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Inside inclusion: Asperger's and teaching

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Asperger's syndrome (AS) is a developmental disorder that influences the behaviour of a person socially. People diagnosed with AS have impairments in social relationships, communication issues and repetitive patterns of behaviour. Considering this, students with AS require additional needs within the classroom setting. This article briefly examines the educational options for students with AS, while covering the preferred option of inclusion more closely. With inclusion becoming the preferred option by parents and professionals, it is important to examine the classroom teacher's perspectives on the inclusive classroom policy, as they are primarily responsible for its success. A variety of teacher perspectives are outlined within the article, along with practical techniques and strategies for teaching students with AS. The importance of ongoing teacher training in special needs and inclusive education is highlighted throughout the article.

Keywords: inclusive classrooms; special needs; Asperger's syndrome; teacher training; teacher attitudes; inclusive practice

Introduction

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is a disorder that affects a person's social capabilities. Students who have AS require additional needs within the classroom setting. This article aims to address the implications for students with AS and their education options, whilst covering teacher perspectives of including a child with AS, or children with other disabilities, within their regular classroom. The needs of an AS child and how those needs can be met within the regular classroom will also be covered.

(AS) "is a developmental disability that is defined by impairments in social relationships, verbal and non-verbal communication and by repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities" (Barnhill, 2001, p.260). The etiology for AS is not yet determined, but it is considered to involve a combination of genetic and environmental factors (Schnur, 2005). In order to receive a diagnosis of AS, a person must exhibit problems with social interaction, restricted, all-absorbing patterns of interest, motor clumsiness, pedantic speech, imposing routines into many aspects of life and non-verbal communication problems, such as clumsy gestures or inappropriate facial expressions (Gillberg & Gillberg, 1989; Schnur, 2005).

Asperger's and education

In accordance with the NSW Public Schools Disability Program (DEC, 2012) students with a disability, such as AS, can be enrolled into a variety of classroom settings, such

as a mainstream class, a support class in a mainstream school or direct into a special school.

There is a preference for students with a disability, or who have additional needs, to be located within their neighbourhood school rather than sent to a special school or support class (Westwood & Graham, 2003). The favoured option for students with AS, is to enrol in their local mainstream school. This option is preferred by parents and professionals, as students with AS are given the opportunity to socialise with other students (Westwood & Graham, 2003), with the goal of providing them with chances to optimise their engagement through social interaction.

Although including students with AS into a mainstream classroom is preferred, it is not an easy process for either the school or the classroom teacher. Students with AS do certainly have additional needs within the classroom and they "require special accommodation made to the classroom routine in order for them to feel comfortable and safe within the classroom setting" (Betts, Betts & Gerber-Eckard, 2007, p.13). The mainstream classroom setting is preferred by parents and professionals as these students exhibit at least average or above-average intelligence (Safran, 2002; Schnur, 2005), however, as they can often subjected to bullying, regular classroom placement potentially creates an emotionally harmful situation (Fine & Myers, 2004; Safran, 2002).

Inclusion and practice

The process of including students with AS and other disabilities into a regular classroom setting is referred to as inclusion. Inclusion involves providing education for all students, despite their apparent difference (Florian, 2008). The implementation of inclusion involves a combination of mainstream and special education practices that, as will be seen, has the potential to lead to teachers lacking confidence in their capabilities and expertise (Kugelmass, 2000, Pace, 2003, cited in Hsien, Brown & Bortoli, 2009). According to Hsien, Brown and Bortoli, "general and special education teacher training have been traditionally separate from each other" (2009, p.28). As a result, established teachers who are now teaching inclusive classrooms have little or no training in special education, which can lead to a self-perception that a teacher lacks the capabilities to successfully meet all student needs. Following this notion, Forlin (2001) identified that 70% of classroom teachers have not received formal training in either special education or inclusive education. With inclusion being the preferred option of parents and professionals, it is a disconcerting prospect to have untrained, less-than- confident teachers educating the students who are in greatest need of their support and experience.

