Neurodiversity in the Classroom

Strength-Based Strategies for Students with Special Needs
with Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D.
www.institute4learning.com
Tinsley Institute/CASDA
Albany, NY
March 14, 2013

Neurodiversity

An idea which asserts that atypical (neurodivergent) neurological development is a normal human difference that is to be recognized and respected as any other human variation.

5 Types of Diversities

- Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- Learning Disabilities
- ADD/ADHD
- Intellectual Disabilities
- Emotional and Behavioral Disorders
Niche Construction

• Helping to ensure the thriving of an organism by directly modifying the environment in such a way that it enhances that organism’s chances for survival.

Positive Niche Construction

• Helping to ensure the thriving of a child by directly modifying the environment in such a way that it enhances that child’s chances for success.

Principles of Neurodiversity

• The Brain is a Rain Forest
• Cultural Values Dictate Disorders
• Success = Adapting to the Environment
• Success = Changing the Environment
• Niche Construction Modifies the Brain
### Neurodiversity Strengths Checklist

#### Dexterity Strengths
- Has a hobby building model cars, planes, ships or other similar projects.
- Displays good handwriting.
- Likes to juggle or do magic tricks.
- Enjoys hand crafts like knitting, crocheting, embroidery, or needlepoint.
- Likes to make things with his/her hands.
- Has good tactile ability.
- Enjoys arts and crafts like origami, collage, and/or paper mâché.
- Enjoys woodworking, carpentry, carving, and/or metalwork.
- Has good eye-hand coordination.

#### Nature Strengths
- Has good rapport with animals.
- Is good at taking care of plants in the classroom or at home.
- Is sensitive to weather patterns.
- Takes care of a pet at home or at school.
- Is concerned about the welfare of the planet (e.g. is ecologically-minded).
- Likes to go hiking and/or camping in nature.
- Enjoys studying nature (e.g. insects, plants, birds, rocks, and/or animals).
- Likes to hunt or fish.
- Has a good sense of direction.

#### Musical Strengths
- Is sensitive to the rhythms of music.
- Enjoys playing a musical instrument.
- Knows the music and lyrics of many songs.
- Has a particular interest in one or more musical genres (e.g. rock, classical, jazz).
- Enjoys listening to music.
- Has a good sense of hearing (auditory acuity).
- Has a good sense of pitch.
- Has a good singing voice.
- Makes up his/her own tunes or melodies with or without lyrics.

#### High Tech Strengths
- Likes to spend time using a computer, tablet, or smartphone.
- Has a facility for playing video games.
- Likes to surf the Internet.
- Knows how to set up audio-visual or computer equipment.
- Likes to text on the phone.
- Enjoys social networking (e.g. blog, website, Facebook).
- Enjoys using a still camera or video camera to record events or express him/herself.
- Has several favorite movies or TV shows that he/she likes to talk about.
- Understands at least one computer language.

#### Creative Strengths
- Expresses him/herself dramatically.
- Has a good imagination.
- Enjoys doodling, drawing, and/or painting.
- Likes to act in plays and skits.
- Works well with clay or other forms of sculpture.
- Demonstrates creativity in one or more school assignments.
- Possesses a love of beautiful things.
- Has ideas for futuristic or fantastic projects.
- Comes up with ideas that nobody else has thought of.

#### Spiritual Strengths
- Enjoys meditation, yoga, or some other form of contemplation.
- Asks big life questions (e.g. what is the purpose of life?).
- Has a deep sense of wisdom.
- Participates in religious or other spiritual events.
- Has a philosophical attitude toward life.
- Has a strong faith in something higher than himself/herself.

#### Miscellaneous Strengths
- Likes collecting things (e.g. stamps, coins, buttons).
- Loves to cook.
- Has a love of learning new things.
- Is a good test taker.
- Possesses a good memory for daytime and nighttime dreams.
- Is curious about the world around him/her.
- Has a good sense of time.
- Manages money well.
- Has good fashion sense in the clothes he/she wears.
- Has good entrepreneurial skills (e.g. has started his/her own business).

### Positive Niche Construction
- Strength Awareness
- Positive Role Models
- Assistive Technologies/UDL
- Strength-Based Learning Strategies
- Enhanced Human Resource Network
- Affirmative Career Aspirations
- Positive Environmental Modifications

---

AI-IEP Protocol: Questions for Discussion at IEP meetings p. 1

First: Success

1) **To the student**: Tell us about some of your successes this year. (If appropriate, add: What have you done well and what has worked well for you? What’s been happening to make you successful?)

2) **To the parent**: What successes have you seen your child enjoy this year? (If appropriate add: Tell us about what’s been happening to help make your child successful?)

3) **To the teachers and specialists**: What successes have you seen for [the student]? (If appropriate, add: Tell us about what’s been happening to help make him/her successful?)

4) **To the group**: What suggestions or changes can you think of to make [the student’s] program work even better?

AI-IEP Protocol: Questions for Discussion at IEP meetings p. 2

Second: Goals

5) **To the student**: * What do you think you’d most love to do when you grow up? (Or: What is your goal in life [or after school]?)*

And * What do you think you’ll need to do to get to do what you love most [or to get to your goal]?

And * What have you done so far to get to do what you love most [or to move toward your goal]?

6) **To the group**: What kinds of support and help can you provide to make [the student’s] program work toward the goals he/she’s set for him/herself?

Source: Peter Kozik, doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, June 2008. Used with permission of author.

Contact Information

- Email: thomas@institute4learning.com
- Website: www.institute4learning.com
- Blog: http://institute4learning.com/blog/
- Twitter: @Dr_Armstrong