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Jennifer Lee Suppo
Seton Hill University

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Elucidation of Effective Professional Development Experiences: Addressing Inclusion for Students with Autism

About the Author(s)

Dr. Jennifer Suppo is an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director of Special Education at Seton Hill University where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in special education including the online graduate autism endorsement program. She has taught in both autism support and life skills middle school classrooms. Suppo has published articles on topics in autism and related disorders.

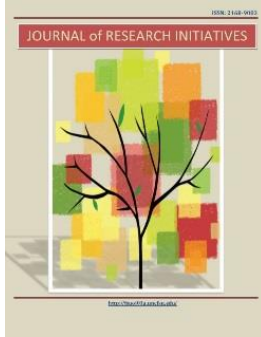
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Special Education, General Education, Inclusion, Autism, Professional Development

ELUCIDATION OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES: ADDRESSING INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

Jennifer Lee Suppo, Seton Hill University

Abstract



Open interviews were conducted with a special education teacher and a general education teacher. The overall guiding question was to provide elucidation of what is needed in a professional development program to meet the needs of both the general and special education teachers who teach children with a diagnosis of autism in an inclusive setting. Overall, the themes of diversity, knowledge and collaboration emerged as important variables for professional development experiences. Furthermore, in-depth knowledge and flexibility arose as important qualities of the facilitator of a professional development experience. Implications are set forth for the expansion of the study and additional research on what is inclusion.

Introduction

Let me begin with how I became interested in the topic of professional development for both general and special educators of children diagnosed with autism. The foundation of my interest stems from several different personal life experiences. I am first and foremost a parent of a child diagnosed with autism. I use the additional wording in the preceding sentence because it is not just the first experience it is the most important one to me. The importance of this topic is not a fleeting fascination. It is a quest to help my daughter and those who are like her. Unlike the education system that searches for equality, I search for “best.” My search for “best” continued as a middle school teacher of children diagnosed with autism. Each day I was presented with the challenge of educating my students in the classroom and helping them to be successful in the general education classroom. Moreover, my mother has been an educator for over twenty-six years, the first thirteen years were in special education and within those past twenty-six years, we have had many conversations discussing what information teachers need to meet the needs of children diagnosed with autism both in general and special education classrooms and how to relay that information to the educators.

Within these professional and personal experiences, I have gained some insight into an area of concern for both general and special education teachers. With the movement towards inclusion of children diagnosed with autism, both general and special education teachers are questioning how they can best meet the needs of children diagnosed with autism both inside and outside of the resource room and how teachers can work together to meet these needs. The focus of my study is to explore how I can create a professional development experience that will address both general educators and special educators’ needs in supporting inclusion for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder.

I believe that by human exploration of the problem of integrating students with autism in a general education classroom, we can begin to see patterns emerging that will guide our path to the elucidation of effective professional development experiences addressing inclusion for students with autism. I believe that through human exploration of the topic, starting with interviews of some of the individuals that inclusion effects, we can begin to construct meaningful

professional development experiences. Through the parental lens, at times I may look only towards the needs of the students, overshadowing the needs of the educator. However, I must construct a framework of belief that the two are one and that the needs of the educator are a direct result of the needs of the students, to provide an unbiased articulation of the educator's views. I triangulated the results of the interviews with the results of the observations to attempt to remove the bias from my interpretation of the interviews. Moreover, I examine the results of my findings alongside the findings of several other pieces of relevant literature to provide an additional interpretive lens to my findings.

I have chosen three studies to provide an additional interpretive lens to my findings. West, Jones, and Stevens (2006) examines fourteen teachers of students with low incidence disabilities attending graduate courses and examines their thoughts on both personal learning experiences and continued professional development. I chose this particular article to review for several reasons. First, the article examined teachers and their insight as to what they found to be effective for them within their own professional development learning experiences. Second, this article explored teachers of students with low incidence disabilities, who like students with a diagnosis of autism, present unique teaching challenges to educators.

West et al. (2006) use the theoretical approach of appreciative inquiry (AI). Some relevant themes emerged from this study relating to professional development. One theme that emerged was the relevancy of learning from others, for example, other parents, students, and colleagues. Additionally, the researchers discovered that teachers valued ongoing continual collaboration. Moreover, teachers valued mediated learning where the mediator had the ability to motivate, which included the mediator's expertise in the content of the information. The author's (West et al., 2006) justify the choice of conducting a qualitative study by their theoretical approach with the goal of understanding what is success and wherein lies the potential for professional development within the vision of practicing teachers. I believe the article provides a good basis for examining what is effective in professional learning experiences. The information was useful to me in providing a basis of what teachers find effective in professional development, and it provides a lens of which to examine teacher interview data.