Teacher attitudes

As students with AS enter the inclusive classroom, it is important to assess the teacher's own perspectives of the policy of inclusion. Unfortunately, there is a limited body of research that has specific relation to AS and inclusion. What research there is applies to teacher attitudes toward inclusion as a whole, and that is the approach taken here.

Teacher attitudes toward inclusion need to be assessed, as teachers hold primary responsibility for what occurs within the classroom (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007). Inclusion requires the mainstream classroom teacher to make a commitment to provide equally for all students within their classroom. Teachers are expected to alter or broaden their teaching methods to accommodate students with additional needs in an inclusive classroom. This expectation contributes to a variety of perceptions toward inclusive classroom policies, which then influences the success of inclusion itself (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010).

Teachers' attitudes towards the success of inclusion depend heavily on the support provided for the teachers (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007). Anderson, Klassen and Georgiou investigated teacher perspectives toward inclusion, identifying that teachers believe that the best forms of support come with teacher's aides or teacher-assistant time rather than through their own practice. They also found that teachers believe that inclusion is a philosophy that is appealing but does not work if the policies are implemented without sufficient support. Furthermore, teachers consider the leadership of the principal and the active involvement of education departments as essential factors in providing support for teachers involved in implementing inclusion (Horne & Timmons, 2009). Teachers believe that a proactive principal facilitates the communication between mainstream classroom teachers and special education teachers (Horne & Timmons, 2009). This communication is imperative for mainstream teachers as they are able to obtain support and advice that will guide their future practice.

Teachers feel they need to be provided with ongoing training in special needs when they are involved in an inclusive classroom (Horne & Timmons, 2009). Horne and Timmons conducted a survey researching teachers' perceptions of inclusion. They identified that unless a teacher thoroughly understands the disability of the student(s) in their classroom they may not feel they are successfully able to meet their needs. Conversely, if teachers were provided with the ongoing special education training they feel they require, they would be able to acquire the necessary competencies needed to effectively teach students with special needs.

When teachers are faced with the responsibility of an inclusive classroom, they are required to provide for a range of students with differing needs. This requires the teacher to develop a program that will appropriately address the needs of the special education student (Forlin, 2001). This can create the feeling that teachers are solely focusing on the student with special needs (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007) and neglecting the needs of the mainstream students within their class community. From Forlin's (2001) survey data, it was established that 89% of teachers surveyed believed their ability to successfully teach mainstream students was compromised by having a child with a disability within their classroom. Conversely, teachers who have adequate training in special education consider themselves accepting of inclusion, as they have more confidence and knowledge about inclusion (Hsien, Brown & Bortoli, 2009). This suggests that support, in terms of expanded teacher training, can provide the positive attitudes and confidence for a teacher that is needed to successfully implement an inclusive classroom.

Anderson, Klassen and Georgiou (2007) also found that teachers believe that regular students become more understanding and knowledgeable of disorders and disabilities when they are involved in an inclusive classroom environment. They also

observed that students with disabilities gain social skills, behavioural skills and work standards from the modelling provided by the other students. This is an important factor for students with AS, as they significantly lack social skills and are often considered inappropriate or naughty. Conversely, teachers also commented that "benefits exist but mainstream students do not become tolerant of students who disrupt the class year after year" (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007, p.138). This disruptive behaviour and a lack of discipline are considered to cause teachers stress, even more so than a lack of resources or student capabilities (Forlin, 2001).

Some researchers (for example, Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007; Forlin, 2001) found that a major issue for regular classroom teachers is time. Teachers feel they do not have enough time to successfully plan to meet all student outcomes, believing that an excessive amount of time is needed to prepare for all the individual student needs. When working within an inclusive classroom, the majority of their time is spent on working with a small number of students or planning to cover the needs of that small number of students (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007). By devoting a huge amount of their allocated work time for students with disabilities, mainstream students are affected, as the level of quality in the work they are provided with is lowered (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007). This notion emphasises why teachers feel their ability to teach mainstream students is lowered when involved in an inclusive classroom (Forlin, 2001). As an inclusive classroom involves more preparation, organisation and, ultimately, time, teachers are often faced with work overload and become highly stressed (Forlin, 2001). This work overload can be pinpointed at the notion of implementing an inclusive classroom without sufficient training in the area and resources to assist that implementation.

