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Inclusive Education For Children With Autism- The Need For Change

Abstract

Children with Autism are immersed in environments that make little to no sense to them. For educators attempting to meet the diverse range of learning needs for children with ASD, the lack or limited knowledge regarding the type of interventions to implement in the classroom can be both misleading and confusing. Interventions need to address the issue of competence in inclusive settings by creating positive, predictable environments that allow the child to develop and expand their ability to successfully impact the environment around them. Educating children with autism simply because the law demands it and the increase of the social awareness is not enough. Education has resulted in unrealistic and unreasonable expectations for students and has hindered the potential progress of students with ASD. Although every child with autism is different and the behavioural manifestations of the cognitive impairments are variable, there are certain key issues which make the education of these children within mainstream schooling a particular challenge. The 'dyad of impairment' summarizes the difficulties of the autistic child, but the actual manifestation of these in the dynamics of the classroom can vary from situation to situation and child to child. It is important for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to be knowledgeable about evidence-based approaches to adequately address the needs of students with autism. The purpose of this article is to suggest to inclusive education system and educators themselves with an overview of evidence-based practice, outline effective teaching practices, and highlight specific resources that teachers can use.

Keywords: *Autism, inclusive education, evidenced-based approaches, effective teaching practices, teachers.*

1-Introduction

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to those around them. Their ability to develop friendships is impaired as is their capacity to understand other people's feelings. Some people with autism have accompanying learning disabilities. Everyone with the condition shares a difficulty in making sense of the world. The failure of schools to provide appropriately for children with autism can have seriously negative consequences on a child's behavior, which can lead to exclusion from school. The lack of understanding and appropriate provision means that children with autism are losing out which leaves the whole family with no resources and hopes. Children with autism often meet with failure after failure when trying to positively impacting the world around them. Despite their level of confusion the child with ASD is largely left to fight for themselves.

Children with autism are considered disabled under the WHO definition for People with Disabilities. Historically, students with disabilities have been segregated from their peers, even from society as a whole (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996). More recently, however, there has been an increasing trend to include students with autism and other disabilities in general education classrooms along with their typically developing peers (McDonnell, 1998).

Many studies have asserted that children with autism can benefit from participation in inclusive classroom environments. International conventions claim that inclusion is a civil right and is responsible for nurturing appropriate social development. However, autism mostly requires specialized supports to experience success in the educational contexts. Providing an appropriate education often requires a degree of specialist understanding that is not present in Albanian mainstream schools. Children with autism may also need significant additional support, such as a classroom assistant or regular sessions of speech and language therapy.

2-Rationale

In Albania, according to the National Strategy for People with Disability, the number of people with mental, physical and senses disability is: Total 35547, Urban Areas 15166, Rural Areas 20381. There is no evidence published about the number or prevalence of children with

ASD in Albania. The Ministry of Education and Science of Albania has started collecting information on the number of students with disabilities, but there is no official data published yet on the number of students within ASD (World Vision Report, 2012). The small numbers the few autism centers existing in Albania might offer are not representative to all population. A national survey to estimate the prevalence of ASD hasn't been developed yet. We can assume however that the rate of children with autism in Albania is the same with that of other countries.

On the Autism Day, 2nd of April 2015, the Albanian Children Foundation declared on media that there are 500 children with autism attending schools and that there are 65 only teachers with Special School background who have been inserted as assistants to these children. These teachers have limited or no knowledge on autism and consequently no training on evidenced – based interventions designed for teaching autism.

At system level, educational system has made progress in terms of law knowing the right of education, of promoting inclusive education and of the right of having assistant teacher within the classroom. The law No. 69/2012 “For the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania” that entered in force in 2012, specifically articles 6, 19, 20, 57,63, 65 regulate the rights to education of students with special needs. There are no special education programs in place and there is no University in Albania that offer programs that prepare teachers to work with students with Autism.

Educators are called to educate all children, regardless of race, gender, or ability. In Albania, students with autism spectrum disorders were once isolated at their homes, than educated in alternative settings in extreme situations, in the special education classroom in moderate cases, or in the regular educational classroom if undiagnosed. As public policy is shifting and more knowledge is being gained about appropriate education of individuals with ASD, parents are striving to find the most effective way to educate their children.

