

Supporting Adolescents with ASD in the General Education Setting: Perspectives from Stakeholders on the Transition Process

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine, from multiple stakeholder perspectives, how students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) served in the general education classroom can be better prepared for a successful post-secondary transition. Using focus group methodology, three primary themes were identified.

The need for:

- a better understanding of ASD school-wide,
- more resources for general education teachers, and
- more attention to student social/communication needs.

Intro

The Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) is a Research & Development Center funded by the Department of Education (IES) to improve post-secondary outcomes for students with ASD by using high quality professional development and evidence-based interventions to support practitioners, families, and students.

We know that post-secondary outcomes for students with ASD are some of the poorest of any disability category (Shattuck, 2012). What we do not know is what contributes to these poor outcomes.

Focus groups were held during the development phase of the CSESA project to gather input from a broad range of stakeholders on the experiences of high school students with ASD.

Research question:

What supports are needed, according to stakeholders, for students with ASD served in general education classrooms to transition to post-secondary settings more successfully?

Methods

- 28 focus groups were held across five universities (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of Texas at Austin, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Vanderbilt University in Tennessee).
- 152 stakeholders participated.
- Focus group protocol included general questions about the experiences of high school students with ASD, as well as questions related to potential intervention components that varied across sites.
- All focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and data was analyzed using NVivo10 software.

Stakeholders	N 152
Parents	47
Educators	45
Administrators	30
Service Provider/Community Member	24
Adolescent/Young adult w/ASD	6

THEME 1-Need for the whole school community, not just teachers, to develop a better understanding of ASD.

“The teachers even though they knew his diagnosis would see him as more capable than he actually was, or they would see him as lazy or stubborn,...having staff that really understand autism and what that is, I just think you have to have that before any of the other stuff.” Parent

“So it really does go back to that whole school training piece is vital because even the custodian needs to be involved and the cafeteria ladies.” Teacher

“It comes down to training - training the entire school on autism...it’s a culture thing. These students are part of our culture.” Teacher

THEME 2-General education teachers need more supports/resources/training to handle the growing diversity of their classrooms, including students with ASD.

General education teachers “have a lot...they have so many things, yes they do have students with autism but they have students with a lot of disabilities, and they have students with ESL....You have to be careful about how much you expect.” Administrator

“When during the day is the time to teach the skills they’re going to need...who is going to teach it?” Special Education Teacher

“I have a beautiful IEP for my son, but it’s not implemented. And part of it is because the teachers don’t have time and they have said that in the meeting, they have other students.” Parent

THEME 3-Social and communication deficits, a defining characteristic of students with ASD, are often not addressed at the secondary level.

“He has no friends..., no one talks to him, unless they have to as part of the class. Academically, he has done well...The social skills and communication...I don’t think the school has any understanding on how that impacts his whole life.” Parent

“I think social skills is probably one of the better predictors of success.” Special Education Teacher

“I don’t think people that have good social skills realize how important good social skills are, and in high school...teachers are so focused on ‘we have to get our students to pass this proficiency test.’” Service Provider

Conclusion and next steps

- High schools need to ensure that everyone from the administration to the bus drivers has a basic understanding of ASD.
- General education teachers need to have training on strategies for meeting the specific needs of students with ASD.
- Additionally, there is a need for more evidence-based practices specifically designed for secondary students with ASD.
- Students with ASD need more opportunities for social interaction - peers could play an important role and benefit as well.

References:

Shattuck, P. T., Narendorf, S. C., Cooper, B., Sterzing, P. R., Wagner, M., & Taylor, J. L. (2012). Postsecondary education and employment among youth with an autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics*, 129(6), 1042-1049.

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