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Amanda Puleo

California State University, Monterey Bay, amandapuleo96@gmail.com

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What Makes that Autistic Student Tick?

Strategies for Classroom Behaviors

Amanda Puleo

CSU Monterey Bay

Inclusion of autistic students in mainstream classrooms may make it difficult for teachers to identify and proactively address disruptive behaviors. That is, mainstream teachers may not know how to respond to these specific behaviors and their standard classroom management techniques may not work with autistic students. It will take commitment and hard work to identify strategies to regulate the disruptive behaviors of students with autism. To address this issue, the perspectives of directors and teachers who specialize in autism, as well as mainstream public or private school teachers were obtained through interviews. Three options for action emerged from an analysis of the data. A specialized teacher training program given twice a year is determined to be the most effective way to maintain a safe and organized mainstream classroom.

What Makes that Autistic Student Tick?

Strategies for Classroom Behaviors

In a private elementary school located in Northern California, a child who has been diagnosed as being on the mild to moderate spectrum of autism is mainstreamed into one of the preschool classrooms by his parents. With the well-intentioned idea of inclusion, the principal accepts the autistic child into her school without hesitation. While this is an optimistic and progressive idea to many principals, the risk of confusing and uncontrollable behaviors occurring and emotional or even aggressive actions directed towards their staff should always be taken into consideration and in this case it was not. During one class period, the child became dysregulated while transitioning from one activity to the next, causing an episode of uncontrollable screaming

and crying. Dysregulation is defined as behaviors that autistic students engage in to avoid activities they don't like. The student subsequently became violent and began to hit and kick the teachers when they rushed to his aid. When they were not able to calm him down, the school staff reacted the way many mainstream teachers would and sent the child to the school office to calm down before being allowed to return to class. The office administrator, ill-equipped for a child with special emotional needs, did not know how to calm an autistic child and as a result, the emotional outburst became amplified while in the school office. The school administrator was forced to write an incident report to the parents as they normally would with a traditional student who acted out. The parents, receiving this incident report, became furious with the office administrator as well as the teacher involved, as they had made it very clear that their child was not a typical student. The school staff was put in the position of having to admit that they were not properly trained to handle the autistic child's behaviors and did not understand what had triggered it. Within a few days, the child was unenrolled from the school by the parents and did not return. The well meaning venture of trying to integrate an autistic child into a regular classroom had ended only having managed to frustrate and upset everyone involved.

Literature Integration and Synthesis

With the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream classrooms, many teachers are finding it difficult to maintain a stable classroom. Disruptive behaviors can cause distractions to other students and interrupt the teacher's lessons. Although many mainstream teachers try their best to regulate these behaviors, most common disciplinary actions do not work with the sensitive cases of autism. Baron-Cohen (1985) asserts that the theory of mindblindness in autism affords a greater understanding of social-communication impairments within autism spectrum

conditions. (Lombardo, 2010). This theory is “among one of the most important topics in autism research” and has “discovered that individuals with ASC (autism spectrum conditions) are profoundly impaired in understanding minds.” (Lombardo, 2010, p.1) Many strategies are specifically implemented in autism based schools to help regulate these behaviors. In order to keep a calm classroom environment, it can be helpful to implement these same strategies in public and private schools.

Behaviors In The Classroom

Mainstream schools within many districts have experienced the problems and behaviors that may occur due to the inclusion of autistic children. Inclusion within mainstream schools began in 1971 when the case of Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children v. Commonwealth was brought before district court in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children v. Commonwealth decision “...decreed that children diagnosed with mental retardation in Pennsylvania were entitled to a free public education and further stipulated that whenever possible they should be educated in regular classrooms rather than segregated from the general education population.” (Horrocks, 2008, p.1) As a result, public school systems are now required to provide a continuum of services in a less restrictive setting for all children who are considered to have disabilities. (Horrocks, 2008) Although inclusion is now an important part of public schools, those schools have to be aware of behaviors that can occur within the classroom. Behaviors that may arise can be both physical and emotional and become a distraction to other students and teachers within the classroom. Preservation, by definition, is known as the repetition of a behavior that can be exhibited by autistic children and is seen most commonly when dysregulation happens. (Arora, 2012) Some of these behaviors can include screaming, crying,