Asperger's syndrome and inclusion

In order for a student to successfully become a member of the school community they must positively interact with their peers, teachers and administrative staff (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008). This necessity creates tension for students with AS, as they lack the ability to understand the subtle communication protocols of the school environment (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008). Considering this, teachers need to provide AS students with sufficient support and understanding (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008). This need for understanding and support, along with Forlin's (2001) finding that 70% of classroom teachers lack formal training in special education or inclusive education, highlights the need for teachers to be provided with the training they need in order to provide successfully for students with AS.

The lack of training provided for established teachers can lead to poor teaching practice, which often exacerbates problems for students with AS. Students with AS may receive punishment for an act that was perceived by the teacher as wrong but, in the eyes of the AS student, was appropriate. These children may be punished for acts that they do not understand are wrong, such as rolling around on the classroom floor yelling out inappropriate words whilst the teacher is reading a story. If "this occurs a cycle of escalating behavioural difficulties, ineffective teacher responses and increasing student−teacher hostility may develop" (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008 pp.35−36), with the confidence of the student and the teacher dropping accordingly.

Furthermore, students with AS are often blamed for their lack of social understanding and for creating stressful situations. Understanding that students with AS have a developmental disorder that dictates and influences their behaviour is the most important concept when engaging with a child with AS (Fine and Myers, 2004). In order to avoid hostile situations and become more understanding of the condition, teachers, for the sake of the students, the students' parents, the teachers themselves and the school, need to be provided with the proper training that will allow them to successfully understand and meet the needs of students with AS.

Teaching strategies and practices that assist students with Asperger's syndrome

In order to successfully teach students with AS or other disabilities teachers need to extend their training and professional development, often provided through workshops. Sue Larkey, a workshop specialist, has a Masters degree in special needs education and provides regular workshops for teachers who wish to further their professional development in AS and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (Larkey, n.d). Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT) also offers professional development workshops to extend teacher training in the area of AS and ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) (ASPECT, 2012). The New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) is responsible for informing the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) about additional professional development teachers need to undergo (NSWIT, 2007). Teachers need to be proactive in gaining professional development, as the DEC may not be aware of the additional professional development teachers need within their school.

Additional training and professional development in the area of AS provides teachers with increased self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to successfully teach students with AS in the inclusive classroom setting (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008). This additional training also provides teachers with the skills to manage the AS student's behaviour, allowing the teacher to provide more quality teaching time (Hinton, Sofronoff & Sheffield, 2008).

Children with AS require special needs and adjustments made to the classroom environment. Bullard and Lock (2004) and Safran (2002) discuss several strategies that can be implemented within the classroom to establish a successful learning plan to satisfy the AS students. These suggestions along with additional training and professional development in the area of AS, will allow the teacher to optimise the quality learning occurring within their classroom.

- AS students need to have a clear understanding of what is going to happen throughout the day. Organisation within the classroom is vital for students with AS (Winter, 2003), who also require the teacher to be consistent with what is supposed to occur. If the teacher is not consistent with the daily or planned routine this can create a stressful, confused situation for a student with AS. If changes in the regular routine are going to occur the teacher needs to prepare the students for the change by thoroughly and repetitively explaining upcoming changes (Safran, 2002).

