Inclusive Role-Play Gaming for The Game Academy

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**Overview**

My Inclusive Action Plan is designed for the ideal future incarnation of the *Enrichment Gaming* program offered through The Game Academy. This program operates in small groups: 3-5 children per instructor, with ages of our participants being between 8 and 18 years of age. Participants will come from a diverse set of educational backgrounds, including home schooled / unschooled children, those in private education, and those in public education. The period of instruction generally is between 2 and 4 hours, once a week. While we already do our best to provide an inclusive experience to as many different learners as we can, there is always more that we can do. This plan will help detail the differing strategies we can employ to create the most inclusive setting we can.

Throughout my plan, I will be making use of the concept of *Universal Design* (UL) and *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) as a platform for maximum inclusivity. As stated by Ron Mace, “Universal design seeks to encourage products that are more usable by everyone. It is a design built for the environment and consumer products for a very broad definition of user.” (Mace, 1998) If you design for the edges of experience, you will address the greatest number of diverse use cases. I will also pay close attention to *The Seven Principles of Universal Design* as laid forth by North Carolina State University, Center for Universal Design (1997). Finally, I will be paying attention to the ACCESS mnemonic as detailed on page 207 of Garguilo and Metcalf (2017) as a guidepost to make use of UDL components in the creation of an environment well-suited to as wide a population of learners as possible. While I will use each of these frameworks for guidance, I will refrain from enumerating them here for sake of space.

**Creating a Physically Inclusive Classroom Environment**

Our Enrichment Gaming environment looks very similar to a classroom, with particular distinctions. Due to this, there are basic classroom accessibility issues that we will address, such as ensuring equal access to the building and classrooms, seating, etc. There will be ramps on the building, doors that can be opened by all (automatic doors, etc.), and classrooms with plenty of space between our tables and ergonomic seating that can support those with orthopedic impairments. We will allow for our participants to sit using a number of choices, from one-legged stools to full-support backed chairs, and standing breaks will be allowed and encouraged for those that may experience physical discomfort from sitting for too long a period.

Because we have a student-to-teacher ratio of no more than 5:1, and each of those groups sits around a table, we do not suffer from some of the classroom-related accessibility issues, such as too much distance from the student to the instructor, or inability to see the white board, etc. All the same, there are still classroom-related limiting factors that we will do our best to mitigate. For example, the sound level in the room could get loud if too many groups are placed in the same classroom; our ideal setting would be small meeting rooms with minimal distractions and comfortable seating around a single table, where all participants have a good visual view to the instructor.

Certain physical limitations such as limited use of hands and arms could cause difficulty in interacting with some of the game-related components, such as books, character sheets, dice, game books, maps, etc. In some cases, this can be mitigated with electronic versions of these devices that can be more easily manipulated with assistive technology devices (electronic dice rollers, electronic books, virtual tabletops, etc.). For those interactions that cannot be easily mitigated with assistive technology, simply pairing up a child with a partner that can assist them in moving the miniature on the table from one location to another on the game board can be an easy solution.

For participants that may possesses speech difficulties, providing wait time may be enough to allow for the student to have the time to fully express themselves, or we may be able to make use of assistive technology such as text-to-speech, to allow a student to have an easier time communicating with others.

For students that have more extreme sensory limitations, such as hearing difficulties / deafness, or vision difficulties / blindness, a more extensive accommodation may need to be made. Fortunately, the distance between the participants and the instructor are short, but we may still have need for a signing translator at the table for those who use ASL, or again we might use speech-to-text and text-to-speech technology to help. For vision difficulties and blindness, we can provide Braille versions of rulebooks, or use other assistive technology. Fortunately, the experience of tabletop role-playing games is largely narrative, so the blind will have an easier time playing as long as descriptions are complete and detailed, and of course questions can be posed to increase detail or repeat descriptions.

For those that may have a condition with a kinesthetic component (ADHD, Tourette Syndrome, etc.), allowances are made to participants to allow for standing, and limited movement / pacing, as long as it is limited to a specifically designated area, and so long as it does not disturb the group as a whole. Education is also given to all group members to normalize this behavior, so that a spirit of inclusivity and understanding create empathy and compassion, instead of judgement and discomfort.

We will do our best to leverage any already-existing supports the participant may already be receiving through their school, through an IEP or 504 plan consideration. We will also maintain “a safe, healthy environment by observing for health-related problems and knowing the steps to take if a problem occurs” (Garguilo, Metcalf. 2017). This means having a staff that is trained in CPR and First Aid, and are educated in all physical ailments or disabilities that the participants may possess, such as epilepsy, migraines, asthma, etc.

**Creating an Emotionally Inclusive Classroom Environment**

In creating an emotionally inclusive classroom environment, it’s important to create a community of trust and safety. “*The social environment requires specific attention. All students need to feel safe, valued, and respected. A teacher’s own enthusiasm for learning and caring influences everything that he or she does. Students need to feel free to take learning risks without a fear of failure or ridicule.”* (Garguilo, Metcalf. 2017. p207)

In order to create a safe and trusting space, we will work to build a sense of community between the participants and the instructors, as well as any other staff we may employ. We will work to improve understanding between participants of differing backgrounds, perspectives, difficulties, strengths and needs, so that everyone feels free to fully express themselves, including feeling safe to make mistakes and ‘do things wrong’. We will create a ‘magic circle’ of trust, in which the activity of the role-playing game will occur. In this circle, the players are accepting of one another, and it is also understood that the actions of the character in the story that each player assumes is distinct from themselves as people. The character becomes a conduit through which emotions and behaviors are safe to express, and failure is celebrated as seeds for new opportunities.