Although the traditional model of lecture in the classroom tend to be no longer the norm, classrooms instruction is not as individualized as these special students need in order for them to achieve success. Many of these students are lost in the shuffle of special education, or lost in a regular education setting that focuses heavily on learning

methods that are difficult for them. Classroom teachers are rarely educated to differentiate instruction and recognize the needs of a student with ASD. There is overwhelming evidence of a shortage of teachers and other professionals who have the knowledge and skills to serve the needs of children and youth with autism spectrum disorders (Simpson, 2003). Preparing qualified teachers and other professionals to educate and otherwise support students with autism spectrum disorders is the most significant challenge facing the autism field (Simpson, 2003).

At the systems level, inclusion can only work well if the educational system (at the district, school building and classroom levels) is designed to encourage and support its success.

3-Method

The article provide the education system and educators themselves with an overview of evidence-based practice and outline effective teaching practices that teachers can use.

First, debate on inclusion as an independent variable will be briefly reviewed.

Second, intervention strategies that have been documented as successful in the process of including students with autism in general education classrooms will be presented.

2.1 Inclusive Education

The autism spectrum occurs along with mental retardation and language disorder in many cases. Thus, educational planning must address both the needs typically associated with autistic disorders and needs associated with accompanying disabilities. Education, both directly of children, and of parents and teachers, is currently the primary form of treatment for autistic spectrum disorders.

The question the Inclusive Education poses is whether we should discuss about the need for inclusion at all if the regular classroom teacher is not fully equipped to provide accommodations for a stu-

dent with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Perhaps we can continue the previous trend of sending all of those students to the special schools to be educated by the special education teacher. What can be gained in a larger setting? Individuals with an ASD are often recognized first by their ineptness in social interactions with others. They often say things that are inappropriate or they may speak only rarely if at all. In play, they may remain off in a corner inspecting rocks while their peers are carrying on a game of tag. If the student remains in the special educational setting with fewer interactions with mainstream classmates, he will undoubtedly experience little or no growth socially. The child may grow into an adult who has difficulty in the work environment because he has still not learned effective communication skills. The regular educational setting will, of course, only be as effective as the adults who are caring for the child, but with intentional teaching of social skills in this setting, more positive growth is likely.

One of the contributing factors in the controversy over inclusion has been the limited number of studies that have focused directly on procedures for facilitating educational inclusion (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Before considering effective strategies, however, it is reasonable to question the extent to which inclusion results in the benefits that its proponents anticipate. The little research available that considers inclusion as an independent variable has documented generally, though not exclusively, positive results. With regard to the potential social outcomes of students placed in inclusive education, researchers have evaluated students with autism on a number of dependent variables, holding educational placement as the independent variable. For example, researchers have documented that students with disabilities, including students with autism, who are fully included (a) display higher levels of engagement and social interaction, (b) give and receive higher levels of social support, (c) have larger friendship networks, and (d) have developmentally more advanced individualized education plan goals than their counterparts in segregated placements (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994).

Authors often note that the mere placement or proximity to typical peers and the general education curriculum may be beneficial, but it is insufficient in achieving an appropriate education for students with disabilities (e.g., Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kohler, Strain, & Shearer, 1996). For this reason, many researchers have advocated for educa-

tional inclusion as a reallocation of specialized educational services, not merely as an intervention in and of itself (Sailor, 1996). Thus, the focus of the inclusion debate may best be reframed from segregated versus inclusive education to how to provide appropriate supports in inclusive settings. For inclusive placements to be successful, educators must have knowledge of and access to empirically validated strategies that will assist them in this process. Therefore, the following discussion provides a review of intervention strategies that have been documented as effective in supporting students with autism in inclusive educational contexts.

3.2 Facilitating Strategies for the Inclusive Education of Children with Autism

Teaching individuals with ASD how to form relationships and understand the feelings of others is likely more important than academic learning when considering the future potential of an individual. Because this is the greatest area of weakness, schools carry an important responsibility to work this into the curriculum. Schools do not always recognize this responsibility. Many professionals do not believe enough attention is being given to the social and emotional needs of children with ASD in the school setting (Bryson, Rogers, & Fombonne, 2003).

