

Inclusive Education Challenges for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Laura J. Graham

Abstract

Autism is a common disorder found within the student population. Despite its prevalence, teachers report feeling unprepared to meet the needs of their students on the autism spectrum. The school environment can present many challenges for these students, and it is important that educators are provided with the evidence-based skills and training to create an inclusive environment.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects approximately 1 in 66 children and youth in Canada (Ofner et al., 2018, p. 2). It is characterized by challenges with language, social interactions, and communication, in combination with restricted behaviours and interests, making school a uniquely challenging place academically, socially, and emotionally (Costley et al., 2012). Students with autism require adequate support, but schools and educators often fail (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Educators report a lack of knowledge and training when it comes to teaching students with autism (Brock et al., 2020), but successful inclusion is possible if educators and schools are willing to adopt evidence-based practices, engage in ongoing professional development, and create positive school environments.

Challenges with Inclusion

Students with autism are faced with many obstacles in the school environment, such as academic challenges, social isolation, anxiety, and inadequately trained teachers. Challenges with executive functioning mean that even students with above average intelligence can struggle academically (Costley et al., 2012). Teachers often have lower academic expectations for students with autism (Zagona et al., 2017), which increases the gap between academic results and the child's cognitive functioning (Goodall, 2015). Some students with autism also report that educators focus too much on academic outcomes and neglect to support the student in other non-academic areas such as social integration (Hummerstone & Parson, 2020).

Deficits in social communication mean that students with autism often struggle socially and report higher incidences of bullying and social exclusion (Able et al., 2014). This social exclusion increases as students mature (Calder et al., 2013). Educators report feeling unsure how to facilitate students' relationships with their peers, while parents report that schools do not do enough to encourage their children's social development (Lindsay et al., 2013). This can make schools feel like lonely and unsupportive places for students with autism (Goodall, 2018).

The school environment can be particularly stressful for students with autism due to their increased emotional needs and sensory demands. For example, students with autism report classrooms being too loud and find disruptive behaviour from other children stressful (Warren et al., 2020). Autism is frequently co-morbid with other mental health and physical disorders, which increases the complexity of their needs (Ofner et al., 2018). van Steensel et al. (2011) found that almost 40% of students with autism are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Schools with noisy classrooms, crowded hallways, and changing schedules can lead to anxiety for students with autism (Goodall, 2018). Students with autism and anxiety are more likely to demonstrate externalizing behaviour such as yelling, throwing things, or stomping, and to evince higher rates of physical aggression (Ambler et al., 2015). This "acting out" behaviour can be difficult for teachers to understand and manage. It is not surprising, then, when reviewing the

statistics, that students with autism also have a higher incidence of out of school suspension (Goodall, 2015). Schools seem ill-equipped to deal with the various mental health challenges presented by students with autism (Rudy, 2020).

Although educators generally report feeling positive toward inclusion (Zagona et al., 2017), they report a lack of knowledge and practical skills when it comes to including these students in the classroom (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Educators feel ill-equipped to deal with the behavioural challenges that often accompany autism, such as emotional outbursts, lack of flexibility, and social difficulties (Lindsay et al., 2013). Teachers report a lack of equipment to provide sensory support for students, and there is a need for more paraprofessionals (Lindsay et al., 2013). Some educators have noted a tension between providing activities that a student can independently complete and aligning them with classroom activities (Zagona et al., 2017). Even with additional in-service training, educators feel unprepared with practical strategies for use in the classroom (Able et al., 2014). This perception of inadequacy is supported by the “research-to-practice gap” between best evidence-based practices and the strategies teachers are actually using in the classroom (Brock et al., 2020). Educators feel unsupported with both training and resources, as well as having limited knowledge of evidence-based practices.

Despite educators reporting low self-efficacy and lack of training, students with autism have legal rights for programming that meets their needs. In Manitoba, the Amendment to the Public School Act (Appropriate Educational Programming) requires school boards to provide “appropriate educational programming that supports student participation in both academic and social life” for students with disabilities (Manitoba Education, 2006, p. 1). Additionally, schools are morally obligated to meet the needs of their students with autism. Students with disabilities have better engagement and academic outcomes, in inclusive classrooms than in segregated special needs classrooms (Zagona et al., 2017). Students with autism report having a teacher who is understanding of their distinct communication and sensory needs as important to support their learning (Hummerstone & Parson, 2020). However, many students feel that schools attempt only to integrate them physically in classrooms (Goodall, 2018), and that key differences between them and their neurotypical classmates are not acknowledged, especially as they age (Hummerstone & Parson, 2020). Failure of schools to provide adequate inclusive education is both legally and morally unacceptable. Academic, social, and mental health challenges combined with poor teacher training are impediments to effective inclusion.

