right icons. I could not memorize the sequence even after she showed us 2-3 examples.

- Another device was very simple and primitive with big buttons. Had option of adding 5-6 terms like “Eat”, “drink”, “pee” etc. This was for beginners.
- Each kid had a personalized device with him/her. When the teacher borrowed one of the kid’s device, he didn’t approve of that and asked it back.
- One kid had just arrived a week ago and was playing outside the classroom. Teacher said, we are still getting to know him. So not giving him any learning activity. We just let him play and do whatever he wants the whole day with one or the other teacher accompanying him all the time.
- One kid was roller skating. Teacher said, they teach them to swim, ride bicycle, roller skate. They learn everything, but at a slow pace and in different manner.
- Teacher said, if sometimes a kid starts kicking / throwing tantrums, we take them to the open ground. Let them cool down. Don’t give them any instructions.
- One kid was wearing mitten gloves and had his head wrapped in scarves / clothing. Teacher said when he gets aggressive, he starts biting himself, hitting himself. So he had to be covered.

Elder people’s classroom:

- These people were much older, some had been coming to the school for 20 - 25 years.
- One person came and asked us “How young are you?” Teacher said, he used to ask everyone how old are you. So he was told that it is not polite. So he now asks everyone how young are you.
- As soon as we were at the entrance of the classroom, 3 to 4 people approached us. They wanted to talk to us. Came and introduced themselves. They recognized the teacher. They continued talking until the teacher told them that we had to move on and talk to others too.
- One person was talking to us about nationalities. His origin, his parents’ and grandparents’ origin in a whole lot detail.
- One very old lady was sitting outside on a bench. Teacher told a story about her. This lady used to walk few steps forwards followed by few steps backward. Once they had Santa Claus at their center. She sat on santa’s lap but then got stuck, since she was not able to step backwards. “We tried telling her to come forward, move, but nothing seemed to work. So we moved the whole set up of christmas tree, Santa, gifts to another place some distance away. She couldn’t move, but we could. So we moved.”

----- **End of Interview 2 and School Visit notes** -----