

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding Homeschooling Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

The increase in individuals and students being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has been significant in recent years, and teachers are finding themselves needing to work with students for which they may be inadequately prepared. More and more parents of children with ASD are concerned with the education programming and preparedness for the future available through the public school system, and are turning to homeschooling as the option that works for their family. Because homeschooling options are many, and communication may be important in order to provide the best program for children with ASD, a need was identified to survey teachers regarding their perceptions and beliefs regarding homeschooling children with ASD. Fifty-two special education teachers from eight states participated in this study. Results indicated that there was no difference in perceptions and beliefs among teachers who have and have not had experience with homeschooling. Results also indicated that teachers were concerned that the children were missing out on academics and social opportunities, and did not seem to consider the flexibility and individual possibilities homeschooling provides.

Keywords: autism, homeschooling, teachers.

CURRENTLY, THE INCIDENCE of autism in the general population is reported to be 1 in 88 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). According to the 2010 Part B Child Count tables from the US Department of Education, the number of students, ages 6-21, receiving Special Education services under the category of Autism, has risen from approximately 192,000 in 2005 to 370,000 in 2010. In 2005, that total was 3.2% of the school-aged population of all students with disabilities. By 2010, the total of students receiving services under the category of autism had risen to 6.35% of all students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This is a significant increase in just 5 years' time. Because of this increase, autism spectrum disorders are no longer rare, and schools are challenged to effectively teach these students.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by impairment in social interaction and communication, as well as restricted or stereotyped patterns of behavior or interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Common social traits include inability to respond to social cues; problems with turn-taking; difficulty establishing and maintaining eye contact; difficulty with reciprocal social interactions; and failure to recognize and read facial expressions, body language, and social cues. Communication traits include delayed or lack of use of gestures, echolalia, scripted language, and pedantic speech. Stereotyped behaviors or interests include rocking, flapping, twirling, insistence on routines and rituals, interest in parts of objects, and hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2000;

Simpson & Myles, 2008; Wilkinson, 2010). Included in this spectrum is autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

While individuals on the autism spectrum may have the same label, they are very unique in their learning styles and individual needs. What works for one child may not work for others, and it is not yet known why one child with ASD responds to one particular treatment and not another (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007). There is no single approach that has been identified as being proven to be effective for all students with ASD. Rather, a comprehensive and intensive program of educational interventions, behavior management, and therapeutic services is recommended (Wilkinson, 2010). The National Research Council recommended several interventions and program areas for working with students with ASD. These include focusing on functional, spontaneous communication; delivering social instruction throughout the day; teaching play skills with peers; providing instruction for cognitive development in natural settings; addressing problematic behaviors with positive, proactive approaches; and teaching functional academic skills (Lord & McGee, 2001). Kidd and Kaczmerak (2010) noted that it has been determined that children with ASD may process information differently compared to their typical peers and therefore may benefit from teaching practices that are different from those offered in general education settings.

Hurlbutt

With the knowledge base changing quickly regarding screening, early intervention, evidence-based practices, and other areas related to ASD, a critical issue needing to be addressed is preparing teachers to work with these students. Myles, Simpson, and deBoer (2008) found that professionals report being unprepared to meet the educational needs of students with complex issues related to ASD.

According to recent statistics, parents of children with ASD may also feel that teachers are unprepared to meet the educational needs of children with ASD as well, since more and more parents are choosing to homeschool their children. Ray (2011) indicated that homeschooling may be the fastest-growing form of education today. Pyles (2004, p.35) estimated, at that time, there may be approximately “3300 to 5000 homeschooled children today who are somewhere on the autism spectrum.” She stated that the numbers would continue to grow with the increasing incidence of autism spectrum disorders. Lawrence (2012) wrote about another option called flexischooling, in which students are enrolled full-time at school, but attend school only part-time and are homeschooled part-time. This is a situation that could meet the needs of even more parents who may not be able to homeschool full-time, but who want the flexibility and opportunity to provide activities not otherwise provided in the school system.