The article by Dymond, Gilson, and Myran (2007) investigates school and community-based services for children with autism and makes recommendations based on their findings for improving those services in the state of Virginia. They examined the data from 886 surveys of parents of children with ASD living in the state of Virginia. The survey was to examine perceptions of parents of children with ASD about available services and recommendation on how to improve the services. An advisory panel composed of 20 stakeholders from across Virginia that had expertise in autism created the questions on the survey. Data was analyzed using a mixed method of qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis. The authors used the qualitative approach to examine patterns that emerged from the data. Dymond et al. then followed this qualitative approach with a quantitative approach to verify the finding by determining an unduplicated count of the frequency and percentage of respondents who provided a recommendation within each theme because sometimes within a theme a related response within the same theme that could be coded in more than one category.

Dymond et al. (2007) found that more and better services were needed for children with ASD. The authors made recommendations to improve services, train an individual that works with children with ASD, increase the funding for services, staff development and research, and create appropriate school placements for children with ASD. The information provided in this

study provides suggestions to make effective changes in services for children with ASD. The findings gave me a glimpse through a parental lens such as my own as to what is needed in the area of services, which includes staff development and school placement for children with ASD.

The article by Coffey and Obringer (2004) explore possible supports that could be used to educate and socialize school-aged children with autism spectrum disorder. The authors were exploring possible educational and community supports to help individuals with autism succeed in both educational and community settings by interviewing the parents who have two sons on the autism spectrum. The family had two children with autism, and the authors acknowledged this as a rare phenomenon; however, they considered the family to have successfully integrated both children into their school and community. Because of the families success in integrating their children into both the school and community they believed they could obtain useful information to serve as perhaps one model of inclusion for students with autism. Using a semi-structured interview with each parent, the authors discovered emerging themes for school, and community inclusion that the parents agreed on and the authors found areas of disagreement. The authors provide a base of information to which others can use and build upon in future research. I believe it is to be assumed by the reader that educators need to look to the families for the answers as to what leads to successful inclusion in school and community for students diagnosed with autism.

Coffey and Obringer (2004) display their compatible and divergent themes in written bulleted form. Each bullet contains a brief description of the information the authors obtained through the interview. The information was then placed in the category of areas of disagreement or areas of agreement. Based on this information the authors make some suggestions to promote successful inclusion of children with autism in school and the community. The authors make many conclusions based on the interviews with the two parents. A few examples are encouraging home visits by teachers, having a small class size, utilizing university students for community and academic support, and peer group support.

In my study, I examine professional development as a means to meet the needs of educators who teach children diagnosed with autism. I want to examine the needs of educators in a general education classroom and a special education classroom. I want to consider both how they work independently of each other and how they can work together to meet the needs of their students. In no way will this be an exhausted examination of the topic; however, I hope that it will lead me to a better understanding of the needs of educators and hopefully a continuation of research in this area of study. Additionally, my overall goal is to provide administrators, educators, service providers, universities and parents with information that will allow them to create successful professional development experiences that cover the information needed to provide successful inclusion experiences for students diagnosed with autism and to provide the information in a way that supports ongoing professional collaboration.

Guiding Questions

The overall guiding question is what is needed in a professional development program to meet the needs of both the general and special education teacher who teach children with autism in an inclusive setting?

From this question, two subtopic questions emerge:

1. What information do the teachers need to ascertain?
2. How this information is best taught to the teachers to aid in retention and generalization to the classroom?

Methods

Subjects

I purposively selected one participant from a general education classroom who includes student(s) with autism in their classroom and one special education teacher who assists the student(s) and the teacher in educating a student with autism in an inclusive setting. I chose one school to obtain a sense of how the participants in this organization work in unison to obtain a better understanding of this phenomenon. The criterion for participant selection was as follows. The teacher-participants were fully credentialed and employed within the school of study. I have chosen this school because it includes students with a diagnosis of autism within the general education classes and with general education teachers. I have chosen a small sample size to strive for a thorough gathering of information and not a superficial overview. The total number of teachers to be included in this study is two.

The special education teacher supports students with varied disabilities in the fourth grade. He has been teaching for almost twenty years. He started his career as a high school math teacher. After being inspired by working with students with exceptional needs, he went back to school to obtain a master's degree in special education. He has been a special education teacher for thirteen years. He assists students with special needs in both the general education classroom and the special education classroom.

The general education teacher teaches fourth grade. She has been teaching for almost eight years. She started her career working in another state; however, she has been employed by this school district for three years. She has always taught general education classes and currently teaches fourth grade. Her classroom is an inclusive classroom that incorporates both students with and without exceptional needs.