hitting, hysterical laughing, or flopping on the ground which is known as Action Preservation. In past studies, the “research has shown that aggressive behavior is relatively common among individuals with intellectual disability.” (Kanne, 2011) Many autistic children crave the sensation that is carried out through verbal or physical communication continuously throughout any given day. If this sensory goal is not reached, “...greater levels of aggression, self-injury, and property destruction...” is bound to occur. (Kanne, 2011) This distraction can bring students and teachers further away from the goals in their curriculum and “...[it] [can] [be] problematic as it is a distractor...” (Arora, 2012, p.1)

Regulating autistic behaviors is included in many Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) goals set for autistic students, regularly seen in autism based schools. There are many strategies that therapists and special education teachers can use to maintain a safe and calm environment for these students. Many mainstream teachers have not been trained to handle explosive autistic behavior and are unaware of strategies used by professionals to keep an autistic child regulated. As teachers find it more difficult to teach due to the increasing amount of curriculum, they also have less time to work individually with students. Many autistic students rely on the one-on-one interaction that they may be missing in a mainstream school versus a school specialized in teaching and regulating autism. This one-on-one interaction is important to “...the development of rapport with the child [as] a prerequisite to learning.” (Barbera, 2007, p.2) Every student is important to determine a system for future curriculum by “...how the delivery of a particular stimulus affects future response rates.” (Barbera, 2007, p.1) Many mainstream teachers do not have the opportunity to implement IEPs and one-on-one focus to keep an organized classroom.

With the alarming amount of behaviors that are possible, strategies can be implemented to keep a calm and stable classroom.

Classroom Stability Strategies

Classroom management is key to facilitate learning in the minds of young students. Many teachers create a familiar and predictable routine for their students to follow throughout the week. While many autistic students rely on a routine, they may not be accustomed to the specific routine administered by the mainstream teacher. With the rise in autism diagnosis in the United States, the current estimate of children with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] is at 560,000 students or at the rate of 1 in 110 children (Hall, 2012). Given that a higher number of children are being diagnosed with ASD, teachers are ill-equipped to handle the amount of Autism Spectrum students who have recently entered into mainstream schools.

Autism inclusion has been regarded as an increasingly positive idea for both schools and the families of ASD children. Parents often times find themselves defending their child's behaviors and are aware that teachers and the public do not understand the symptoms or why the child behaves the way they do. (Hall, 2012). Social support is proven to be a helpful solution that can help benefit both the child and teachers. This social support involves teachers and specialists within the classroom. While teaching social skills to autistic students can be an educational objective for school-age children, two researchers, Disalvo and Oswald (2002) have "identified three approaches to social skills training". (Licciardello, 2008). These approaches are administered with play groups, social initiations toward the child with autism, and prompting the autistic child to initiate social conversations. Play groups with peers can be implemented in

classroom activities such as board games or playing catch with a ball. These activities will help increase their social skills and help their mainstream experience.

Even though these activities can be implemented fairly easily, the teacher still has a prominent role in arranging these games. Teachers must “[prompt] children with autism to initiate social interactions with peers” and implement them effectively. (Licciardello, 2008) Prompting, as one of the approaches for increasing social skills, is important for an ASD child. Yet, this approach takes a good amount of attention from the teacher that other students may need. Finding the help for these teachers by providing a teachers’ aide, can help the implementation of prompting and increase the overall classroom stability over a long period of time.

Curriculum Barrier

Increasing the number of autistic children in mainstream classrooms can be difficult not only for the stability of the classroom but conquering the curriculum barrier standing between the child and success. The level of curriculum taught in both restrictive and less restrictive classrooms can sometimes be non-transferrable making it difficult for some students to bridge the gap between two different classrooms. Aside from the “...relevance of skills taught in more restrictive settings, they frequently fail to transfer to classes closer to the mainstream.” (Fuchs, 1992, p.1) Not only does the curriculum make it more difficult, but the instruction may differ between both teachers. A few key factors that are seen within a special education classroom includes smaller groups, one on one focus, and unique instructional materials from that specific teacher.

