As I am not a teacher, my plans to use the information from this workshop are as follows:

I work with at-risk youth, usually children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who have one, if any, parent in the home, and who have often been abused or neglected. I would like to improve their awareness of other children with special needs. The children I work with want people to be compassionate and understanding of the daily problems and difficulties they face, so it seems natural that they would be understanding and compassionate towards other children with special needs, if given the awareness and the opportunity to do so. I would hope that educating these children would also help to educate the people around them, both children and adults.

This workshop has really opened my eyes to the daily lives of these children - their frustrations, anxieties, and social and mobile disabilities. I would imagine that outside awareness is the biggest problem for children suffering from ASDs; people just don’t know enough about Autism and its associated disabilities to know how to respond to them properly. I have learned that these children are often misunderstood, which can lead to further frustration and anxiety for them. We all experience anxiety in various forms and knowing that can help to bridge the gap to these children.

The children’s organization I work with, Friends for Youth, has workshops the children must attend – drug prevention, gang prevention, bullying awareness workshops; this could be another workshop. I think asking these children to complete a questionnaire about what their needs are, what causes them anxiety, how they cope, and what others can do to assist them could be given before any information about ASD children is dispersed. Then, we could do some simple teaching about ASDs and have a round table discussion about how they could help and how their difficulties aren’t that different from the children with ASD.

Friends for Youth recently received funding to mentor at-risk incoming freshmen at Sequoia High School, and I think this kind of workshop could be a part of it. I don’t know if Sequoia is an “inclusive” school, but typically children who need a mentor can become excellent mentors, themselves; they know what it takes to be helpful and compassionate. Also, feeling needed or helpful could be good for these at-risk youth because they often feel unwanted or unneeded, and this might help them with those feelings.
I wish I could create a room that “neurotypical” children and adults could walk into that would recreate some of the common physical symptoms children on the spectrum experience. I think this would heighten compassion. The subjects would answer a short questionnaire before entering and another of the same upon exiting. The questionnaire can ask them things like, “What would you think if you saw another child flapping their hands or covering their ears. What would you do?”

The room would have lights that flicker suddenly and appear bright and blinding. Then a loud and almost deafening siren could be sounded intermittently, while someone with a soft voice gives instructions. Another stimulus effect could be gloves that all who enter have to wear. The gloves would have an electrical current in them that goes off whenever the hands are kept still. This would make the subjects have to keep moving their hands to escape the discomfort, mimicking the stimming or hand-flapping motion that ASD sufferers often engage in. There would be a video in the room recording the subjects’ responses to all of this, so they could see themselves and their reactions to the stimuli later. Upon exiting the room, they would be questioned about their experiences and shown the video of themselves. I think the questions would be answered very differently after the experience.

Something like this room could be in a public location that school field trips could attend (an Exploratorium kind of setting). I also think this could be built in a mobile setting – a van or a bus (“The Sensory Bus”) – that travels around to schools for a day. I really believe that knowledge is power and that, when given the opportunity, most people will choose to be kind and helpful once they are aware of the problems the people around them are suffering.

Reminding the children I work with that “Fair isn’t everyone getting what they want, it’s everyone getting what they need.” The children I work with understand that life is not fair – life has not been “fair” to any of them, but pointing out that it isn’t fair in other ways for other children could be very helpful.