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## **Thinking Inclusion: Analysis of Grandin's Strategies for Including Students with Autism in the Classroom**

Julia Fama<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract: This article will focus on how to include students with autism in mainstream schools effectively. I draw on the anecdotal evidence shared by Temple Grandin in her autobiography, Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism. In the text, Grandin argues for: (1) the inclusion of students' fixations in the classroom, (2) the benefits of social interaction between students with autism and typically developing students, (3) the maintenance of structured activities, and (4) the importance of supportive college professors. I contend that while Thinking in Pictures proposes ideas for successful inclusion, it does not include a sufficient amount of research to support its arguments. That said, others in the field of education support and extend Grandin's claims.*

In her autobiography, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*, Temple Grandin shares with readers her candid experience with autism. Readers can gain a clearer understanding as to what life is like for someone living with the disability. In addition to personal stories from her own life, her book contains factual information about autism. However, in the section on education, Grandin does not take the opportunity to write about the findings of professional educators. In this section, it is clear Grandin feels strongly about the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools, and she makes several suggestions as to how children with autism should be educated to ensure they receive the greatest possible opportunity to succeed: "When an educational program is successful the child will act less autistic" (Grandin 102). For Grandin, characteristics of a successful educational program include the use of students' fixations in the classroom, social interaction between students with autism and typically developing students, structured activities, and supportive professors. Although Grandin proposes ideas as to how to include students with autism in mainstream classrooms effectively based on her own experience, she fails to support her claims with adequate research. I argue that Grandin would have made a stronger case if she had included more evidence from professionals in the field of education in support of her ideas.

Grandin argues it is important for teachers to acknowledge their students' fixations. To support her argument, Grandin draws on the psychiatrist, Leo Kanner, who writes:

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Many children with autism become fixated on various subjects. Some teachers make the mistake of trying to stamp out the fixation. Instead, they should broaden it and channel it into constructive activities. For example, if a child becomes infatuated with boats, then use boats to motivate him to read and do math. Leo Kanner stated that the path to success for some people with autism was to channel their fixation into a career. (Grandin 104)

Grandin asserts that teachers must utilize students' special interests as a tool to help them learn. Although Grandin cites Kanner as a reference for this idea, the argument Grandin references does not give details on how teachers could incorporate students' fixations in the classroom with other students. Instead, Kanner states that some individuals with autism have found success by creating a career around their fixation. While Kanner's findings may be accurate, Grandin does not reference any connection to teachers utilizing a student's fixation.

Rhea Paul addresses the issue of students with autism becoming fixated on a particular subject. Paul agrees with Grandin that teachers should not force the student to abandon their fixation. However, she does not believe that the teacher should simply use a student's fixation as a way to motivate the student to do their work. Instead, as an expert in the field, she believes that teachers should find a way to incorporate students' special interest into their classrooms. Teachers should figure out a way to relate it to the curriculum instead of encouraging the student to stray away from it. By doing so, they will help to keep the student engaged in the lesson and include them in with the rest of the class (Paul).

In addition, Grandin touches upon the importance of having supportive classmates. However, she does not back up her ideas with additional sources and excludes significant details:

I was enrolled in a normal kindergarten at a small elementary school. Each class had only twelve to fourteen pupils and an experienced teacher who knew how to put firm but fair limits on children to control behavior. The day before I entered kindergarten, Mother attended the class and explained to the other children that they needed to help me. This prevented teasing and created a better learning environment. (Grandin 101)

Grandin hints at the idea of social supports but does not explain the methods which can result in positive interactions. Instead, she describes how her mother encouraged her classmates to be supportive of her. Although the inclusion of this personal narrative can help to illustrate Grandin's experience with social supports, in order for readers to be convinced that social supports are effective, they must know the "how" and "why" behind them. Grandin might have included evidence that states the importance of social supports. In addition, Grandin should give examples of

teachers implementing these classroom practices in addition to the example of her mother. While parents play a vital role in the education of their child, teachers are the masters of their classrooms and are responsible for the majority of interactions that take place within them.

According to Paul, social supports are powerful ways for students with autism to learn and develop social skills that will help them throughout their lives. Therefore, Paul recommends enlisting the student's peers to help them gain these skills. Teachers should guide classmates to the understanding that working with children with autism can be "fun." She provides several examples for teachers. One way to implement social supports is through "buddy time," which is an effective way for younger students to work together. During buddy time, students alternate among partners with whom they "stay, play, and talk."

Furthermore, for older students, Paul recommends cooperative learning groups. Students in cooperative learning groups are given assignments to which each member has to contribute. These assignments allow students to work together as a group to figure out how to get the student with autism involved. She also advocates peer networks. This involves gathering approximately five students to serve as social supports for students with autism. Each day, each student is assigned to support the student with autism for 20 minutes. These 20 minutes may be during lunch, recess, etc. This activity is productive because it increases the social opportunities for the autistic child.