Many administrators agree that autistic children should have the basic operational skills and school behaviors that are required for the student to be mainstreamed. Yet, it is agreed “....that regular education math teachers are familiar with the [reintegration] [of] student’s strengths and weaknesses and are confident that the children are prepared to perform adequately and behave appropriately in their classrooms.” (Fuchs, 1992, p.1) CBM, or known as curriculum-based measurement, combined with instructional programs can result in student achievement and teachers making effective decisions regarding their students. TP, or known as Trans-environmental Programming, focuses on implementing academic skills that are critical for a student’s success in a less restrictive mainstreamed classroom. (Fuchs, 1992) The CBM and TP combined can bring an autistic child to ease with learning new curriculum decreasing the chances for disruptive behaviors. Without these, an autistic child’s transition to a mainstream school may not be beneficial. Teachers who are aware of these two specific programs will help enhance a calmer learning environment for the student.

Strategies For Teachers

The number of ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, students in public schools has increased over the years causing a large gap to occur between teachers and ASD students. The IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, was established in 2004 and “...mandates all educators implement evidence-based educational programs.” (Hess, 2007, p.1) Since many strategies have been ineffective over the years, it has created a critical need to examine the quality of the educational services provided to students with ASD enrolled in public schools. (Hess, 2007)

Public school teachers have requested the knowledge of useful strategies for their classrooms to keep a secure learning environment for ASD students. Most recent legislative reforms “have increased pressure on schools to demonstrate learning outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.” (Tincani, 2007, p.1) Some of these strategies need to be specific to certain kids as every autistic child is different. Strategies include sensory diets for these students and can be incorporated with fidgets or soft toys. (Mere-Cook, 2016) For example, many autistic students use bolts that can be wound onto screws or bead necklaces to relieve their sensory needs. If these strategies are not used, the student may become hands-on towards other students or the teacher. It is claimed that “..a variety of qualitative and quantitative studies have suggested that the sensory processing of individuals with ASD is unique from typically developing individuals...”. (Mere-Cook, 2016, p. 43) According to Kari Dunn Buron, a teacher from Minnesota, “the objective of the 5-point Scale is to teach social and emotional information in a concrete, systematic, and non-judging way” (Buron, 2012, p.1). To keep the autistic brain in the blue or green zones of regulation, teachers can include sensory breaks between worksheets or song breaks to keep the brain from reaching the red zone. Once the red zone is reached, many disruptive behaviors can occur which includes hitting other students, spitting, or screaming. Buron claims that “students who have poor skills in the areas of social thinking and emotional regulation often exhibit challenging behaviors...” (Buron, 2012, p.1). These challenging behaviors can ruin the chance of learning for mainstreamed students and can reduce the chances of bringing a child back to the blue or green zone for learning. With the help of a scale for reference, strategies can be implemented into mainstream classrooms to keep behaviors from occurring.

Behavioral Goals

All ASD students have Individualized Educational Plans that include personal growth goals based on the number of prompts surrounding their individualized goals. Many ASD students have curriculum based plans such as using flashcards, completing puzzles, and math worksheets and these goals can be reached triumphantly with multiple breaks throughout the day. Most ASD students have breaks that include swinging on swings or sliding down the playground slide while others may want to simply sit on a bean bag chair.

Services, which includes behavioral or occupational therapy, can be provided within the classroom with help from school-based professionals. These professionals need to be ready to access information on mental health disorders and developmental disabilities with the information given about the student. (The School Services Guidebook, 2013) With the professional help in the classroom, they can help implement high-quality and simple strategies for the teacher to use towards their ASD student.