Setting

The location is a public school district that has four elementary centers and is located just outside of a large city. This district serves approximately 25,000 residents. The overall school district population is approximately 3,500 pupils, and over 400 of the students are located at the elementary center where the interviews were conducted; approximately 15% of the school district receives special education services. The elementary schools house students grades K-5. I purposely selected this setting because of my familiarity with the school and because of past observations conducted in the school.

Procedures

I chose to include the data collection technique of observation as well as open-ended interviews. The data obtained was recorded, transcribed and coded to look for themes. Open-ended interviews were used to obtain information from the point of view of the participants. The method of an open-ended interview allowed themes to emerge naturally and helped dissipate a predisposal to a theme that might occur in the case of a survey. Each teacher was interviewed individually in a private room without students or other educators. An additional method of passive participation observation to examine teachers interacting with students, was also utilized. This method of observation was used to validate the needs expressed by the educators and to open up new themes to explore in the area of professional development for educators of students diagnosed with autism.

The interviews was recorded and transcribed on to a spreadsheet. Afterwards, an analysis of the transcribed data and labeling of the data were coded according to themes that emerged from the information collected during both interviews. Observation information was compared

with the information obtained through the interviews to observe if there was a correlation between the two sources of data. Lastly, the information obtained through the interviews and the observations were examined alongside three purposely-selected relevant journal articles to compare and contrast the findings.

Results

From the analysis of both the general education teacher and the special education teacher, I have arrived at the following categories for what is needed in a professional development program to meet the needs of both the general and special education teacher who teach children with autism in an inclusive setting regarding the information teachers need to ascertain:

Diversity

The first category is diversity. Both the general education teacher and the special education teacher corroborate that the needs of students with a diagnosis of autism vary greatly from student to student. The diversity of the needs of the individual with a diagnosis of autism makes it a requirement for a professional development experience to include both the recognition of this diversity and the differentiation of the techniques and strategies taught throughout the professional development experience.

The special education teacher said, “What works for one kid may be the opposite of what works for another.” He sees the wide range of needs between individuals with ASD. Additionally, he related that students with ASD sometimes have a difference in the processing of information. Furthermore, “if they don’t make good eye contact (students with ASD) they (the teachers) may not think the child is listening to them.” He believes that any training provided on educating students with autism would have to cover all students on the autism spectrum.

The general education teacher has had many students with autism included in her classroom over the years and acknowledges the differences of the needs from student to student. Additionally, she sees the diversity in the use of supports by students with ASD. She said that students diagnosed with autism “are so different in their needs and so there is not a one size fits all solution or strategy.”

Knowledge

The second category that emerged from the analysis of the interviews is knowledge. The type of knowledge needed is as diverse as the students this knowledge supports. The knowledge sought by both the general education teacher and the special education teacher will depend on the needs of their individual students, which relates back to the diversity seen within the autism spectrum.

The special education teacher spoke throughout the interview in a broad way about knowledge. He discusses the need for knowledge of effective strategies, for example, he said, “they’re (the general education teachers) are good at pairing written and oral directions.” Additionally, he conveys the necessity for educators to be knowledgeable when and when not to assist a student with autism. He said, “We (as educators) want to know when to help” because “a lot of times I’m prone to give too much help.” He revealed that the general education teachers are open to working with children with ASD and they will ask a lot of questions, and they try a lot of the strategies they see him use in class.

The general education teacher also communicated the need for knowledge. She revealed the multiple strategies educators need to be knowledgeable on to be effective educators of a student with ASD, for example, she reported that some students need, “manipulatives for calculations.” Furthermore, she revealed that not only do educators need knowledge of strategies,

they also need knowledge of the individual students, for example, she said, “As a classroom teacher, all of your students are new to you each year, and you are trying to learn all of their needs, and when you have someone with special needs it is helpful just talking to someone who knows their needs and can give some pointers.” She said much of the knowledge general education teachers obtain is through working with the special education teachers.

Collaboration

Educators seek knowledge of autism, both because of the diversity of students with ASD and because of the wide range of strategies that can be effective for educating students with ASD. In analyzing the feedback from the educators, the category of collaboration has emerged. This category is seen throughout the categories of diversity and knowledge; however, it encompasses a much wider reach than just collaboration of the general education teacher with the special education teacher.

The special education teacher discussed collaborating with the general education teacher. He reported that general educators work with him and use many of the strategies he uses to help a child with ASD. He also conveyed the need for good communication with the parents, for example, he said teachers “require a lot of communication with the parents” and teachers need to “keep that open dialogue.”