There are a number of reasons parents choose homeschooling. Gusman (2008) shared five reasons why homeschooling may be best for children with ASD. These include: 1:1 instruction which provides for optimal learning and maximized progress, environments that can be adapted more easily for the child’s sensory difficulties, flexible scheduling with less time wasted on nonacademic tasks, better opportunities for more positive socialization, and incorporating children’s interests into their schoolwork and studies.

School itself can cause a great deal of stress for children with ASDs. Lawrence (2012) noted that school can be a lonely, scary, and stressful place for children with autism, especially those on the higher end of the spectrum. They experience isolation, loneliness, bullying, and rejection by peers which leads to fewer interactions with them. This perpetuates the cycle of isolation and rejection. With the emphasis on inclusion in the schools, students with ASDs are often educated in the general education setting which can cause significant difficulty for them. Children with ASDs may struggle with working and thinking in groups of students, and yet this is what occurs daily in the schools. These individuals may need to think by themselves, be apart from others, and be in a quiet, unstimulating environment. This is difficult to accomplish in a public school setting. Individuals with ASDs often have specific areas of interest, skill, and passion, and these are harder to cultivate in school (Lawrence, 2012). Additionally, these children often exhibit self-calming or other stereotypical behaviors (e.g., rocking, spinning, singing to self) which are not generally accepted in school by peers and some teachers.

Many children with ASD are very capable but are not achieving to their fullest potential while in school, which can be overly stimulating, too loud, too confusing, and have too many transitions and changes in routine. In classrooms, they are often with a large group of students, and all of this stimulation can be exhausting for individuals on the autism

spectrum, and energy spent in dealing with the stimulation can interfere with their ability to learn. The effects of being overstimulated are seen even with adults with ASD in the world of work. In Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004, p. 219), one adult with Asperger Syndrome explained about how tired she was when she got home from work after concentrating so hard all day on understanding the world of neurotypicals (people without autism). She shared that she liked the work, but found that she was so exhausted and tired when she got home that sometimes she would “slip into ‘robot’ voice or start toe-walking without even realizing it.”

Pyles (2004) addressed another important effect of the stress of school for children with ASDs: the effect on their parents. Parents of these children struggle with (a) feeling the need to train teachers every year about ASDs and their children, (b) handling dietary restrictions, and (c) finding themselves being called into school often when there are behavior problems and needing to take their child home.

Bullying is also a significant issue at school, and children with autism spectrum disorders are especially vulnerable. Because of their communication and social difficulties, these children are easy targets for other children who are “predatory,” according to Attwood (2007, p. 95), and are at risk for being ridiculed, teased, and humiliated. Simpson and Myles (2011, p. 7) reported on findings that indicated the incidence of bullying, especially for those at the higher end of the spectrum, was “chillingly common.” Attwood (2007, p. 98) stated that children with ASD are four times more likely to be bullied than their typical peers.

Hurlbutt (2011) conducted a qualitative study with parents who homeschool their children with ASDs. The overarching theme was that these parents felt as though they had found a treatment plan that works, and they perceived that the school was either unwilling or unable to provide that treatment effectively. It was clear to the parents about what they wanted their children to be prepared for, and how that differed from the typical public school’s focus on academics and test scores. They wanted their children to be prepared for the real world. Overall, these parents did not have negative comments to make about the school system but most of them had shared many stories of negative interactions with teachers and administration, especially if they pulled their child from school.

Purpose

FOLLOW-UP CONTACT with the parents in this study, after being published, showed that three of the nine children had been enrolled in the public schools and were no longer being homeschooled. Two of them were children returning to school, and one was enrolled for the first time at age 9. It was from these stories that a need was identified to learn about the perceptions and experiences of special education teachers of students with ASD. Because some of the children had been removed from school (two had gone from school to home and back to school again, and a couple of the homeschooled children did receive some services from the school), it appeared necessary to understand teachers’ perceptions as well as those of the parents, in order to aid in providing effective educational

programs of all kinds to children with autism spectrum disorders.