While most autistic students are in school for curriculum based learning, many are in need of basic life skills. One example, is that “it is not uncommon for parents of children with ASD to advocate a program primarily based in applied behavior analysis (ABA) while professional team members advocate a more eclectic approach.” (Tincani, 2007, p.1) These ABA services can be a primary way for basic life skills to be implemented and practiced. These sessions can also contribute to the behaviors that can occur when pushed to the limit. During these sessions, ABA therapists will keep students from growing to the red dysregulated zone by keeping activities at a slower pace and giving needed breaks. With the skills to keep students from becoming overwhelmed, there is less of a chance for the student to exhibit these behaviors.

Administration Involvement

Although many look at the classroom teachers as the primary factor in helping students in the classroom, not many view the principal or administration of the school as another important component when in fact, they can be quite helpful. The role of a principal or director, can be classified as the leader of the school and as such, a strong component of successful inclusion. As administration influences inclusion decisions, they also convey messages of acceptance through their gestures and attitudes.

Studies have shown that principal's attitudes towards inclusion are portrayed through a multitude of feelings. (Horrocks, 2008) Some principals have supported the benefits that inclusion brings while some have low expectations of inclusion. (Horrocks, 2008) Those who believe that students with autism can be included in regular classrooms, are more likely to recommend higher levels of inclusion and fortunately, most had positive attitudes towards inclusion. Principals can also use their experience and skills to continually supervise and encourage teachers in the classroom when it comes to inclusion. This can decrease the chance of disruptive behaviors during class time. Many educators and principals that have been teaching for a longer period of time may not have been educated in the idea of inclusion and therefore may be more hesitant. (Horrocks, 2008)

When students move through inclusion, principals look more noticeably at the socialization aspect. Social interaction is a challenging area for autistic children which can be a difficulty for public schools. Throughout several studies, the data has "indicated a lower frequency and lower quality of social interaction by children with autism at all functioning levels..." and "children with autism may lack the understanding of social relationships and

interactions...” (Horrocks, 2008, p.10) Principals must take this into consideration and help create new ways of broadening the social environment that these students will be brought into.

Inclusion is a large debate within public and private schools around the nation. Autism Spectrum Disorder students can have a hard time fitting into public school settings due to social interactions, classroom curriculum, and factors that can contribute to disruptive behaviors. Autistic behaviors can be both physically and emotionally disruptive and classroom factors can be the cause. Teachers with strategies to ease these behaviors can help regulate a disorderly classroom and keep autistic students in regulatory zones. With the support of the school’s administration, inclusion can be guaranteed to function more smoothly.

Method

For this Capstone Project, I investigated how both public and private school teachers cope with autistic children who have been mainstreamed into the school system. This project looked closely at what teachers and directors believed could be done to improve the acceptance of autistic children in the classroom and strategies to minimize classroom disruption. Based on an analysis of data and relevant research literature, I formulated an action plan that addressed my classmate’s understanding of an autistic child’s perspective of mainstream classrooms. Educators will use coping strategies when a special needs child becomes over-stimulated and in using these actions, minimize disruptions within the learning environment for other children.

Context¹

Located in the hills of Heightland, CA, a long mountain road leads to Great Minds School. This facility provides a school setting based around autistic students. Not included in the

¹ Pseudonyms were used to disguise school and city original names.

public or private school system, this school is a NPA, also known as, Non Public Agency. Great Minds provides additional services around the area to help students not only at the center but also in their homes. A few of these services include ABA therapy, Occupational Therapy, or Speech Therapy; which can be conducted within any of the numerous classrooms or even outside on the playground which is surrounded by large trees. Being in nature can be a large advantage for autistic students especially when it comes to learning development.

