School Culture that Facilitates the Inclusion of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Mainstream Classrooms

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**Abstract**

Autism prevalence is rapidly increasing in the United States, and more and more general education teachers are finding children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) included in their classrooms. While these students frequently have the capacity to perform academically, they often need extra social and behavioral support. This paper seeks to establish the kind of school environment that is most beneficial for the social and behavioral development of students with autism and their typically developing peers in the mainstream classroom, as well as how the general education teacher can be supported in establishing this environment. With three primary learners in mind – the student with ASD, the typical peer, and the general education teacher – the inclusion setting is explored, the curricular needs of each learner are identified, and goal setting and assessments are discussed. Two whole-school, tiered models provide promising structures for helping address many of these elements. Effective inclusion of children with autism in the mainstream classroom requires consideration of all of these elements; implications are discussed.

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The incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) has risen dramatically over the last twelve years, from one in 150 children in 2002 to one in 68 in 2014 (CDC, 2014). ASD is a developmental disability that is characterized by the presence of social, communication, and behavioral challenges (CDC, 2014). Because it is a “spectrum” disorder, the manifestation of ASD varies among affected individuals, with ability levels ranging in functionality and severity “from gifted to severely challenged” (CDC, 2014).

The challenges of autism, and its increasing presence among school children, are creating a need for schools and administrators to support educators in utilizing effective strategies in their inclusion classrooms, to ensure their students have access to the academic content and school experience of their peers to the greatest extent possible. Increased rates of autism, “inclusion and integration trends,” and state and national requirements for educators to utilize evidence-based practices (Stichter, Randolph, Gage, & Schmidt, 2007, p. 219) all contribute to the urgency for educators to utilize strategies that support the inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in their classrooms.

This topic interests me based on my previous experiences in teaching and in working with children with ASD and their families, as well as my future ambitions of eventually working in school administration. I taught 7th grade English in an inclusion classroom. I had students with different interests and at various levels of ability in each of my classes, and I worked as much as possible with the resource teacher trying to make sure every student received what he or she needed. However, the resource teacher had a large caseload and was not always available to support me; additionally, I do not remember receiving any support from my school administrators in working to ensure success for the students with special needs in my classroom.

After four years in the classroom, I took a break from teaching and worked as the Assistant Director at a non-profit school and support center for children with autism and their families. The center’s preschool consisted of one-on-one behavior therapy, and as students became ready, they were integrated part-time and then full-time into a neighboring mainstream private school environment. In this arrangement with the private school, an individual therapist from our preschool would accompany the student for support that was gradually released over time, until the child needed little to no support in the general classroom. Without this sort of partnership in place in the upper grades of the private school, I saw elementary and middle school teachers struggling to support students with autism in their classrooms – resulting, in almost every case, in the parent(s) pulling their children with ASD from the school and placing them elsewhere. I even began tutoring a few hours per week outside of my normal duties for one of these students who was not adequately accommodated in the general setting.

Given the rising rates of autism, the inclusion of many of these children in the mainstream classroom, and my experiences as a frazzled teacher, a frustrated observer, and a staff member at a special needs resource center, I am interested in how inclusion for children with autism can be more successful for both students and teachers. Throughout my studies over the past year, I researched and wrote several papers related to autism, and/or inclusion of students with special needs in a mainstream setting. Though in this paper I incorporate some research and information I have gathered for those papers, this capstone builds off those experiences, answers different questions, and is written for a different audience.

This capstone will begin to answer the following questions: What kind of school environment is most supportive for helping mainstreamed students with ASD succeed socially and behaviorally? How can students be supported in the social and behavioral aspects of the mainstream classroom environment, and how can teachers be supported in creating and maintaining a classroom environment conducive to these students’ learning?To answer these questions, I will identify and explore learners as students and teachers, the context of inclusion, the specific curricular needs of students with autism and their teachers, and ways to ensure that students and teachers are getting what they need.

**The Inclusion Context and Its Learners**

In order to begin answering these questions, we must first explore the context of inclusion, and needs of the primary learners in this context: children with high-functioning ASD, their typical peers, and their general education teachers. Assuming collaboration among other stakeholders is an essential support in schools (Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010), other learners could be identified: special education teachers and case managers, administrators, staff, parents, community members. However, while important to consider, these learners lie outside the scope of this paper.