Solutions for Successful Inclusion

Students with autism can have positive school experiences if staff are trained in evidence-based practices, professional development is ongoing, and environmental modifications are in place to support the whole child. General educators must see themselves as capable of teaching students with autism, rather than it being something that should be left to specialists (Goodall, 2015). Evidence-based practices have a large amount of supportive evidence from systematic research efforts, but teachers require training on how to identify and customize these practices for their students (Kretlow & Blatz, 2011). Brock et al. (2020) suggested that teachers focus on evidence-based interventions that are already present in teacher training, such as modelling and scaffolding, and build from there. Feedback should be provided to teachers so that any mistakes can be amended, and the evidence-based practice is adhered to faithfully (Mazzotti et al., 2013). It is important that training is not just a one-off event but rather an ongoing journey that builds upon teachers’ skills (Goodall, 2015).

Numerous evidence-based practices have been shown to support students with autism in the classroom. Many of these techniques are similarly effective for other students with executive functioning challenges, such as attention hyperactive deficit disorder (ADHD) and fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD). Students with autism generally crave structure and routine; the use of a clear schedule along with shorter, well-designed lessons can be beneficial (Warren et al., 2020). Conversely, it is important that teachers are flexible and tailor their lessons to meet

students' needs in that moment (Hebron & Bond, 2017). For example, a student's work stamina may vary day to day and certain days may require more adaptation than others. Providing an alternative choice can be useful when a student is having a particularly stressful day (Warren et al., 2020). Restricted interests, which are a symptom of autism, can also be used to engage the student in the lessons (Goodall, 2018). By implementing these practices in the classroom, educators have the tools to improve individual students' school experiences.

Additionally, support for students' social development can be cultivated in the classroom by providing opportunities for collaborative grouping and problem solving (Gibb et al., 2007). Creating a school environment where neurotypical students have been educated about autism and other disabilities has also been shown to improve outcomes for students with autism (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). There have been significant debates about whether students should disclose their autism diagnosis. While this ultimately remains a personal decision, there is evidence that suggests sharing that information can improve attitudes toward autism (Campbell, 2006). Students who are prepared for some of the differences that might be demonstrated by students with autism are more likely to embrace their atypical peers (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). Programs that focus on educating students about autism have led to an increase in positive social interaction between peers and students on the spectrum (Morris et al., 2020). Educators can facilitate interactions between typical and non-typical peers by using positive reinforcement techniques (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). The use of trained peer tutors can also support the success of the student with autism when the adult steps back and allows developmentally appropriate peer interactions to take place (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Despite practices that support social inclusion, the inherent sensory challenges that schools present can still be troublesome.

Noisy school environments have been identified as contributing to the challenges faced by children with autism. Schools in the U.K. have experienced success with the resourced provision model which addresses some of these environmental challenges (Warren et al., 2020). These are schools that have smaller classrooms with extra environmental modifications for students with autism to spend part of the day (Hebron & Bond, 2017). This enables students to have a safe place to self-regulate while also having some time in a mainstream classroom (Warren et al., 2020). While certainly reminiscent of the older pull-out model of special education, it appears to be something many students with autism require to be successful at school. This model can help to balance students' sensory and emotional needs while still operating in the inclusive framework.

Conclusion

Autism is a common disorder found in most schools and classrooms. Students with autism often find the classroom environment challenging. Schools have a moral and legal obligation to provide inclusive education for students with autism, but they often fail to meet requirements. Educators do not feel knowledgeable or confident in supporting students with autism in the classroom. However, successful inclusion is possible if educators commit to ongoing training that uses evidence-based practices, supports students socially, and addresses environmental challenges. Students with autism are unique individuals with their own strengths and challenges. Therefore, it is important that educators are well-prepared and confident in their ability to create an inclusive classroom.