The Ranch Elementary is a small private school located in Carsonville, CA. It was established in 1961 with only a preschool section in the beginning. As it grew, the school added an elementary side and today it incorporates all grade levels up to and including eighth grade. The school provides extracurricular activities including swim lessons at their onsite pool, a large play structure for recesses, and a cook onsite for hot lunch every day. Although it is a small school, it provides a private curriculum based education with small classes and a sense of community. This gives children the benefits of close friendships and more one on one instruction. I interviewed two preschool teachers, Lesley B and Analyn L, who have had experiences with incoming autistic children and have seen the behaviors that can occur. I also interviewed the Assistant Director of the school, who has had many experiences with implementing disciplinary actions. Disciplinary action involving autistic children have created a loss in efficiently helping the ASD child. Gaining evidence from the interviews constructed, showed the need in helpful strategies that mainstream teachers could use.

Participants and Participant Selection

The participants who took part in this study consisted of two teachers and two directors.

Due to the subject matter of the research, the need to interview both directors and teachers was an important aspect of the study. Having two different views regarding the students is important in expanding the data collected. The four participants are one hundred percent female with the mean age of 50. All participants have been involved in the education industry for a majority of their professional careers and have had many experiences regarding children both on and off the autism spectrum.

Tamila S. The Director and Founder of Great Minds School located in Heightland, CA. She has been working with autistic children for over thirty years and still enjoys it today. She founded Great Minds, which is a school based on teaching and providing services for autistic students. Great Minds runs many different programs including after school Applied Behavioral Analysis Services which helps with behaviors expressed by these students.

Diane P. The Assistant-Director of a small private school called The Ranch Elementary located in Carsonville, CA. She started as a preschool teacher back in 1992 and has made her way to the position of Assistant-Director for the school. Her position includes managing the office when it comes to disciplinary instances and speaking to parents or outside sources.

Lesley B. A teacher located at the small private school, The Ranch Elementary, in Carsonville, CA. She has worked here since 2007 and works in the preschool section of the private school. She has been exposed to instances in which she was unaware of how to regulate an autistic child.

Analyn L. A teacher located at the small private school, The Ranch Elementary, in Carsonville, CA. She has worked there since 2016 in the preschool section of the private school. She has been exposed to instances in which she was unaware of how to regulate an autistic child.

Researcher

Autism inclusion is an important concept in the educational world. This concern is meaningful to me since I believe that all teachers should have experience in both the autism world and the non-autism world. I personally strive to share the knowledge that both I and others have about autism to many can have the opportunity to experience providing this different type of education.

I have had eye opening experiences regarding Special Education students beginning in high school. I was able to volunteer at a middle school Special Education classroom in my town for approximately two years. Today, I work at an autistic school as an ABA Therapist, also known as Applied Behavioral Analysis. I work with students after school hours to regulate behaviors and collect data on when and why these behaviors occur. I began to think about when one of the students from my workplace is mainstreamed into the public or private school system and the effects this has on all the students and teachers involved.

The difference between others who work in the autism industry and myself, is the insight that I have into both the mainstream and the autism world. I have volunteered and worked in both areas of education and I am able to make the connection needed for a smooth transition for students who are mainstreamed. With connections in these two worlds, I am able to provide

knowledge to both with the help of participants and evidence from both sides.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

The Ranch Elementary Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me briefly about yourself and any experience you have with autistic students?
2. What are some methods that teachers/you are using/used to minimize disruption and help the autistic child regain their balance?
 - a. Are these methods working/Did these methods work? (Why/Why not)
3. What are your concerns about mainstreaming autistic children into traditional school classrooms?
4. What are some methods you would like to know when regulating dysregulated autistic students?
5. What obstacles would you anticipate when training teachers on regulating autistic children in traditional classrooms?
6. Do you have any other concerns, suggestions or comments about developing procedures to educate mainstream teachers about autistic behaviors?

Great Minds Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me briefly about yourself and any experience you have with autistic

students?

2. What are the most common manifestations of autistic dysregulation that you see in the classroom?
3. What are the warning signs that indicate an autistic child might be starting to get over-stimulated?
4. What are your concerns about mainstreaming autistic children into traditional school classrooms?
5. Should teachers in traditional classrooms be trained in how to work with autistic children's special needs?
6. What are the most effective methods to train teachers in handling special needs children?
7. What obstacles would you anticipate when training teachers on regulating autistic children in traditional classrooms?
8. Do you have any other concerns, suggestions or comments about developing procedures to educate mainstream teachers about autistic behaviors?