We will work to create safety for participants to express behaviors and emotions that might otherwise in other environments incite discomfort and anxiety. In order to accomplish this, we will work to normalize behaviors, holding the values of both transparency and privacy where appropriate. Non-neurotypical behaviors will be explained and demystified, but not dwelled upon. Permission will be given for non-disruptive soothing behaviors.

Beyond trust at the table, there are always possible moments when a participant is feeling overstimulated or agitated and feels the need for a break from the intensity that may arise in the activity of collaborative storytelling. We will therefore provide safe physical and emotional spaces where a participant can retreat. There is a no-judgment place for them to go and regroup, and staff will be in attendance if they need companionship or help working through and emotional issue. When there is a need for behavioral modification, it will be done with empathy and understanding. Mutual respect between all participants, instructors, and staff is explicitly valued and re-enforced.

**Supporting Learners Who Need Cognitive Supports**

For those participants who may need extra cognitive supports, there are a number of methods and strategies we will employ. For those who may have cognitive impairment, we can employ task analysis to support any activities that might be multi-step and sequential by nature (such as creating a character for a game or resolving conflict through combat). “Cheat Sheets” or flow charts are excellent game aids that are assistive to a majority of participants, and we employ them liberally. Visual aids and manipulatives are already a strong component of the game activity (game boards, maps, miniatures, etc.) and we can adapt these to meet the needs of a wide variety of participants.

We will use partner work to model appropriate behavior and actions, to support both beginners and those with cognitive impairment who may need the extra scaffolding. We will model both tasks and behavior, both in peer partnering and from instructors.

We will also use appropriate grouping of participants by maturity and capability, in order to limit the frustration that may occur with too large a distance of maturity and functional capacity between participants. In any group, we will also consider the appropriateness of the tasks required for participation, and we may be able to scale back certain activities through using the lens of Bloom’s Taxonomy (Garguilo, Metcalf. 2107. p39).

**Supporting Learners Who Need Social Supports**

In order to create a strong sense of social support for all participants, it is crucial that we develop a strong sense of community between all participants and staff. The participants will be in small groups for several hours at a time on a weekly basis, and will learn one another’s strengths and challenges intimately, and there will be a strong ethic of peer assistance, where everyone helps everyone else feel welcome and included. Again, there will be a ‘safe space’ to which participants may retreat and regroup if needed. Staff will always be available to support students that need extra help.

**Supporting Learners Who Need Emotional/Behavioral Supports**

Some of our participants will need emotional and behavioral supports, including behavioral modifications. We will work to reinforce positive social behaviors and will constantly model appropriate behavior through the actions of our staff and volunteers. For those that need extra help, we will make use of a peer or buddy system, using adult aids and companions when the participant has a particular need of extra support. Whenever conflict arises in the group, we will take that as a learning moment, and will do our best to mediate conflict by enabling the participants to express their concerns to one another, and to hold the separation between actions made by characters in a story narrative and those performed by players in the game.

**Supporting Learners Who Need Language Support**

Our goal will be to support participation for any student, no matter their relationship to the English language. Ideally, we will be able to offer multilingual instruction, using the language of preference for the players in the game, or at the very least providing supports to those that are English language learners. We will use vocabulary lists and supports, translation sheets, peer/buddy supports, and live translation at the game table. Our goal is to apply just-in-time (J.I.T.) assistance, so that confusions around language are resolved quickly in the moment, be it due to acquisition of English as a second language, or due to a limited vocabulary due to cognitive impairment.

**Supporting Learners from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds**

Our goal is to serve a wide population of participants in our program, from different diverse cultural backgrounds. One main component of the support we will offer will depend on keeping our staff well-educated on their student population and any issues that may arise due to differences in cultural or socio-economic backgrounds between participants. We will seek community support from family and friends, as well as members of any special education team to which the student may belong.

Also, the nature of the way that we create our narratives is inclusive, inquiry-based and democratic in nature. We gather our players together for an initial meeting and ask them questions about what sorts of stories they regularly entertain, what they read, watch, what they prefer in terms of narrative style, etc., and from this inquiry we create our game curriculum styled specifically for the group of kids in question. If we are starting with a ready-made curriculum, we can always (and must always) make adjustments for the specific participants we have in the group at hand. Wherever we can constructively include elements from a player’s interests and personal backgrounds, we will.

**Reflection**

After taking this class, I feel that I have a more complete and nuanced understanding of what diverse needs all students may possess, and it is clear to me that all of us have some sort of ‘special needs’ that apply to our educational challenges and successes. Instead of viewing Special Education as something that is reserved for the outliers, to be held as distinct from General or Typical education, I now hold a view that all education is special education. In holding this idea, not only will I be more likely to be aware of how I can be more helpful to a participant in our program (or any educational setting), but it helps me hold a wider view of what is ‘typical’. We must ‘kill the average’ as a concept, and instead design our learning experiences for the edges, and in doing so, we will reach the majority of our participants with equivalence. In using principles such as UDL, we are taking a stand for an educational approach that needs less retrofitted accommodations and modifications, and instead works towards universal appeal and accessibility that can be engaged with by the participants at their own levels of comfort and need. As I work in the field, I am excited to engage with a wider population of learners, and to address the needs of those with a diverse set of challenges. I am far less frightened by the concept of ‘how do I help those with issues x, y and z’, and more focused on answer the question of ‘how can I make what I do work for as many people as possible’.

References

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