Method

TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS for this study, administrators and autism specialists from schools in eight states were contacted and asked to forward a survey to special education teachers in the district. The survey was developed by the researcher and approved by her university's IRB (Institutional Review Board) committee. The survey contained several open-ended questions, which Maykut and Morehouse (1994) recommended, so that participants had an opportunity to share what they felt was important with the researcher. Additionally, a notice was sent out on state ASD listservs, requesting volunteers. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) described this as purposive sampling, in that special education teachers who work with students with ASD represent the experience for which the researcher was looking. Fifty-two special education teachers from eight states responded to the request and completed the survey (see the Appendix for a sample of the survey questions). Many of the respondents included descriptive responses which explained their thoughts and beliefs on some of the survey items. Teachers were not required to have had experience in working with parents who do, or have, homeschool(ed) their children, but were required to have worked with individuals on the autism spectrum. Teachers were asked, however, to indicate whether they have had experience with children with ASD or their parents in the homeschooling process.

Participants were asked to respond to each of the items on the survey. As the surveys were received, each one was numbered, and the contact information for each respondent was kept separate from the surveys. Comparisons were made between teachers who have and have not had experience with homeschooling children with ASD, and data analysis was conducted using qualitative research techniques as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and as follows: The researcher reviewed each survey, noting recurring ideas and thoughts, and charting responses of each survey item. Emerging patterns were identified by the researcher. Data were analyzed using an open coding procedure for the short answer questions on the survey. Throughout this process, patterns and codes were identified by isolating topics/comments/issues, counting the number of times they occurred, and how many times they consistently happened in a specific way. Comments believed to be important or significant for supporting the topics were identified.

As the surveys were read, a word or phrase which identified the main idea of the response for each question was written down by the researcher. Miles and Huberman (1994) identified the importance of coding by clustering together the data and sorting them into categories. Sixteen words were identified at this point. These included critical, questioning, defensive, threat, respect, relief, educational level, evidence-based strategies, socialization, academics, monitoring, funding, state testing, progress, advice, and choices.

The researcher utilized peer review as a way to ensure reliability and validity of the data. Thomas (2006) recommended peer review, among other verification strategies, for purposes of validity. A colleague who had not been

involved in the research reviewed submitted surveys and identified several keywords. In the peer review, only nine codes were identified; however, all of them were the same as, or very similar to, the 16 codes the primary researcher identified. After all the data were coded, the next step involved identifying concepts. The researcher grouped the concepts and then named them according to the characteristics of the grouped concepts. After further analysis, the codes were collapsed into five categories. These included viewing parents; reasons for homeschooling; academic/social concerns; advising/consulting; and monitoring. Some of the codes were assigned to more than one category while others were clustered together into one specific category only. This occurred while the researcher continued to narrow down and categorize the codes and rework the configurations until patterns were found in the data. Eventually, two themes emerged.

Care was taken to ensure reliability as well by creating as much similarity as possible. Bogdan and Lutfiyya (1996, p. 231) explained that in qualitative research, there is more emphasis on validity than on reliability, but that attempts must be made to "try to make the research situation the same for all respondents." Procedures were explained the same way to all participants, all participants were asked the same questions, all surveys were reviewed by the same researcher (who utilized a peer review process as well), and the same information regarding the study was shared with all 52 participants.

Results

AN ANALYSIS OF the surveys indicated that respondents had been teaching for a range of 1 year to 29 years (average years in teaching profession was between 6 and 12 years) and had been working with individuals on the autism spectrum for a range of 1 to 27 years (average range was between 6 and 12 years). See Table 1 for a summary of the respondents' professional experience. Of the 52 participants in this study, just over half (n=28) had at least some experience interacting with children with ASD who were homeschooled, and their parents. The other 24 teachers had not. Following is a discussion of the two themes that evolved from this study.

Theme 1: There was no significant difference in responses between the teachers who have had experiences with homeschooled children with ASDs, and those who have not.

Teachers gave a variety of answers for each of the questions but when teachers with homeschooling experience were compared to those without, the variety and frequency of types of responses was the same for all survey items except for one. This was an unexpected outcome of the study.