Education in general is characterized by simple features like:

- ✓ Learning is based on the ability to understand;
- ✓ Involve constant and high level of language inputs;
- ✓ Focus on group interactions and cooperation;
- ✓ Assume that the child has the inner desire to learn/give/interact;
- ✓ Ratio staff/student;

Whereas educating children with autism requires different and additional applications like:

- Repetition;
- Simple language inputs like: “come here”;

- Removal of distracters;
- Consistent teaching approach;
- Greater commitment of staff (ratio included);
- Assistance with behaviour issues;
- Learning of many skills that typically developing children learn independently, e.g.: play skills & self-help skills;

As for all children, an intervention program must be individualized and tailored to the specific needs, strengths, and weaknesses of the individual child. In addition, children with autistic spectrum disorders often present special challenges for intervention.

From the time of Kanner's (1943) definition of autism, social deficits have been consistently identified as an, if not the, essential feature of the condition. Social interaction requires careful attention to multiple, shifting strands of information; an ability to perceive the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others; and coping with novel situations on a regular basis. In children with autistic spectrum disorders, social difficulties persist over time, although the nature of the social difficulties may change with age and intervention (Siegel et al., 1990). These social difficulties,

as reflected in relationships with teachers and particularly in relationships with peers, are different from those seen in all other developmental disorders and present special difficulties for programming. For a child with an autistic spectrum disorder to be able to be included in mainstream settings, the child must be able to manage social experiences. This requires careful consideration on the part of school staff. While children with an autistic spectrum disorder can be served within many school environments, even for more cognitively able individuals this can be a challenge. The characteristic difficulties in social interaction require special teacher training and support beyond knowledge concerning general developmental delays or other learning disabilities.

As has been widely noted, autism is a highly heterogeneous disability with regard to level of functioning (G. Dunlap & Bunton-Pierce, 1999; Gillberg, 1999; Koegel, Valdez-Menchaca, Koegel, & Harrower, 2001). Thus, the level and intensity of supports required for a given

student with autism will depend largely on the characteristics of the student's functioning. The below is a very short description of documented strategies that can then be individually tailored to meet the idiosyncratic needs of particular students with autism participating in inclusive educational placements.

➤ **Antecedent Procedures**

By modifying discriminative stimuli for both appropriate and inappropriate behavior, antecedent procedures can be designed to prevent and reduce challenging behavior. One very positive aspect of antecedent procedures is that they are proactive.

➤ **Delayed Contingencies**

It is the generalization of behavior in the absence of direct supervision. One goal of education is to increase the independent academic functioning of students. This has often been a daunting goal for educators working with students with autism. While successes have been well documented for students with autism under conditions of close adult supervision, there has also been evidence that the removal of supervision often leads quickly to a reappearance of challenging behavior and/or a decrease in appropriate behavior (Marholin & Steinman, 1977; Stahmer & Schreibman, 1992).

➤ **Self-management strategies**

Self-management has been described as a viable intervention strategy for promoting independence in the classroom, as it shifts some responsibility for behavior management from the teacher to the student (L. K. Dunlap, Dunlap, Koegel, & Koegel, 1991), increasing a teacher's ability to focus on instruction. As a result of this decreased dependency on adult intervention, the student has increased opportunity to interact with classmates without the potential stigma of having a one-on-one aide. Thus, self-management allows students with disabilities to become actively involved in the intervention process and more involved in their classroom environments. For these reasons, self-management has been suggested in the literature as an ideal intervention for children with disabilities participating in full inclusion classroom settings (Reid, 1996).

➤ **Peer-mediated interventions**

Due to common deficiencies in the social relationships of children with autism, peer-mediated interventions have been advocated as potentially useful approaches for facilitating the participation of children with autism in general education classrooms.

4-Conclusion

Children with autism can benefit from participation in inclusive classroom environments, and many experts assert that inclusion is a civil right and is responsible for nurturing appropriate social development. However, most children with autism require specialized supports to experience success in these educational contexts.

Inclusion can only work well if the educational is designed to encourage and support its success. For instance, systems need to have workable strategies to be used in inclusive classrooms, and the teachers responsible for implementing special strategies need to have adequate resources and social support. Appropriate training for all special educators, specifically in the field of autism, is imperative. Teacher preparation programs need to ensure that future teachers are provided with the tools to accurately evaluate research to identify evidence-based practice; how to implement that practice in their daily teaching strategies.

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