References

- Able, H., Sreckovic, M. A., Schultz, T. R., Garwood, J. D., & Sherman, J. (2014). Views from the trenches: Teacher and student supports needed for full inclusion of students with ASD. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, 38(1), 44-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406414558096>
- Ambler, P. G., Eidels, A., & Gregory, C. (2015). Anxiety and aggression in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders attending mainstream schools. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 18, 97-109. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2015.07.005>
- Brock, M. E., Dynia, J. M., Dueker, S. A., & Barczak, M. A. (2020). Teacher-reported priorities and practices for students with autism: Characterizing the research-to-practice gap. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 35(2), 67-78.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357619881217>
- Calder, L., Hill, V., & Pellicano, E. (2013). "Sometimes I want to play by myself": Understanding what friendship means to children with autism in mainstream primary schools. *Autism*, 17(3), 296-316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361312467866>
- Campbell, J. M. (2006). Changing children's attitudes toward autism: A process of persuasive communication. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 18(3), 251-272.
<http://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-006-9015-7>
- Costley, D., Clark, T., Keane, E., & Lane, K. (2012). *A practical guide for teachers of students with an autism spectrum disorder in secondary education*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Ferraioli, S. J., & Harris, S. L. (2011). Effective educational inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 41(1), 19-28.
<http://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-010-9156-y>
- Gibb, K., Tunbridge, D., Chua, A., & Frederickson, N. (2007). Pathways to inclusion: Moving from special school to mainstream. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23(2), 107-127.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360701320770>
- Goodall, C. (2015). How do we create ASD-friendly schools? A dilemma of placement. *Support for Learning*, 30(4), 305-326. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12104>
- Goodall, C. (2018). Inclusion is a feeling, not a place: A qualitative study exploring autistic young people's conceptualisations of inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(12), 1285-1310. <https://doi-org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1523475>
- Harrower, J. K., & Dunlap, G. (2001). Including children with autism in general education classrooms: A review of effective strategies. *Behaviour Modification*, 25(45), 762-784.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0145445501255006>
- Hebron, J. & Bond, C. (2017). Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: Parent and pupil perceptions. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(4), 556-571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1297569>
- Hummerstone, H., & Parson, S. (2020). What makes a good teacher? Comparing the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum and staff. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. Advance online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1783800>
- Humphrey, N., & Symes, W. (2013). Inclusive education for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders in secondary mainstream schools: Teacher attitudes, experience and knowledge, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(1), 32-46.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.580462>
- Kretlow, A. G. & Blatz, S. L. (2011). The ABCs of evidence-based practice for teachers. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 43(5), 8-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005991104300501>

- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Thomson, N., & Scott, H. (2013). Educators' challenges of including children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream classrooms. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 60(4), 347-362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2013.846470>
- Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth. (2006). *Appropriate educational programming in Manitoba: Standards for student services*. https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/aep/pdf/Standards_for_Student_Services.pdf
- Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. R., & Test, D. W. (2013). Navigating the evidence-based practice maze: Resources for teachers with secondary students with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 48(3), 159-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451212454004>
- Morris, S., O'Reilly, G., & Byrne, M. K. (2020). Understanding Our Peers with Pablo: Exploring the merit of an autism spectrum disorder de-stigmatisation programme targeting peers in Irish early education mainstream settings. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*. 50(12), 4385-4400. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04464-w>
- Ofner, M., Coles, A., Decou, M. L., Do, M. T., Bienek, A., Snider, J., & Ugnat, A. M. (2018, April 19). *Autism spectrum disorder among children and youth in Canada: A report of the National Autism Spectrum Disorder Surveillance System*. Public Health Agency of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder-children-youth-canada-2018.html>
- Rudy, J. A. (2020, September 3). *Why school is so challenging for children with autism*. Very well health. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/why-school-is-so-challenging-4000048>
- van Steensel, F. J., Bogels, S. M., & Perrin, S. (2011). Anxiety disorders in children and adolescents with autistic spectrum disorders: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 14(3), 302-317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0097-0>
- Warren, A., Buckingham, K., & Parsons, S. (2020). Everyday experiences of inclusion in primary resources provision: The voices of autistic pupils and their teachers. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1823166>
- Zagona, A. L., Kurth, J. A., & MacFarland, S. Z. C. (2017). Teachers' views of their preparation for inclusive education and collaboration. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council of Exceptional Children*, 40(3), 163-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417692969>

About the Author

Laura J. Graham is pursuing her M.Ed. with a focus on guidance and counselling. She currently teaches grade 5/6 English in an Indigenous language immersion program in British Columbia, but has spent most of her career with Frontier School Division in Manitoba. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, writing, and travelling.