**Inclusion**

Some professionals and parents, for a variety of reasons, believe in including children with special needs in the general classroom. Full inclusionists, those who believe nearly *all* children with disabilities should be in the general classroom, say that no student, regardless of label or lack thereof, should be denied support in the classroom if they need it; “to do otherwise is to blatantly discriminate against some students” (Stainback & Stainback, 1984, p. 105). While full inclusionists are seen by some to be extreme in their philosophy, the essence of this rationale behind including children with special needs in the mainstream setting is that it is unfair to do otherwise.

A counter argument to full inclusion is that general education is designed for educating groups of students, whereas special education, including pull-out services and self-contained classroms, is desinged to support individuals (Zigmond & Kloo, 2011). In addition, full inclusion places a heavy burden on general education teachers due to lack of time and training (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1995), and perhaps as a result, some inclusive programs that have been implemented for children with learning disabilities were ultimately unsuccessful (Zigmond, et al., 1995).

Challenging behaviors and more specialized needs of students could require more teacher time and energy, taking focus away from typical students in the classroom, and making it difficult for teachers to address all their students’ needs. However, given the nature of autism, and the social and behavioral needs of many high-functioning children with autism, it seems that the general education setting could be the most appropriate, beneficial placement for the student, considering the specific needs of the child.

**The Child with ASD**

Often,the student with high-functioning ASD (e.g., one who has verbal communication and self-help skills) has demonstrated academic capabilities,but may have developed “at least one challenging behavior that interferes with their learning and development” as well as social interaction (Neitzel, 2010, p. 247). Common examples of these challenging behaviors include repetitive or stereotypical behaviors such as hand flapping, difficulties with transition, or idiosyncratic compusions; or disruptive behaivors such as tantrums, aggression, or elopement (Neitzel, 2010).

Additionally, the child with ASD often lacks basic social skills like managing emotions, interpreting social cues, and understanding different perspectives (Autism Speaks, 2014). These deficits in social behavior can be isolating and make interventions more difficult, which can worsen social delays (Stichter, Randolph, Gage, & Schmidt, 2007), and prevent students from making and keeping friends, which “is key to a child’s social, emotional, and even cognitive development” (Boutot & Bryant, 2005, p. 14). “Increased isolation and peer rejection” can later result in language and communication deficits (Stichter, et al., 2007, p. 220), as well as decreased likelihood of employment and independence, decreased life expectancy, and increased mental health issues (Strain & Schwartz, 2001). Despite these obstacles, these children deserve to reach their full potentials. With the right support in the right setting, these children do have the potential to overcome many of these challenges and become fully functioning individuals in society.

Research suggests that students with autism who have one-on-one supports in the classroom “underperform academically, receive less attention from their teachers, and [are] isolated from their peer group” (Symes & Humphrey, 2011, p. 153). Interactions with adults, though they can be meaningful, are not easily generalized with typically developing peers (Rogers, 2000). However, being in close proximity to typically developing peers can help improve social behaviors in children with ASD (Osborne & Reed, 2011) and can “significantly decrease levels of autistic behavior” (McGee, Paradis, & Feldman, 1993, p. 57). This proximity can be facilitated in a mainstream setting.

McGee, Paradis, and Feldman (1993) found that “children with disabilities are more likely to imitate the actions of children without disabilities than they are to imitate the actions of other children with disabilities” (p. 65). While this emphasizes the importance of peer modeling and proximity, it also should reassure educators and parents that children with ASD will not acquire inappropriate social behaviors they observe in peers with disabilities. In one study, researchers found that children with autism in inclusion classrooms have the same prominence in the classroom as their peers (Boutot & Bryant, 2005). In other words, children with autism learn appropriate social behavior thorugh interacting with their typically developing peers. These children are just as visible as their peers in a mainstream setting; therefore, an inclusion classroom can provide for the social interaction children with autism need to develop these skills.

**The Typical Peer**

Because an inclusion context contains typically developing students in addition to their peers with autism, it is important to identify these students as learners as well. In a review of eight studies on inclusion, researchers found that typically developing students believe, through being in class with students with autism, that they gain acceptance of and sensitivity to others, self-awareness, and improved coping mechanisms (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Additionally, parents of typical peers cited “social benefits of inclusion” (Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004, p. 139), including “appreciation of the needs of other children” and “acceptance of differences in behavior and appearance” (p. 138). Few parents of typically developing students indicated negative effects of inclusion on their children. From this research, it is clear that both children with autism and their typical peers benefit from inclusion.

