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Professional Development Needs for General Education Teachers to Educate Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify areas in which educational leadership could aid in preparing general education teachers to educate children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). A needs assessment was conducted through a case study in a rural Missouri school district to identify the level of efficacy noted by teachers of various experience levels. Pre-service preparation and provided professional development were examined to identify ways in which educational leaders could further the knowledge base and effectiveness of general education teachers to teach students with ASD.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TO EDUCATE CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify areas in which educational leadership could aid in preparing general education teachers to educate children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). A needs assessment was conducted through a case study in a rural Missouri school district to identify the level of efficacy noted by teachers of various experience levels. Pre-service preparation and provided professional development were examined to identify ways in which educational leaders could further the knowledge base and effectiveness of general education teachers to teach students with ASD.

Manuscript

“In education, professional development is an essential component for teachers to remain relevant and effective” (Education Commission of the States, 2014). The purpose of this study was to identify areas of improvement for professional development in properly training general education teachers to educate children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This study identified a need for increased information on best practices strategies for general education teachers to use in their classrooms to educate children with ASD. Educational leaders can take this information and disseminate it into their current professional development plans to create a workforce ready to educate the growing population of students with ASD.

The three guiding research questions were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of regular education teachers in the areas of

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preservice preparation related to inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders?

2. What are the professional development experiences of regular education teachers in the areas of teaching strategies and collaboration pertaining to inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders?

3. What are the levels of efficacy experienced by regular education teachers in teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Through the use of a survey and open-ended questions, the participants identified areas of lacking expertise and knowledge of ASD. The participants were able to elaborate and share specific examples during the focus groups. These groups were comprised of third, fourth, and fifth grade educators with a variety of personal experiences to share. This article will focus on the conclusions gathered for research question two as they pertain to leadership implications for professional development planning.

Inclusion training is sparse for current educators. Educational leaders need to fill this void and properly train educators to correctly follow inclusion guidelines. In terms of preservice preparation concerning inclusion, one study stated, “special education teachers rated their efficacy, ability, understanding, and resources higher than general education teachers” (Buell et al., 1999, p. 1). Numerous studies point out the importance of educational leaders providing professional development opportunities for current educators in the area of inclusion (Forlin, 2007; Jung, 2007). This study identified areas of need for current educators to properly educate children with ASD and the leadership implications necessary to decrease these fissures of knowledge and expertise within the school setting.

Professional development in this study is defined as any training teachers receive facilitated through their school district or building principal to better the educational experience of their students.

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These teachers have already fulfilled all educational and preservice requirements to be certified in the teaching profession. The goal of “bridging the gap between inclusion and actual classroom practice” is paramount for professional development (Higginson & Chatfield, 2012, p.1).

Research question two focused on professional development experiences of the regular education teachers pertaining to inclusion of children with ASD. Survey question 18 asked participants to indicate methodologies they have received training on to use in their classrooms. Six current and relevant teaching strategies were listed with the option to list other methodologies being provided in the participants’ districts. The strategies included Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based Model (DIR), Discrete Trial Training (DTT), Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Social Stories, and Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped CHildren (TEACCH). Participants had the option to check all applicable strategies. Only 6 of the 16 participants chose to answer this question. The 3 who responded with “other” had the following responses: none, in services, and preservice University course. Overall, training in the six common methodologies is missing as noted by the response rates noted in Table 1.

The lacking information on proper teaching strategies for educating children with ASD is apparent from this study. Educational leaders can begin with these strategies to provide a knowledge base for their practicing educators in the form of professional development. Overall, an understanding of how adults learn and how to incorporate the best-practices for children with ASD into the classroom becomes the responsibility of district professionals and outside sources to supply this information and training (Jones, West, & Stevens, 2006; Mueller & Brewer, 2013). This article provides background information on the six current and researched-based strategies for educating children with ASD. This information can be utilized as a springboard for professional development planning.

Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based Model (DIR)

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This model focuses on “individual developmental needs; including social-emotional functioning, communication skills, thinking and learning processes, motor skills, body awareness, and attention span” (Ryan, et al., 2011). This model requires communication between the family and the school to get a full understanding of the individual child and his or her family. A crucial element to DIR is “floortime” (as cited in Ryan, et al., 2011). Floortime is a playtime experience which can be implemented at school and in the home and furthermore models proper social interactions. Training in this model requires educators to enter “the child’s world” by these close interactions (Ryan, et al., 2011, p. 61).

Discrete Trial Training (DTT)

In Discrete Trial Training (DTT), teachers ask students to complete a task and time is provided for the student to respond. Once the student responds, a consequence in the form of rewards or corrections is presented by the teacher; this consequence is followed with a break or pause before the next task is presented (Sicile-Kira, 2004). DTT consists of a “specific task (also called a trial) isolated and taught by being repeatedly presented to the student” (Ryan, et al., 2011, p. 60). Educating teachers on this discrete prompting requires the understanding of consistency; as trials are presented to the student, the teacher must be consistent until mastery of said task is mastered (Ryan, et al., 2011). This intense one-on-one strategy places DTT under the broader umbrella of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA).

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Sicile-Kira (2004) explained Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) as being “proven to be the most effective way to teach young children with ASDs” (p. 94). ABA is characterized by skills being presented in a step-by-step format where each next step builds upon the previous step (Sicile-Kira, 2004). ABA is a theory characterized by the “components of any behavior by an A-B-C model: the

antecedent to the behavior [A], the behavior itself [B], and the consequence [C]” (Ryan, et al., 2011, p. 60). Consistency is key for educators and the understanding of this intense one-on-one interaction which requires “constant feedback and correction of the child’s behavior” (Ryan, et al., 2011, p. 60).

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

A Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) refers to a communication facilitation strategy where students hold up pictures or specific sentences to interact with others. This strategy is easily implemented into a classroom for both academic and social means of communication; the cost to a district is minimal as materials can be made by the teacher working with the student (Sicile-Kira, 2004). Modeling is a key component to teacher training for proper implementation of PECS. The teacher must model the desired activity or response associated with the symbol or picture. These symbols and pictures must also be very natural to the environment and nature of the activity desired; continued modeling by the teacher reinforces the behavior to follow the symbol or picture provided (Ryan, et al., 2011).

Social Stories

Social Stories are used as an instructional strategy by creating stories “prepared in response to troubling situations” to prevent possible problems prior to the event or situation (Zager, 2005, p. 314). These stories can be composed by educators of children with ASD to prepare their students for day-to-day classroom activities or for field trips and various school activities which break the student from their normal daily routine. Training for educators includes training on writing social stories and social scripts (Zager, 2005).

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped CHildren (TEACCH)

TEACCH was developed by Eric Shopler in the 1970s as a type of parent and child treatment; however, it evolved into a collaboration between the home and school to create a “stress-free

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environment” catered to the individual needs of the specific student (Sicile-Kira, 2004, p. 133). The TEACCH environment focuses on “minimizing distractions and using highly predictable routines” to meet the needs of children with ASD (Samuels, 2007). A study conducted by Kantavong and Sivabaedya (2010), utilized TEACCH and PECS strategies to provide educators with ways to improve the learning of their students with ASD. These educators “agreed that their students improved their social skills by participating in group work and interacting positively with their friends” (Kantavong & Sivabaedya, 2010, p. 57-58). Kantavong and Sivabaedya (2010) concluded that the inclusion of TEACCH training provided the educators with a means for reflection on their current teaching practices and the inclusion of this new strategy. This reflection and growth benefits the educator and the students.

While research questions one and three identified experiences and efficacy of teachers, research question two focused on professional development. This analysis sought to identify gaps in knowledge of ASD and provide educational leaders this useful information to determine areas of future professional development needed by their school faculty. Furthermore, educational leaders know practicing teachers are arriving in their schools with limited preparation to properly educate the growing number of children with ASD. The need for additional professional development is critical. Increasing the confidence, understanding, and efficiency of regular educators through properly planned and implemented professional development opportunities is the charge set for current educational leaders.

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Table 1
Methodologies for which Training has been Received (N=6)

Response	Frequency	Percent
DIR	2	33.3%
Social Stories	1	16.7%
Other	3	50.0%