There were a number of reasons teachers gave for how they felt parents of homeschooled children with ASD were treated by the schools, but the most common response was that they thought schools treated parents positively. Twelve of the fifty-two teachers commented that they thought parents were treated with respect, just like other parents. One teacher commented that "school treats parents who choose to homeschool with respect."

Hurlbutt

Number of years	Teachers with teaching experience	Teachers with ASD experience
0-1	3	3
2-5	12	13
6-12	15	16
13-19	5	10
20+	17	10

Table 1. Number of special education teachers with years of experience

The second most common response (11) revealed that teachers thought that schools would be critical of the parent for homeschooling their child and concerned for the child. One teacher stated that she thinks schools “likely feel that the parent has made an incorrect judgment on what is right for their child.” One teacher said that schools may view the parents “with disdain because they don’t feel the parents are capable of homeschooling their child.” Another teacher said that, as teachers, “we feel are the most qualified to meet the needs of all students, and feel that parents are second rate. I don’t agree with this although I do believe deeply in quality public education and feel it is the best choice for kids.” One teacher said that “schools probably think that the parents are not up to the challenge.”

While many teachers expressed great concern over parents not having had proper teacher training, they also may have underestimated the ability of parents who homeschool their children with ASD. About one-third felt that most parents have only a high school diploma. Half felt that most homeschooling parents had a bachelor’s degree but in something other than education, and with no teacher training. One teacher commented that she “hopes parents would have at least a high school degree,” and wondered if “a less educated parent would be more intimidated by the whole idea of finding a homeschool program and then being capable of following through with it.” Another teacher felt that most parents have just a high school degree “but know more about ASD than teachers do.” Another teacher believed that most homeschooling parents “had degrees in education,” and another stated that “some homeschooling parents were in Special Education themselves!” One teacher who has been teaching for eight years stated that “homeschooling parents are educated but they lack teaching knowledge.” Two teachers shared that they had seen homeschooling parents at all educational levels, “from high school to having PhDs.”

The topic of the educational level of parents who homeschool their children with ASD was the only area where there was a significant difference in responses between teachers with and teachers without experience with homeschooled children with ASD. Thirty-nine percent of the teachers with experience felt that parents had completed a bachelor’s degree (usually in an area other than education), as compared to 65% of the teachers without experience. This was interesting to note because the majority of teachers with experience said that they had “never asked” but believed the educational level to be

“high school level or some college” only. For the teachers who did believe the educational level to be at least a college degree, only three commented on the fact that parents of children with ASD are very knowledgeable in the field. One teacher shared that she believes that “most parents who homeschool their children with ASD are educated themselves but lack the teaching knowledge to effectively teach the students.” Another echoed that sentiment by sharing this:

I would imagine that if someone were to take over the schooling of their child, they would probably feel confident enough to accept that challenge. I would guess that most would have at least completed a bachelor’s degree, although not necessarily in the education field.

The third common response (7) was that teachers thought the schools might be relieved if parents pulled their child to be homeschooled, especially if the child “was a behavior problem.” Another teacher also felt that schools would be “relieved to a certain degree,” and commented that “children on the spectrum take a certain amount of work, patience, and know how, and not everyone in the education field is equipped to handle or deal with a child on the spectrum.” One other teacher thought that “schools are thankful that someone else gets the job!”

The fourth most common response (6) was that teachers felt that school staff would feel offended if the parents pulled the child. One teacher felt that there may be some “animosity or hurt feelings that parents feel that we would not do our best to serve the children in our care,” if they removed their child from school. She added that it is “sometimes hurtful when a parent does not trust or believe in your professional judgment and experience to attempt an intervention or support.” One teacher stated that “it’s hard to not feel offended. It’s like a slap in the face.” One teacher elaborated by stating that she felt schools view parents as a threat because “if the parents collect enough data about the effectiveness of a program, the school might be forced to implement it.” About half of the teachers did feel that parents who pulled their child would be treated more negatively than when a child had never been enrolled. One teacher said “the district can just pretend they don’t exist and don’t have to acknowledge” the children who had been homeschooled from the start, and that “if they remove their student, the district will feel that they have been dissed.” One teacher said that if a child had been pulled from the school to homeschool, that if the parents chose to re-enroll the child later, then “it wouldn’t be well-received.” One teacher commented that if a child had previously been enrolled, then the school “may be more likely to reach out and provide assistance.”