Procedure

After requesting to interview each teacher through email or phone call, I was able to sit down with each teacher individually. With the consent of each teacher, I video recorded the teacher or director's responses to my interview questions. The individual interviews each took a maximum of thirty minutes and was held in different settings. For Tamila S, the interview took place in the privacy of her office at the Great Minds School. Analyn L's interview was filmed at

The Ranch Elementary and was recorded for the total amount of time. Diane P's interview was taken in the privacy of her home located in Fullson, CA. I was not able to film Lesley B's interview because of prior complications. She has sent her interview questions with results via email and will be included below. Each interview that was filmed was edited for a smooth finish to be included in the official powerpoint presentation.

Each link to the interview videos and slideshow is listed below:

Tamila S: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3y-RS4qv-A>

Diane P: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2K646bq1qQ>

Analyn L: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw7wanpS0rY>

Google Slideshow:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vracVKjy wz2OGnPP1BovfuaeOpARF2_BC002Mjh6vwc/edit#slide=id.p

Data Analysis

After all interviews were collected and transcribed, similar themes were chosen from the data collected while non-relevant themes were excluded. The final step was piecing together all factual data and making sure that the evidence supported my research. The data was then implemented into the final paper and presentation.

Results

For this Capstone Project, two mainstream elementary teachers, one mainstream assistant director, and the director of an Autism- based school were interviewed to gather information and ideas on how to improve autistic student behaviors in the mainstream classroom. This is

important because many mainstream teachers feel ill-equipped to handle disruptive behaviors that can divert attention and resources away from other students in the classroom. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, three themes emerged (see Table 1).

Evidence-based decision making requires evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Volunteering Opportunities; Specialized Training; and Parental Communication. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option, an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

| | Time | Cost | Reach |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|-------|
| Volunteering Opportunities | High | High | Low |
| Specialized Training | Medium | Medium | High |
| Parental Communication | Medium | Low | High |

Volunteering Opportunities

Volunteering opportunities are always a good idea for those who may not have all the experience they desire. The time reserved for these volunteering opportunities consists of two days a week for one hour to observe and work with special education students in a special education classroom or at an Autism based institution. Considering the amount of time needed to volunteer, time remains at a “High”. The cost needed to implement this program is the amount

offered for an hour of overtime pay for the teachers to be able to volunteer in the special education classrooms. Money remains “Low” in this option and budgeting these costs can be a difficult conversation to have with school administrators or the school board. While this can be difficult for many school districts, the end results will show improvement within classrooms. The population that these programs are expected to reach are all mainstream school teachers that do not have the experience with students who have neurodevelopmental disabilities. It is expected that the number of teachers this option will reach is low as it is a more time and cost intensive option and one that many school administrators may be reluctant to participate in. However, the experience gained from this opportunity will be an advantage to all teachers who may have a special needs student in their classroom at some point in their career.

Specialized Training

Specialized training would provide a strong foundation for teachers who may not know how to create a positive atmosphere for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students. While teachers run up against obstacles in their teaching careers, “aggressive behaviors [can] have negative effects on teacher’s instructional efforts, thereby reducing opportunities for learning a variety of skills even when educational and other interventions are in place.” (Kanne, 2011, p. 1) Currently, some of the techniques being used are listed as patience and keeping the child calm. (Lesley B, Personal Communication, 2017) Analyn L from The Ranch Elementary responded that “for many regular teachers there isn’t any real information” for the students they are given. (Personal Communication, 2017) When asked about mainstreaming an autistic child into The Ranch Elementary’s small private school, she explained that “they didn’t have any behaviorists or anyone who is trained” to handle the behaviors. (Diane P, Personal Communication, 2017)