**The General Education Teacher**

Overall, many general education teachers support the idea of mainstreaming, and many general education teachers are willing to have students with ASD in their classrooms (Davis, 2013), provided they feel they have administrative support and access to support services, and if they believe they have had success previously with students with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1995).

However, despite the benefits that children with autism reap from an inclusion classroom, and the willingness of teachers to include them, inclusion can put significant strain on general education teachers. Few teachers surveyed felt they had the time, skills, training, or resources necessary for successful mainstreaming of these students (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1995). While the overall attitude toward inclusion is positive, research indicates a need for teacher support – in this case, specifically in understanding autism, incorporating social skills and behavior training into their classrooms, and allocation of time and resources to help teachers do this.

**Curriculum and School Culture**

In order to build a school climate that supports all three learners in the inclusion context, the needs of these learners, including the elements of explicit and implicit curriculum (Eisner, 1994), should be considered.

**Social Skills**

In the general education classroom, “Social Skills and Behavior” is not a class subject like English or Math. Typically developing students often learn social and behavioral skills by picking up on social cues without needing explicit instruction; therefore, teachers hold certain expectations for behavior and social interaction without having to teach it explicitly. Developing social skills requires children with autism to be in proximity to their typical peers, but proximity alone is not sufficient to increase social interaction, without some sort of intervention (McConnell, 2002). Because children with ASD need more support in building social skills, “identification of and intervention for social skill deficits must be a focus of instruction if students with ASD are expected to achieve increased success and independence” (Stichter, et al., 2007, p. 220). Individual support staff can support students with ASD emotionally and behaviorally, but social development necessitates typical peer proximity (Osborne & Reed, 2011; Rogers, 2000). The social aspect of integration with their typical peers, therefore, should be a key focus for educators as children with ASD enter mainstream or typical classroom settings.

To support children with autism in social and behavioral development, teachers must “arrange the environment to prompt and support social interaction” (McConnell, 2002, p. 367) and incorporate various strategies into their teaching. McConnell (2002) suggests incorporating: predictable scheduling and structure, access to trained peers, explicit instruction on social skills to both children with autism and their peers, fading out prompts to encourage long-term generalization, and continuous monitoring over time. This does not always have to be done in the classroom; for example, one study suggests that teachers can utilize recess time to advance educational goals of students with ASD (Lang, et al., 2011). Research and resources do exist that delineate evidence-based practices for teaching social and communication skills (see Neitzel, 2010, for example).

**Professional Development**

In order for teachers to support students with ASD and effectively implement some of these strategies for building social skills into their classroom, teachers need certain supports themselves. Research suggests that increasing quality training and support is key for teachers working with this population (Gavaldá & Qinvi, 2012; Moores-Abdool, 2010; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Segall & Campbell, 2012). Effective teacher training can support teachers’ confidence in their own competencies, which can help develop social behavior and foster a sense of school belonging in children with autism (Osborne & Reed, 2011). In one study, teachers’ assistants for students with ASD believed that, in order to provide effective inclusion services, they needed “*access to expertise*, *communication within school* and *teaching staff awareness of ASD*” (Symes & Humphrey, 2011, p. 153, emphasis in original).

Without specific knowledge about ASD and strategies for supporting these students in their classrooms, general education teachers could find themselves frustrated and ineffective. For all staff members, but for general education teachers in particular, continuous education on autism and effective approaches is critical (Gavaldá & Qinvi, 2012). Teacher professional development should “stress collaborative planning and problem solving” (Gavaldá & Qinvi, 2012, p. 4074), and should ensure that teachers and staff have “a clear and shared understanding of the aims and expectation of inclusion within their school” (Symes & Humphrey, 2011, p. 154). Teachers also should have the necessary training to teach students with ASD strategies to cope with being an inclusion learning environment (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodger, 2009). Finally, through training, experience, and collaboration, teachers should understand and acknowledge that, due to the individual and sometimes unpredictable nature of autism, some strategies may be effective with some children that are not with others (Davis, 2013). When teachers have a solid understanding of specific interventions to utilize with their students (Machaliecek, O'Reilly, Beretvas, Sigafoos, & Lancioni, 2007), as well as a certain openness and flexibility to approaching new challenges, they are able to create an environment more conducive to learning for all learners.