Surprisingly, there was no difference in the responses between teachers with and without experience with homeschooling regarding monitoring and accountability. For the most part, teachers were not able to identify any procedures that were in place regarding monitoring during homeschooling and communication between parents and the school. Most felt that there should “be something” but were not sure of what was required. A few teachers commented that it “varied from state to state” and they knew that in some states, there was “loose monitoring” while, in others, it was “enforced more.” One teacher stated that she had been required to have monthly

contact with parents and provide information regarding specific academic skills for that grade level. The majority of teachers did feel that the school should not dictate what the parents should do when homeschooling but that monitoring should take place. Several believed that there should be “quarterly contact just like we have with all parents,” and many teachers believed that homeschooled students were required to participate in statewide testing.

Four teachers believed that parents needed only to contact the state education agency to inform them of the decision to homeschool. One teacher said that homeschooling parents “only have to register their child as a homeschooled student and that’s it!” Another teacher commented that while the school did not need to approve the homeschooling program, they were “required to let the parents know what services the child is missing out on by not attending public school.” One more teacher felt that while the school does not approve programming, the “parents should have to present the program(s) they are implementing to make sure they’re working on identified goals and identify the steps they are taking for the child to meet that goal.” Another teacher felt that parents should be required to implement a program that is “based on state academic standards.” The types of responses were as varied among all teachers, regardless of experience with homeschooling, or among those from the same state.

Theme 2 – Teachers were concerned that the children were missing out on academics and social opportunities, and did not seem to consider the flexibility and individual possibilities homeschooling provides.

There appeared to be an overwhelming attitude that without proper teacher training, parents would not be successful in teaching their children through homeschooling. The teachers believed that schools have many materials and resources, and that children with ASD who are homeschooled miss out on proper academics and socialization opportunities. Many of the teachers felt as though homeschooled children could not get all they needed from the home environment. The main concern was that the child would not be receiving the academics and social opportunities they need. One teacher commented that in her experience, when a child with a disability of any kind is homeschooled,

He or she usually returns to the regular school within a year with less skills than he had when he left. This is the main reason I believe schools don’t like to see students with ASD pulled from the regular school setting.

Another teacher commented that “schools are concerned with the amount of academic time in their day, along with the level of curriculum.” One comment made was that “educators question and always talk about the fact that children with ASD (and their families) need the support of the school system for academics and especially the social aspect.”

While so many teachers focused on children with ASD needing to be in school for academic and social reasons, almost none of them addressed issues that could be troubling for children with ASD when they are in school. They did not

address issues such as learning styles of children with ASD and the need to use different teaching styles with these students, sensory issues, motor skills, or concrete versus abstract learning and understanding,

Individuals with ASDs are usually visual learners, not auditory. In schools, there is a great deal of auditory learning. Many individuals with ASD experience hyper- or hypo-sensitivities to sensory stimuli and struggle with the level of stimulation in school, from fluorescent lights, to speakers and fire alarms, and to coming into physical contact with many textures and materials. Gross and fine motor skills are often poor and this can affect them negatively as well. They may experience a need to move around, and often struggle with writing, cutting, and gluing. Students with ASD are concrete learners, but in school, abstract concepts are often presented. This is a great struggle for them, and they often have difficulty with reading comprehension and math problem solving (Simpson & Myles, 2011).

Teachers were either not aware of the programming and routines involved in homeschooling or were not confident in what homeschooling parents were doing throughout the day with their children. However, they guessed at a list of things such as academics, sensory breaks, 1:1 instruction, life skills, community activities, and private therapies. It was interesting to note that while many teachers made comments such as “I would hope that the parents would do these things,” it was not an important aspect in their concerns for what children would be missing out on if they were homeschooled. As mentioned earlier, the majority of teachers was concerned with children missing out on academic and social opportunities, but these concerns did not seem to include the above-mentioned areas as being important when students were in school. It was noted by the researcher that activities such as 1:1 instruction, life skills, and community activities were not listed by the teachers as activities that could be more effectively implemented in a homeschool setting.