In addition to teachers encouraging group activities and social interaction amongst students, it is also important to maintain a structured classroom. Grandin addresses this concept in her text: "It is important for an autistic child to have structured activities both at home and at schools. Meals were always at the same time" (Grandin 101). Through her personal experiences, Grandin understands the value of having structured activities. However, her experience with dinner is not enough to persuade her readers on the value of structured activities. She does not provide any scenarios of structured activities in the classroom, nor does she explain why it is important for teachers to design structured activities for students with autism.

Both Paul and Friedlander supply their audience with several strategies to ensure a comfortable environment for students with autism. Paul calls this concept, "Making the environment understandable." She recommends teachers decorate the classroom with signs and posters so students with autism can easily see what is happening. In addition, she advocates visual schedules posted either given to the student with autism individually or displayed at the front of the room for the whole class to see. A visual schedule is one that maps out the class' entire agenda with pictures. According to Paul, the best types of visual schedules for students with

autism are ones that allow students to remove an activity after it has been completed. By removing the image of the activity, students with autism can visually confirm that the activity is over, so they no longer need to finish it.

Friedlander further explains the significance of the seemingly small act of removing an image from the visual schedule, which can help ease the uncertainty of time and transitions by providing notice in advance and giving the child a visual cue as to what comes next. Also, removing the image may increase their comfort level and help the child better internalize change. Finally, Friedlander argues, participation in switching the images helps the child to understand and accept the change (142).

Additionally, both professionals argue scheduling helps to predict when a child may experience difficulty throughout the day. They suggest teachers practice priming and rehearsing an activity prior to exposure. Having a trial will allow time for the student to adjust to the new situation. Friedlander includes the example of a student with autism adapting to a noisy cafeteria. Strategies for handling this situation include, eating comfort foods from home, assigning a seat for him to sit in, telling him exactly how much time he has to eat before he should clean up, and assigning him to a buddy that will serve as a model to help him understand lunchroom behaviors (Friedlander 142). Had Grandin included the advice given by Paul and Friedlander, her commentary on structured activities would have been more informative, rather than one strictly based on her personal experience.

In addition to discussing her K-12 experience, Grandin also discusses her experience as a student at a mainstream college. Grandin provides anecdotal evidence that addresses the importance of support from college professors:

Mr. Dion, the math teacher, spent hours with me after each class. Almost every day I went to his office and reviewed the entire day's lecture. I also had to spend hours with a tutor to get through French. For moral support there was Mrs. Eastbrook...When I got lonely or down in the dumps I went over to her house and she gave me much needed encouragement. (Grandin 106)

Grandin describes the immense support she received from her college professors. Furthermore, she credits them for getting her through college. Grandin's example creates a clear picture of how having a close relationship with her professors benefited her personally; however, it does not persuade readers to believe students with autism should have mentors. Grandin does not provide any research to explain the tremendous effect mentors can have on a college student with autism. Professional educators, Austin and Peña, provide research-based evidence which proves the benefits a college mentor has on a student with autism.

According to Austin and Peña's study, college faculty members, nominated for being exceptional mentors for students with autism, believe in forming meaningful relationships with such students. These relationships help students with autism to reach their full potential. Faculty members claim it is necessary to establish an environment in which the student with autism feels comfortable. It is more likely that the student will respond positively to feedback when they feel safe and welcomed in their environment (Austin and Peña 18). Furthermore, some students with autism do not feel that they are at the college level. Therefore, the faculty members of this study argue it is critical for college professors to nurture these students to ensure that they get to where they need to be (22).

Not only do Austin and Peña suggest professors be a mentor to students with autism, but they encourage professors to mentor their fellow faculty members as well (11). Since there is an increase in the number of students with autism attending college, they believe it is important for faculty development training to offer information on how to interact with students on the spectrum. Through these types of training, faculty members can develop the skills to work with students with autism and learn successful teaching strategies. In addition, each college should have faculty members who serve as mentors to other faculty members who may come to them with questions or concerns about teaching students with autism (Austin and Peña 11). Austin and Peña's study on exceptional college professors illustrates key points that were missed by Grandin in regards to educating individuals with autism at the college level.

Grandin would make a stronger case for the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools if she had incorporated statements from professional educators in her book *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*. Though the ideas proposed in the section on education are valid, the text does not explain them thoroughly enough. Personal narratives about autism have a major impact on society; they educate others and eliminate stereotypes. These types of stories are necessary for creating a change in the classroom. Adding factual evidence would not diminish Grandin's voice or the momentous impact her personal stories have on readers, but rather, make her case even more powerful.

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