Appropriate Inclusive Practices for Children with Autism

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Abstract

Children with autism have unique needs, and providing them with an appropriate education in an inclusive environment requires collaboration between team members. There are extensive articles available to assist with the planning process; however, the most important source of information for educational planning for a child with autism remains the strengths and abilities of that child. This paper examines resources, guidelines, and specific examples that are available for educators to use, in collaborative methods, in order to ensure that an appropriate inclusive education is provided for a student who has been diagnosed with autism.

Preface

This article contains information about a 10-year-old girl, Izzy (a pseudonym). Izzy was diagnosed with autism at the age of 2. Izzy is in grade 5, and has had speech and language, occupational therapy, and autism specialist interventions from the age of diagnosis. Currently, Izzy completes at level classwork, which is heavily adapted to suit her unique learning needs. Specifically, Izzy does not like to do traditional paper/pencil work. Rather, she prefers to write on white boards, manipulate cut-up sentences, or Velcro letters and words. Additionally, Izzy completes most of her work outside of the classroom. When in the classroom, Izzy makes vocalizations, rocks back and forth, and does other similar stemming activities. Often, Izzy will leave the classroom to go to the quiet space that has been provided for her without adult permission or prompting.

The inclusive practices for a child with autism are determined by the specific strengths and needs of the child. Planning for the appropriate, inclusive education of a child with autism requires knowledge of inclusive policies, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and the specific complexities of the child. The needs and abilities of the student will determine the appropriate amount of inclusion within a mainstream classroom. Team collaborative efforts to create a comprehensive student profile will facilitate the creation of specific learning goals. These learning goals often include plans for self-regulation, transitioning, communication, and task completion. For these various reasons, appropriate inclusive practices for a child with autism will vary based on the specific needs and strengths of the individual child.

Inclusive Practices and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Appropriate inclusion of a child with ASD requires knowledge of inclusive practice and ASD, and a willingness to collaborate with others. Manitoba's philosophy of inclusion is a way of being that ensures all people feel "accepted, valued, and safe" (Province of Manitoba, 2017, para. 2). Autism is a neurological disorder, which includes symptoms such as difficulty communicating, interacting socially, and engaging in repetitive behaviours (Manitoba Education, 2005). The goal of educators then becomes ensuring that children who have difficulty communicating and interacting socially, and have unique repetitive behaviours, are provided with an education that enables them to feel accepted and valued for who they are.

Due to the extreme complexities that a student with ASD can present, Supporting Inclusive Schools: A Handbook for Resource Teachers in Manitoba Schools suggests working as a school team to determine the specific interventions and adaptations that a student may require for a successful inclusive education (Manitoba Education, 2014). Izzy (a pseudonym) is a child

with autism in this author's school. In addition to the school team that includes her classroom teacher, support staff, and her mother, Izzy's team also consists of an occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech and language pathologist, and autism specialist. All members collaborate in order to determine appropriate, specific goals for Izzy. Working together, the team members apply the policies of inclusion to Izzy's unique needs. Like Izzy, each child who has been diagnosed with autism will present a variety of unique needs, and it is important that all specialists involved with the child contribute to an appropriate educational plan.

Student-Specific Profiles

A specific student profile that is created collaboratively with team members results in a solid inclusive education plan for a student with autism (Brodzeller, Ottley, Jung, & Coogle, 2018). Every child with autism is different, with his/her own unique needs. To have worked with a child with autism provides the experience of solely working with that one child, which cannot be generalized to all children with autism (Manitoba Education, 2005). This uniqueness makes the student profile imperative in the effective planning for a student with autism. The student profile ensures that the team members truly get to know the child, because general strategies, while an important starting point, are not always sufficient (Anglim, Prendeville, & Kinsella, 2018). A student profile can mark the student's abilities in the areas of social skills, communication, repetitive behaviours, sensory, anxiety, and other medical conditions (Manitoba Education, 2005). A close examination of these abilities fosters the creation of a purposeful education plan. The collaboration involved in creating a functional student profile is imperative in determining the process of inclusion for the child (Hedegaard-Soerensen, Jensen, & Tofteng, 2018).