While teachers were concerned over the fact that they felt the children would not be receiving proper academic training and social opportunities, many of them also worried that parents would not be able to continue the rigor of planning activities, keeping up with academics, and staying organized. One teacher shared that she thinks some parents “provide a firm education while others end up struggling and don’t follow through.” Another teacher said that “something is lost in academics through homeschooling; there is much more to academics than curriculum. The schools have a wealth of valuable material and I can’t imagine that a homeschool environment could compare to the resources that are available in a school.”

For the most part, teachers felt that if schools offered assistance with educational programming, parents would probably refuse. As one teacher put it, “If parents wanted advice, they would have stayed in the district.” One teacher described how she was required to make monthly contact with the parents and offered materials, “and the parent refused.” Another teacher shared that she did not think parents would want advice on programming or assistance but she believed that “they have a right to if they ask.” Another teacher felt that the school “should be open to offering advice and support but not

Hurlbutt

try to force themselves on the parents.” One teacher summed things up by saying that she didn’t think the school should approve what the parents are doing, but that “if the parents ask for support, then the school system should be willing to offer whatever help they can.” She felt that some parents did want recommendations from the school on curriculum and materials, while other parents did not.

However, not all teachers wanted to give advice and be a resource to parents who choose to homeschool their children with ASD. One said that teachers are “busy with their own caseloads,” while another felt that if a parent chose to homeschool, then they “should not expect support from the school.” One teacher did share, however, that the purpose was “to work as a team and provide the best programming for the child.”

Discussion

THERE WAS AN overwhelming attitude among the teachers regarding their lack of confidence in a parent’s ability to adequately provide an effective educational program for their child with ASD when homeschooling. About one-third underestimated the educational level of many parents who homeschool. According to Ray (2011) the education levels of parents that homeschool are more diverse than in the past, from parents with PhDs, bachelor’s degrees, high school diplomas, GEDs, and no high-school diplomas. In Hurlbutt (2011), all but 1 parent out of 18 had at least a bachelor’s degree and higher, including graduate degrees and PhDs. It would be important for teachers to have statistics provided to them regarding the educational level of parents who homeschool, so as to have greater respect and confidence in the parents’ ability to provide effective programming. Interestingly, Blok (2004) found that the initial concern people had when believing that parents lacked the experience and training needed to teach students with special needs was in fact, wrong, as homeschooled students with special needs were found to experience greater academic success than their peers with similar disabilities who attended public schools.

The teachers were able to list different reasons why parents homeschool, which were primarily because parents do not feel as though the school is meeting their child’s needs in some cases, and to protect their child from bullying and anxiety. It must be understood that homeschooling is an alternative education option chosen by increasing numbers of parents along with more specific reasons for homeschooling. Samuels (2008) reported on a study completed by Easter Seals Society and the Autism Society of America, in which researchers found that 70% of parents of children with ASD were concerned about their children’s education, as compared with 36% of parents of typically developing children. Only 19% of parents of children on the autism spectrum felt that their children were receiving education to adequately prepare them for life, compared with 56% of parents of children without disabilities (Samuels, 2008).

In their study, Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010) identified a common reason why parents chose to homeschool their children with ASD. This was the fact that they had flexibility in the daily routine, especially when the child required time for

solitude. Additionally, being able to meet the child’s learning needs at home was the most frequently mentioned issue in all interviews in that study. Increasing numbers of parents believe that their child is not receiving adequate individualized support and attention, therefore not allowing the child to be able to advance at his or her own pace (Starr, Foy, Cramer, & Sigh, 2006). Because of this, homeschooling parents are happy to be able to tailor-make the curriculum for their children, troubleshoot academic problems as they occur, ensure more opportunities for socialization with peers with and without disabilities, and have more flexibility to address health needs and appointments (Mulvey, n.d.). In Duffey (2002), it was noted that homeschooling allows for the time and opportunities needed to meet the child’s individual and unique needs, and can give parents the opportunity to utilize the teaching techniques to which their child best responds. Only four teachers in the current study noted that school can be a difficult place for students with ASD, especially at the higher end of the spectrum, and can cause a great deal of stress from the social effort required to participate in school. Parsons and Lewis (2010) also noted that the experience of school has been documented as being a source of anxiety and stress for the child with ASD.