- When planning group work or arranged seating, AS students' needs merit extra consideration. Due to their obscure social behaviour, these students are often subjected to bullying (Fine & Myers, 2004; Safran, 2002), so careful thought should be given when planning group assignments to avoid AS students being placed in groups with their bullies. These students should be placed into groups with well-behaved and studious students who will provide the AS student with a model of appropriate group-work behaviour. When organising seating, close to the front of the classroom is suggested to maintain eye contact and concentration (Fine & Myers, 2004). Conversely, students with AS do enjoy an open area around their seat, as it is less likely that inappropriate behaviour will be noticeable by the classroom teacher and their peers (Fine & Myers, 2004).

- Due to their lack of ability to understand social cues and protocols, students with AS often become stressed and disorderly when they are faced with a demanding social situation. These demanding social situations occur often within the school environment, with assemblies, excursions or even peer interaction (Safran, 2002). The teacher needs to ensure that they provide the student with the support or escape that they need. Safran (2002) suggests the idea of headphones or ear plugs to calm the students. If this sort of stressed reaction occurs within the classroom, Bullard and Lock (2004) suggest providing the student with their own free-time station where they can escape. This station should be filled with things that they enjoy doing or are interested in.

- Although their absorbing interests can be used as an escape or a negotiation tool, it is discouraged for the student to neglect social interaction in order to feed their interest (Safran, 2002). The teacher is encouraged to promote social interaction by using the AS student's prescribed interest as a means of group work or peer involvement. An example of this is when a student who is highly interested in the internet becomes assigned as the classroom researcher. This can foster social interaction by having the student explain their research to individual students or the class body (Safran, 2002).

- Another technique used to support the AS student's lack of social skills is to teach the mainstream students how to interact and care for the student with AS, both academically and socially (Bullard & Lock, 2004). By providing the mainstream students with the ability to understand and be compassionate toward students with AS, group work and interaction will become easier to organise and manage. Teaching can occur through role-playing, discussions and modelling (Bullard & Lock, 2004). This process can successfully promote inclusion (Bullard & Lock, 2004), while the child with AS will benefit from more people knowing thoroughly about their condition, as it allows people to manage and understand their behaviour more easily and the whole environment is more cooperative (Attwood, 2000).

- Despite the lack of social understanding, students with AS exhibit an average or above-average intelligence (Schnur, 2005). Considering this, if the teacher can manage the obvious social barriers, the AS students will academically flourish. In order for these AS students to academically achieve, they need to be provided with the right type of information. Students with AS "have difficulty with auditory input", (Barnhill, 2001, p.263), they interpret and understand visual information easier. "It is speculated that these individuals process visual and auditory information, but they may have difficulty processing both types of information concurrently" (Barnhill, 2001, p.263). Unfortunately, academic material is often presented in oral form within the classroom setting. This difficulty with auditory information needs to be considered fully when planning in order to make the information comprehensible for the students with AS. A means of providing visual stimulus is a concept called comic strip conversations. Comic strip conversations was developed by Carol Gray (1996, cited in Attwood, 2000) and involves drawing basic pictures that complement what a person is trying to convey to a student with AS (Attwood, 2000). This is an important strategy for classroom teachers as they can simply and easily create visual stimulus for instructions and directions.

These strategies and suggestions for teaching and supporting students with AS, will be easier to implement with the theoretical understanding acquired through ongoing professional development and training in either special education or inclusive education. This necessary training will provide current teachers with the theoretical knowledge to help them improve and sustain a successful inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

For students with AS, inclusive classroom options are becoming the popular education choice. The teachers involved in inclusive education options ultimately feel they need more training and support to successfully implement an inclusive classroom. This requested training, would allow educators to be better equipped and more confident when educating students with disabilities, such as AS. Teachers need to provide students with AS support that will allow them to flourish socially and academically in the classroom and school setting. Fortunately, at least in New South Wales, a compulsory component of pre-service training is directed at special needs. Therefore, the teachers who are currently practicing are the teachers in need of the training, which should be provided as a mandatory aspect of their professional development. Ultimately, teachers practising now need to be provided with the support and training that they need to feel confident and knowledgeable about teaching in an inclusive classroom for the policy of inclusion to work successfully.

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