This specialized training can help teachers learn more of the basics in improving these behaviors. The time reserved for the specialized training would be one day, twice a year, preferably on holidays or teacher development days. The amount of time dedicated to this training is administered through days that will not affect students or lesson plans causing the evaluation to remain at a medium level. The cost needed to implement this program is the amount needed to pay one or two professionals at the rate they request to administer the all-day session. The money can be paid through the school district if these training sessions are approved. While money within the school district can be difficult to discuss, the evaluation of cost remains on the medium level. This training would reach all teachers and administrators within the public or private mainstream schools and will give them the knowledge to administer techniques that will ultimately help their classroom and the ASD child. The evaluation of the numbers of staff this program would reach in this option is high, especially if training is implemented on a required ‘teacher development’ basis. The techniques can be learned through a series of videos, activities and study guides that are given to the teachers for reference. Qualified specialists can help teachers learn about the “disabilities, and their effective management and treatment, including a brief primer on the scientific method”. (Thompson, 2009, p. 2) These programs are ultimately the key for a smooth functioning classroom.

Parental Communication

Communication from parents to a teacher of any ASD child who is being mainstreamed should be mandatory with any school. It can be difficult for parents to find books on autism and some practitioners do not promote others’ theoretical positions. (Thompson, 2009) It is up to schools and teachers to be the biggest influence in the child’s life. Diane P from The Ranch

Elementary, described one instance where “the parents got a little upset ...they thought [The Ranch Elementary] [was] punishing him....” while they were originally trying to calm him down. (Personal Communication, 2017) The teacher should know the factors that can affect behaviors and what the student enjoys that will help regulate them. Tamila S from Great Minds School recommends that “parents [should] write a letter to the teacher describing where the student was and where they are today.” (Personal Communication, 2017) The time it takes to meet with parents is evaluated and as low. This is due to the fact that setting up additional meeting times can be difficult to schedule for both the parents and teacher when it is not on a district-set parent-teacher conference day. These conferences do not cost any money, which is why the cost of this option is evaluated to be “Low”. Once the parents and teacher meet for a conversation about the ASD student, the reach between the parents and teacher can be very convenient and remains at a constant high. Analyn L from The Ranch Elementary professed that she would like to have “meetings before to get feedback from the parents” to discuss what to do if a behavior occurs. (Personal Communication, 2017) This can be helpful for not only the child’s goals but for the teacher and administration to learn more about the student which will ultimately decrease the amount of behaviors.

Conclusion

It is recommended that the second action option listed, Specialized Training, is to be the most effective when creating a solution for any teacher who feels unprepared. It is the recommendation that the second option, Specialized Training, be the proposed solution for public school teacher training. This specialized training will give teachers the knowledge and the tools to help maintain a calm learning environment when they have ASD students in their

classrooms. While the other two options were not recommended, each have benefits in helping teachers understand how to better mainstream autistic students into the classroom. Volunteering opportunities in special education classrooms or at autism-based schools can help teachers who have not had experience working with students with neurodevelopmental disabilities. Spending more time with special education students will help the teacher understand some of the differences between them and the mainstream students. While experience is key in helping students, parental involvement is also a strong factor in how a student's learning process occurs. A recommendation made by many teachers, including one participant, is that parents meet with the teacher to discuss their child's particular needs or even to address a letter to the teacher describing any special behaviors that they may exhibit. These two other options are strong and can still be implemented in addition to the original recommendation. While specialized training days can be helpful, there can still be changes in behaviors that even those who specialize in autism studies can be aware of. Since every student is different, there is always a possibility that the child could have a difficult day, resulting in backwards progress. If some teachers are not able to attend the specific training days, they may not feel as prepared as their colleagues when accepting challenges from their ASD students. As all teachers experience difficulties in their classrooms, having supportive colleagues and being prepared for certain types of behaviors, the training they will receive will assist them in creating a stable classroom environment for all their students.