**School Culture**

In addition to social skills supports for students and professional development for teachers, it is the school leadership’s responsibility to establish a school environment that supports all three learners. The school culture that supports inclusion is collaborative, in which all staff, professionals, and parents work together (Symes & Humphrey, 2011) and recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of all students regardless of label (Gavaldá & Qinvi, 2012). This school culture is also flexible; teachers understand “the constant interplay among universal, group, and individual needs” (Symes & Humphrey, 2011, p. 154). “Mutual respect” between teachers and students, as well as “inclusive *policies* and *practices*” are essential (Symes & Humphrey, 2011, p. 154, emphasis in original). Gavaldá & Qinvi (2012) argued for many other school climate factors, including maintaining small schools and classes to the extent possible, utilizing highly structured management “allowing students with ASD to know and anticipate in advance what their school day will bring,” developing committed teachers, supporting typical peers with interaction strategies, and building in time for students with ASD to “receive special functions training” (p. 4074). Students in the inclusion classroom and their teachers cannot receive the support they need to the fullest extent possible without a positive, respectful, structured but flexible, collaborative environment in which to learn and work.

**Goals and Assessment**

In a school in which children with ASD are educated in inclusion classrooms, it is important that social and behavioral goals are established, and that some sort of assessment exists to measure progress toward those goals, and the overall success of the inclusion setting.

**Meaningful Goals and Measures**

The varying manifestations of autism call for both meaningful and individualized goals for students. To write such goals, one must begin with baseline skills, by “assess[ing] social interaction in naturalistic settings, including classrooms and homes” (McConnell, 2002, p. 367) to determine what types of social and behavioral interventions are needed. Strain and Schwartz (2001) maintained that educators need to collaborate with parents, “observe children in settings outside of school, and be experts in the social behavior of typically developing children” (p. 126). While the full extent of this may not be possible for general education teachers, the principle remains the same: teachers must have some knowledge of typical social behavior for the students they teach.

Due to the individual nature of the chosen outcomes during the planning stage, specific measures are difficult to establish across the board. However, improved social skills would be demonstrated by generalization of these skills across peers and contexts, and maintenance of skills through periods of time. Boutot and Bryant (2005), in one study of integration, analyzed findings using the framework of “acceptance (social preference), visibility (social impact), and membership in a peer group (social network affiliation)” (p. 14). This framework could serve as one type of measurement within an inclusion classroom context.

**Tiered Whole-School Models**

In addition to various strategies that can be implemented in the classroom and providing for a strong, supportive school culture, tiered whole-school support models should be considered for use in schools that are including children with autism in the mainstream classroom, as they are structured and require decisions be made based on collected data.

**Positive Behavior Support.** Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is a “tiered intervention model” that is “used to increase positive behavior in children by gradually applying more focused support and intervention at each level of the hierarchy” (Neitzel, 2010, p. 248). This model, if implemented well school-wide for all students, can help prevent, and intervene to reduce, challenging behaviors in the classroom that can prevent learning, and therefore can be useful to implement in an inclusion setting.

Three tiers dictate the type of behavioral interventions given to students who need different levels of support. In traditional, whole-school PBS, tier one includes “universal” structures that help “teach and reinforce behavioral expectations” for all students (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young, & Young, 2011, p. 2). “Targeted” interventions in tier two are directed toward 10-15% of students who need extra support, and can come in the form of “small-group instruction in social skills;” and tier three is “individual” interventions for the 5% of students who will need it (Caldarella, et al., 2011, p. 3). Nietzel (2010) advocates for a modified tier system when working with children with autism. In tier one, social and communication skills should be taught, laying the foundation to prevent undesired behaviors. Tier two should utilize “evidence-based practices to reduce interfering behaviors” (p. 253), and tier three should utilize strategies from tier two but in a more intensive, individualized manner.

Key elements of implementing school-wide PBS include defining, teaching, and creating systems to support behavioral expectations, and “collecting data to make decisions and evaluate effectiveness” (Caldarella, et al., 2011, p. 3). However, in the context of autism, Neitzel (2010) argued for an additional step of identifying “factors in the environment that may be causing interfering behaviors” (p. 248). While this is traditionally done in tier 3, she suggested, based on the nature of the challenging behaviors children with ASD exhibit, that this be done in tier 1 or 2 when working with students with ASD in order to identify and modify (where possible) environmental issues earlier.