A student-specific plan fosters the creation of appropriate student goals, and it is important that the school team evaluate these goals on a regular basis (Smith, 2012). In Izzy's case, appropriate goals are chosen based on her specific needs and strengths; however, the school team struggles to implement them because Izzy will often refuse to participate. When presented with a new activity, Izzy will leave the table, pace the classroom, and make loud vocalizations. Occasionally, Izzy will take the activity, rip it up, and throw it at the adult who is trying to present it. It is important to evaluate student goals in order to ensure that the student becomes engaged in learning activities, and that the student progresses in accordance with his/her learning goals (Smith, 2012). Inclusion will not be successful if the child is simply sharing a space with mainstream learners, and not working on specific goals (Lupart & Webber, 2012). The student must be shown how to become engaged in his/her education, and progress with learning goals (Smith, 2012). Izzy's school team has found that incorporating her preferred activities into her academics is the easiest way to promote engagement. Izzy loves shopkins, and often will complete a task if there is a shopkin picture attached to it. Inclusion becomes realistic for Izzy when the school team recognizes her motivators and plans accordingly. Therefore, effective inclusive practices will occur when the student-specific profile is used in a purposeful manner to ensure that the child with ASD is engaged in his/her education.

Appropriate Inclusion

There are many benefits of inclusion; however, it is important that the collaborative team recognizes that, for some students, full inclusion may not be appropriate (Smith, 2012). Inclusion can help to teach empathy and acceptance, and can enable children with autism to experience social interactions with similar-aged role models (French & French, 2018; Smith, 2012). The school team must determine whether the benefits of inclusion exceed the stressors that are placed on the student by being in the mainstream classroom (Prizant, 2015). If appropriate, students with autism can be in a mainstream classroom for portions of a day, and in a separate learning environment as needed (Manitoba Education, 2005). Prizant (2015) suggested that if the student spends a great deal of time socializing outside of school, then

there is no need to include that student in the mainstream classroom if this evokes a large amount of stress. The school team can consider the aspects of the student profile in order to determine how often a student with autism should be working within an inclusive classroom.

Children with autism often struggle with self-regulation, which can make transitions, communication, and task completion difficult (Smith, 2012). Self-regulation is defined as how effectively a person recovers from a stressful situation (Shanker, 2017). The regular school day is filled with situations that can be stressful, and some children are affected by these situations more than others. The primary caregiver at school plays an important role in facilitating the steps of self-regulation. Dr. Stuart Shanker (2017) has identified five essential steps in promoting self-regulation for children. The first step is to understand what the signs of stress look like for the child, and attempt to alter the child's response to the stress. An attentive adult will notice a slight change in the child when he/she becomes stressed, and may be able to suggest an alternative behaviour. The second step is to recognize what is causing the child stress, which leads to the third step of reducing the amount of stress the child is experiencing. Izzy often experiences stress from the volume level in a classroom. The louder the classroom becomes, the louder she becomes. Izzy will ask to leave the classroom, or simply walk out, which immediately reduces the amount of stress she is experiencing. Once out of the classroom, Izzy needs a few moments of stemming in order to become regulated; then she is usually able to continue with her expected activities. The fourth step is to reflect on the situation and plan how to prevent it in the future. It is not always possible to eliminate stress from a child's life completely. However, if the child is having a difficult day, the team or primary caregiver can make the appropriate decision to reduce stress. The final step is to teach the child how to return to being calm after a stressful experience. For Izzy, this typically involves a preferred activity such as watching the fish tank, looking at a book, or receiving a tight hug from her trusted caregiver. Once she is calm, she and her caregiver can decide whether they are ready to return to the classroom. Because children with ASD often struggle with self-regulation, the adult is integral to ensuring the successful completion of these five steps of self-regulation.

Specific tasks, such as transitions, communication, and task completion, can cause dys-regulation in a child (Smith, 2012). These are essential parts of a school day, so it is important to teach children strategies to deal with these stressors. Visual schedules can be very beneficial in helping students to have successful transitions and to complete the required tasks (Brodzeller et al., 2017). Similarly, visual cue cards and video or visual social stories can be used to model for students with ASD how to communicate effectively with peers and teachers (Brozeller et al., 2017). Antecedent behaviours, such as "priming" the student with visual or written schedules so they know what to expect, can also help to keep a child regulated (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 72). It is important to have an awareness that transitions, communication, and task completion can cause dys-regulation, so that proper interventions can be put in place to support the student.

Conclusion

There is not one specific practice to follow in order to implement an effective education plan for a child with ASD. Each student with ASD is unique, with his/her own strengths and challenges. As a result of these unique strengths and challenges, it takes a team of people to plan effectively for the inclusive education of a child with ASD. There are policies and general procedures to follow as a guide, and the student needs to be at the centre of the planning. Inclusion does not mean that the child should be forced to be in a mainstream classroom if being in the classroom causes large amounts of stress. It does mean, however, that the child should have the opportunity to learn the skills needed to reduce or manage stressful situations, while experiencing a purposeful, appropriate education. The unique needs of a child with ASD will chart the inclusive education course that is most appropriate for educators to follow.

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