Teachers were also concerned with the lack of social opportunities for children who do not attend public schools. Their concerns were in direct contrast to the activities described by parents who homeschool their children with ASD. In Hurlbutt (2011), and Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010), parents were found to have provided a rich, stimulating environment of activities, strict requirements regarding reading and following routines, and opportunities to move at the child’s pace while addressing problem areas as they occur. Some of the activities their children participated in to enrich their social opportunities included participation in Meals on Wheels, tae kwon do, Bible study play group and other church activities, gymnastics, swimming lessons, physical education, friendship, music classes, and other activities through the local homeschool organizations and cooperatives. Parents in both of these studies believed that their children were receiving more positive social opportunities with good role models, better than their children would have received in the public schools. This was in line with what Ray (2011) stated, when he asserted that through homeschooling, guided social interactions with peers and adults are easily provided. Additionally, it appears as though many parents’ concerns about their child with ASD not fitting in and being bullied are very real concerns. Socially, isolation and loneliness are common for children with ASD at school, and they are more likely to experience bullying (Attwood, 2007). According to Odom, Zercher, Shouming, Marquart, Sandall, and Brown (2006), there have been very few studies focusing on the social acceptance of children with disabilities by their peers. However, there is evidence of social rejection of children with disabilities by their typically developing peers. Studies have indicated that children with disabilities engage in less social interaction, exhibit more negative and less adaptive interaction styles, and have fewer relationships (Odom et al, 2006).

As was mentioned earlier, the teachers in this study felt that homeschooled children with ASD are not given the social

opportunities that are needed, and that the school can provide. Contrary to this belief is the fact that the literature indicates that children with special needs who are homeschooled are involved in extra-curricular activities as much as children in public school (Ray, 2011). Additionally, it has been found that these children interact with people of all ages, which allows them to build confidence in interacting with a wide range of individuals (Ray, 2011). It is necessary, however, for the parents to initiate these activities and interactions. If they do not, homeschooled children do not have the social and community experiences they should have.

The topic of whether or not the school should serve as a resource to parents who homeschool and be available to provide advice or information was a controversial one in this study. It was interesting that while the majority of teachers felt that parents were not treated positively when they pulled a child for homeschooling, and felt that parents were not qualified to teach what needed to be taught, the majority of them felt that the school should be willing to give advice and support if the parents asked. They did not feel as though the school should push or require it, but should be a resource when contacted. As a comparison, in Hurlbutt (2011), a two of the parents in that study noted that there was no communication with the school except for when an IEP was in place for therapy or social skills groups, but they thought that some kind of monitoring system should be enforced. One parent shared that he was so concerned about the lack of monitoring that he even called the state education department and asked if anyone was going to monitor them. Another parent had shared that while it was "easier to be left alone.....there should be some kind of checks and balances in place" (Hurlbutt, 2011, p.9). Both of these parents were surprised that both the state and local education agencies did not follow up, for the safety of the children.

The confusion or lack of knowledge among the teachers in this study regarding monitoring is not surprising. According to the Home School Legal Defense Association (2010), currently 40 states have regulations regarding homeschooling, while 10 states have no requirements for parents to give notification that they will be homeschooling their children. When a state has regulations, it will fall into one of three categories: low regulations, moderate regulations, and high regulations. There are 14 out of 40 states with low regulations, only requiring parents to notify them that they are homeschooling their children. There are 21 out of 40 states that have moderate regulations. These moderate regulations require parents to not only send a notification that they will be homeschooling, but also the test scores and/or professional notification of the student's progress. Finally, five out of the 40 states with regulations have high regulations which require parents to (a) notify the state that they are homeschooling their child, (b) send test scores on achievement tests and/or professional evaluations of progress, (c) have their curriculum approved, and (d) be a qualified teacher or have a professional teacher make home visits. These regulations do not take into consideration specific circumstances with children who have special needs and are homeschooled. Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers, and administrators at local education agencies (as well as state education officials) to know what

regulations, if any, the state has, and to follow those regulations carefully.