**Response to Intervention.** Response to Intervention (RTI) is another multi-tiered system for “the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs” (RTI Action Network, 2013). Student data helps educators and administrators make decisions regarding academic instruction and interventions in the regular classroom. While there are varying formats and approaches for its implementation, it must be implemented school-wide for efficiency and fidelity (RTI Action Network, 2013). In RTI, students are divided into three tiers.

Tier I involves high-quality classroom instruction delivered to the whole class. In Tier I, all students are screened periodically (in cycles of 8 weeks or fewer), utilizing the nationally normed, skills-based universal screener. Classroom teachers then provide supplemental instruction in the regular classroom to students found to be “at risk:” those who score below average on this assessment (RTI Action Network, 2013). In the next screening, these “at risk” students either show they have made significant progress and remain in the mainstream classroom, or they move to Tier II if assessments show inadequate progress.

Students in Tier II are placed in small group settings to receive “increasingly intensive instruction matched to their needs” (RTI Action Network, 2013). Because this tier is designed to meet individual needs, levels of intensity, group size, frequency, duration, and educator training vary (RTI Action Network, 2013). Student academic progress is monitored more intensely during this stage. According to the RTI model, Tier II should not last longer than one grading period. Here again, students who progress significantly are moved back to Tier 1, whereas students who do not are moved to Tier III.

Intensive, individual interventions are done in Tier III to address student skill deficits (RTI Action Network, 2013). With still inadequate progress in this tier, students are “referred for comprehensive evaluation and considered for special education services under IDEA 2004” (RTI Action Network, 2013). Noted clearly throughout the literature on RTI is the fact that parents may request anevaluation at any time throughout the RTI process. In addition to the tier model, implementation can include (and does in Tennessee) parent involvement and professional development for teachers, administrators, and school psychologists (TN CORE, 2013).

**Implications of Tiered Models.** Assuming fidelity of implementation, a tier model can be helpful in ensuring that all students are getting what they need; for this reason, they can be especially effective in inclusion settings. While RTI can ensure that students are receiving the academic support they need, this model should be conducted in tandem with a socio-behavioral system like PBS in order to help students with autism receive the behavioral and social development support they need. Assessments done and data collected in both models should assess whether student achievement is low due to cognitive or instructional issues, or due to social or behavioral challenges in the classroom. With this knowledge, teachers and administrators, working with parents and other professionals, can make better-informed decisions regarding interventions for these students.

**Assessments**

Regardless of the strategies or systems used to ensure student success in the classroom, these strategies or systems should be assessed for effectiveness. Effective measures will answer the questions: Are students getting what they need? Do teachers have the tools they need to successfully support students with ASD in an inclusion setting? If so, how do we know, and if not, why not? To answer these questions well, various formal and informal measures should be utilized. For students with autism, their typical peers, and general education teachers, these measures should include formal and informal student achievement data, data tracking progress toward IEP and other goals, formal and informal observation data, and parent, student, and teacher survey data. Analysis of these various measures will demonstrate whether strategies for supporting each of the three primary learners in the inclusion setting are effective.

**Implications and Moving Forward**

The implications of having increasing numbers of children with autism in the classroom could be great, and teachers and schools must be ready to support these students. There is very little research to be found currently on the inclusion of children, with autism specifically, in the mainstream classroom, or what supports are most effective for general education teachers when leading inclusion classrooms with this population of students. However, there is much to be gleaned from knowledge of typical social development, the specifics of autism, and strategies and structures that support inclusion.

Effective inclusion of children with autism in the mainstream classroom requires consideration of the needs of all involved in the context, most importantly the children with autism, their typical peers, and their general education teachers. When school administrators have a deep understanding of their needs, they can work to establish a school culture that best supports these three primary learners. Children with ASD need explicit behavioral and social instruction, their typical peers need support in interacting with their peers with autism, and teachers need training on autism and how to incorporate behavioral and social instruction into their classrooms, as well as collaboration with administrators and experts in the field. Addressing these needs may put budgetary, time, or other strains on administrators; but to successfully educate children with autism in the mainstream setting, it is crucial that these elements are considered.

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