Action Documentation and Reflection

In many mainstream schools, teachers and administrators work hard to bring inclusion into their classrooms. While this is honorable, the behaviors of ASD students can be disruptive

during class time which is not beneficial for both the teacher and the students. Strategies can be taught to many mainstream teachers and administrators, so they may administer these strategies to help initiate a calming environment. Four interviews took place while completing this research. Tamila S, director and co-founder of an autism based school, Great Minds, was video interviewed at her office. Diane P, assistant director, and Analyn L, a preschool teacher at The Ranch Elementary, were both video interviewed as well. Lesley B, another preschool teacher at The Ranch Elementary, was unable to video interview and was able to provide written answers to the questions. Three action options emerged from these interviews: volunteer opportunities to gain more experience in a special education classroom; specialized training to prepare mainstream school teachers; and parental communication between parents and teachers about the ASD student. After interviewing the four teachers and evaluating these three options, specialized training was chosen as the prominent choice that will increase the opportunity for ASD students to be included in mainstream classrooms. This option gave teachers and administrators the opportunity to work together and implement new strategies that will help the child's well being in the classroom. Money, time, and reach were shown as advantages towards increasing the school's inclusion opportunities and helping ASD children receive a great education.

The response to the research conducted has been ultimately positive. All the participants were more than willing to share their experiences for the research. Each teacher and administrator were eager to be apart of the research to improve inclusion in mainstream schools and to learn about behaviors that can be used to help the ASD child remain calm. I was surprised to learn how much experience each teacher and administrator had with ASD children. It was much more common than I had expected going into the research project and it became clear the

inclusion is happening more often than expected. After conducting the full research, I took action in preparing a flyer to be presented to all teachers regarding the inclusion of autistic students in their classrooms. This is my own personal example of a specialized training program flyer that hopefully would be taken advantage of by school districts. The link for the specialized training flyer is listed below:

Flyer:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RBBkUbpU0oc3YXfxP6MmKNmPzkwdpZr5jl-84AFmVyw/edit#heading=h.cbw47xq1tokq>

The research conducted for this project reflected the changes that many would like to see in mainstream classrooms regarding inclusion. Many opinions were shared in the interviews and were all very similar: mainstream school teachers would appreciate knowing more about ASD students and the behaviors that occur. Specialized Training would give teachers the skills they can use in their own classrooms making both the teachers, students, and parents satisfied. Flyers, similar to the one listed above, can give teachers a visual reference in any case a behavior does occur. These skills can be learned and practiced by educators creating an overall successful learning environment for both the ASD students and the students surrounding them.

Critical Reflection

From this research project, I learned about the effects of inclusion and how in many cases, teachers find it difficult to juggle both a mainstream classroom and the inclusion of an ASD student. While I have volunteered in many special education classrooms, I still learned new techniques of transition and inclusion from the research I conducted. After interviewing multiple teachers and directors in addition to researching the statistics, I became aware of how behavioral

strategies can help a mainstream school teacher in their classroom. Behavioral strategies such as sensory diets and prompting to socialize with peers can help both the students and teacher learn about the individualized needs of that child. If districts will provide specialized training for their teachers, both teachers and ASD students can benefit with these new skills. If these changes are implemented in the inclusion process, it can help create a calmer environment for the child and enhance their overall learning.

In agreement with CSU Monterey Bay's Major Learning Outcomes of becoming a Developing Educator and Subject Matter Generalist, my goal is to share my knowledge and elaborate on the current knowledge of my students and peers. Through the process of this research project, I was able to share my knowledge about special education inclusion with fellow peers and current mainstream teachers. Giving the teachers strategies on how to help reduce the amount of behaviors in their classrooms was a success. My goal as a future educator is to establish a change in the classroom and I believe that through my research, I was able to devise a safe learning environment for both teachers and ASD children.

I believe the necessary steps to take to become the professional I envision being is to not only complete my education but to make sure that my classroom management reflects my true beliefs of what being a teacher means. Being a great teacher includes knowing each of your students and their individual needs, especially if they happen to be an ASD student. Building a rapport with these students is an important tool for every teacher and will help teaching material much easier. My goals as a teacher are to be mindful of every student and knowing the skills to help that individual child and I hope to implement these behavioral strategies in my own classroom one day.

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