Implications for Practice

As the overall goal for students with ASD is successful programming of some kind, it is important for specific guidelines to be in place regarding the school's and parents' responsibilities for homeschooling. While states have different requirements regarding accountability and communication, it appears as though the school should remain open to the idea of serving as a resource to parents who homeschool their children with ASD if the parents ask. The school could provide a list of resources in the community and at the state and national level for parents to utilize. As noted in Hurlbutt (2011), parents of children with ASD who homeschool these children are very knowledgeable in this field; however, having the school be available as a resource, particularly for Individual Education Program programming, may be necessary. A lending library of materials offered by the school would help parents in the area be more aligned with what the school is doing. Schools or state education agencies, and parents alike need to understand their roles and responsibilities, and accountability measures need to be documented and followed consistently. This may result in a more positive attitude among teachers if they understand that state guidelines are being closely followed. There was an overwhelming attitude in this survey about teachers believing that homeschooling parents may not be qualified to take on the role of teacher, but if teachers communicated and listened more to the parents' point of views, and developed a greater understanding of what life is like in the home of a family which homeschools their children with ASD, perhaps teachers would not be as quick to judge. It was noted in Hurlbutt (2011) that while some homeschooling parents of children with ASD want to be left alone to do what they feel is right for their child, there are other parents who do desire a more working and open relationship with the school. If the school does not share some information with the parent about services, resources, and support it could provide, parents who want help may not ask for it. When the door is opened by the school, parents may be more willing to ask for support, and teachers can learn to understand and accept the choice of parents who choose to homeschool their children with ASD.

There are any number of combinations of home and school programming available to children with ASD. Some of these include full-time homeschooling, flexischooling as described by Lawrence (2012), and attending school for social skills groups or specific therapies, as described by parents in Hurlbutt (2011). Because the overall goal is an effective and successful plan for children with ASD that meets their unique needs, it appears as though having options and combinations of home and school services should be available for different types of family situations, parent preferences, and student/child needs. Teachers should be educated about homeschooling options and parent experiences so as to keep communication open, in order to provide the best opportunities for children with ASD to learn and be prepared for the real world.

Hurlbutt

Limitations

Although this study provides insights into beliefs and opinions of 52 special education teachers from eight states regarding homeschooling children with ASD, the results must be interpreted with some caution. This study was confined to 52 special education teachers who responded to a request for volunteers through recruitment efforts of the researcher. The information received from the participants was based only on their perceptions of their individual experiences and beliefs regarding homeschooling children with ASD. The researcher did not account for, or differentiate among, such experiences on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, education, or religion. Any similarities among the teachers regarding education level, programming methods, and experiences with homeschooling were not planned; all were required to have had working experience with individuals with ASD, and no generalizations were made regarding all special education teachers. Therefore, the results of this study may not be representative of all teachers regarding homeschooling children with ASD, but does provide preliminary findings that may be of interest to others who are exploring educational options for students.

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Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs and Autism

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Appendix

Sample Survey Questions

What do you think is the educational level of most parents who homeschool their children with ASD?

Why do you think parents homeschool their children with ASD?

How do you think schools treat parents who choose to homeschool their children with ASD?

Do you think there is a difference in how the parent is treated if the parent removes their child from the public school system to homeschool as opposed to those who never enrolled their child? Explain.

Please describe the programming you think children with ASD receive through homeschooling

Did/does the school system have to approve the parents' programming? Or serve as a resource?

How do you think parents find materials and resources to use for teaching their children at home? Do you have any specific resources or materials that you would recommend for parents of children on the autism spectrum?

What is your occupation? How long have you been in this profession? Please circle.

0-1 years 2-5 years 6-12 years 13-19 years 20+ years

How much experience have you had with individuals with ASD? Please circle.

0-1 years 2-5 years 6-12 years 13-19 years 20+ years

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