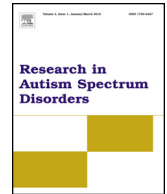




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Factors influencing the educational placement of students with autism spectrum disorders



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ABSTRACT

Due to legal and therapeutic reasons, children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are often educated in general education settings. As such, it is important to understand the variables that might affect a student's placement in inclusive education settings, simultaneously considering student variables (e.g., disability label) and teacher variables (e.g., knowledge of autism). Investigators experimentally manipulated the cognitive ability and diagnostic label of a student with ASD, characteristics and asked first grade teachers to provide their opinion on the student's educational placement. Results suggested that cognitive ability, but not label, significantly impacted decision making. The results hold important implications for special education decision making as well as training for educators.

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1. Introduction

For both legal and therapeutic reasons, students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are increasingly educated in general education settings alongside their typically developing peers. Special education law mandates that all children be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE; [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act \[IDEIA\], 2004](#)), implying that children with disabilities should be educated with typical peers and given access to the general curriculum to the extent that harm is not increased and access to learning is not decreased for any student. Litigation involving the education of students with ASD has led experts to recommend that school districts employ a variety of education professionals who have considerable expertise in ASD ([Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005](#)). Moreover, ASD assessment should lead to thoughtful programming which occurs in inclusive settings to the extent that it is appropriate ([Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003](#)). Indeed, there are several important assumed benefits of educating students with ASD in the general education setting, including (a) higher academic expectations, (b) access to peer models of social behavior, (c) improved self-concept and reduced stigma, and (d) development of positive attitudes by typical peers ([Mesibov & Shea, 1996](#)).

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Many share the view that children with ASD should be included in the general education curriculum to the greatest extent possible (Mastergeorge, Rogers, Corbett, & Solomon, 2003; National Research Council, 2001); however, due to the vast array of services available and the heterogeneity of symptom presentation, LRE environments for students with ASD may best be conceptualized as a continuum of educational placements and services (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). In this way, students with certain relevant features (e.g., low cognitive ability) who need a great deal of support may be educated in more restrictive settings, such as self-contained classrooms, and others, who may demonstrate higher intelligence or received early intervention (Harris & Handleman, 2000), may be educated in general education settings. It is suggested that this continuum of placements allows for practice of social or functional skills (Mesibov & Shea, 1996), protection against negative perceptions and stigma (Jordan, 2005), and proper services for highly emotional and reactive students (Williams, 1995).

Some studies have investigated the effects of inclusion for students with ASD. Boutot and Bryant (2005) reported on 10 students with ASD who were educated in general education classrooms for at least half of their school day. Analyses suggested that the students were no different than peers on a variety of social status measures. Other investigators have found that students with ASD in inclusive settings are viewed positively by both their teachers and their peers (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003), whereas other studies suggest that attitudes of peers toward a child with ASD is less positive than those toward a typically developing child (Campbell, Ferguson, Herzinger, Jackson, & Marino, 2004; Swaim & Morgan, 2001).

An investigation of social networks within classrooms that contained a student with ASD produced a complex picture (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). According to self-report measures, students with ASD do not perceive themselves as lonely or isolated; however, typically developing peers in the classroom rated students with ASD as less socially accepted than students with ASD. This result suggests the potential for stigmatization of students with ASD given the discrepancy in self-perception and perception of others. To explain this complex social environment, Ochs and colleagues (2001) have suggested that some behaviors by peers and teachers promote social inclusion for students with ASD (e.g., patience, disclosure of disability) and other behaviors (e.g., rejection, scorn) contribute to poor social experiences and outcomes.

Soukop, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, and Bovaird (2007) reported on the inclusion experiences of 19 elementary school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, two with ASD. For the purpose of their analyses, the authors grouped students by the amount of time they spent in the general education setting: high inclusion (>75% of the school day), medium inclusion (50–75%), and low inclusion (<50%). Results suggested that students in the high and medium inclusion groups spent more time working on grade level materials and goals. On the other hand, students in the low inclusion group were more likely to have spent time working on specific IEP objectives. A similar investigation found that students with ASD made greater gains on adaptive behaviors when placed in specialty schools for ASD as opposed to an inclusion setting (Reed, Osborne, & Waddington, 2012).

Given the variety of positive and negative findings regarding inclusion for students with ASD, consideration of the variables that are related to general education placement is warranted. In an experimental design, Myles and Simpson (1989) provided general education teachers with brief descriptions of students with disabilities, manipulating both the disability type and diagnostic label, and then asked teachers to recommend whether the student should be educated in a regular classroom setting. While not specific to ASD, authors found that neither classification nor label resulted in teachers suggesting the student should not be educated in regular classrooms. On the other hand, given the challenge of educating students with ASD in general education settings and the significant range in ability and severity for such students, other authors have identified additional variables that predict educational placement.

Consistently, researchers have found that cognitive ability is highly associated with regular class placement for students with ASD. For example, children with higher ability at the time they began an intensive behavioral treatment were more likely to be placed in general education settings at follow-up six years later (Harris & Handleman, 2000). Likewise, a retrospective analysis of 76 children with an ASD diagnosis suggested that, as cognitive ability increases, the likelihood of general education placement significantly increases (Eaves & Ho, 1997). Other important variables related to placement appear to be academic ability (Eaves & Ho, 1997) and age at which intervention begins (Harris & Handleman, 2000), whereas social abilities are less emphasized in placement decisions (White, Scahill, Klin, Koenig, & Volkmar, 2007).

Once placed in inclusive settings, several educator variables may contribute to the student's success in the classroom. For example, in a sample of school psychologists, Brubaker and colleagues (2010) found that psychologists' beliefs about autism, while generally accurate, did not correlate with the treatment acceptability of a number of common classroom practices and strategies. Similarly, Segall and Campbell (2012) found that, while education professionals rated the attitude of the staff (e.g., general education teachers, administrators) as an important factor for successful inclusion for students with ASD, participant attitudes were not significantly correlated with awareness of practice options available to support students with ASD. On the other hand, greater knowledge of autism, in terms of symptomatology, etiology and treatment, was associated with increased awareness and experience with classroom practices. Other studies have found that special education teachers are more likely to view the attitude of the staff as more important to success than general education teachers (McGregor & Campbell, 2001), and, in general, experts suggest that staff attitudes are crucial to appropriate implementation and positive outcomes (Burack, Root, & Zigler, 1997). Attitudes and beliefs of principals have also been found to be related to placement recommendations for students with ASD (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008).

In addition to attitudes, the presence of support staff (i.e., paraprofessionals) has been viewed as a potential factor for successful inclusion (Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). Some studies suggest that such support staff may prove a hindrance

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