The general education teachers discussed collaboration as well. She relates the need to work with support staff, for example, having a paraeducator “help with making the extra manipulatives” and working with the students using a planner. She also reveals the need for educators to work with companies that create the curriculum that is used in schools. This is so that the differentiation of supports, for example, visuals supports that support the text, is created in conjunction with the text to support all learners, including students on the spectrum who need the addition of visual supports to enhance their learning of a subject.

Throughout both interviews, the categories of diversity, knowledge, and collaboration were seen as necessary components of an effective professional development experience. However, even with these emergent categories surfacing, the questions of how to provide this information to educators emerge. From the analysis of both the general education teacher and the special education teacher, I have arrived at the following category for how to provide this information to teachers to aid in retention and generalization to the classroom:

Knowledge

Through analysis of the interviews with both the general education teacher and the special education teachers the category of knowledge emerges. The category of knowledge emerged as an important element within a professional development experience. Educators need to be knowledgeable on how to educate students with autism. However, a deep knowledge and understanding of students with ASD are critical for those who facilitate a professional development experience.

The special education teacher said he wants someone “that gets it and has a personal connection.” He wants them to be knowledgeable and engage both mind and soul. He wants a professional development facilitator to be able to meet the needs of the audience through the relaying of information in a way that makes the personal connection to those in the professional development experience.

The general education teacher also reports the need for a knowledgeable professional development facilitator. She wants a facilitator that can provide strategies that can take back to

the classroom and used immediately. She said that she wants “something that you can implement right.” She says this makes her feel that she has “accomplished something.”

Flexibility

Another category that emerged, though only through the special education teacher, is the category of flexibility. He said he wants a professional development facilitator to be flexible in their presentation of the material “based on the needs of the audience.” He wants a facilitator that will take “audience participation or questions.” Moreover, he communicates the need for a facilitator to be able to break any from a preordained outline.

Observation

A brief observation was conducted, approximately for one-half hour, of one student with autism, in the general education teacher’s class. The observation included a math exam and a test assisted by the special education teacher. By the analysis of my observation, I discovered both analogous and divergent views inclusion for students with ASD. The general education teacher’s usage of strategies such as highlighting key terms, visual display of classroom rules, supports the information provided by the educators on need for knowledge, knowledge of strategies for the students diagnosed with autism and knowledge of the student’s individual needs. The general education teachers also provided periodic one-on-one support for the student during the test, supporting knowledge of student’s needs. However, during the test the special education teacher came in to take the student with autism back to his room to provide additional support for the test. The teacher provided the student with additional test taking strategies to help complete the test, and the student found humor in this phrase and giggled, which as a parent of a child diagnosed with autism, I found the sound of the giggle the best part of the entire interview and observation process. The student proceeded to eliminate the most obvious wrong answer within the multiple choice math quiz, leaving only a couple of other possible answers.

Limitations

One challenge of the observation of the participants in the study was the possible variation of teacher behavior that may occur because of my observation. In other words, by my being there the teacher may have been more self-aware of his or her behavior and acted differently than he or she would if I were not in the room. Additionally, I may have altered the behavior of the students by my presence and thereby alter the typical interactions that occur daily between the teacher and the student thus allowing themes of the need for professional development topics to emerge that otherwise might not emerge without my presence. I will try to minimize this challenge by seeking an observation location that will minimize my interference and contact with both the teacher and the students. For example, I will choose a location at the back of the room as far away from both teacher and student as possible while still being afforded a view of the classroom interactions between student and teacher.

Another limitation of the study is the relatively small sample of participants. Although the study included a special education teacher and a general education teacher, they may not be representative of the larger group of which they are included. I may have obtained divergent views of information, or additional categories of need may have emerged with the inclusion of additional participants.

Lastly, as I was the individual who provided the analysis of the information, I might have had a bias towards the information I believe that the teachers should obtain for a successful professional development experience. However, this also could be conceived as beneficial to the study because as a parent of a child severely affected by autism, I bring an additional perspective

to analyzing the information one that most researchers never have the opportunity to experience. I tried to minimize this bias by providing the addition of analyzing the interviews within the context of the observation and placing both the interviews and the observation within the framework of a few selected studies.

Discussion and Implications

The study conducted by Dymond et al. (2007) showed an overwhelming response by parents that schools need staff development and increased funding for this service; however, expanding professional development opportunities does not ensure that all children diagnosed with autism will get a better education, including better inclusion experiences. We as parents and educators need to examine what information is necessary in professional development experiences and how we can best deliver this information to educators. Several categories emerge from the analysis from the responses from the general education teacher and special education teacher interviews, some of which are supported by my observation of their classrooms. Both the interviews and the observation support the requirement of both the teachers of students with ASD and the facilitators of professional development on ASD to be knowledgeable. This knowledge is not just a superficial perusal of strategies and techniques. This knowledge needs to be through with a constant reexamination of the needs of both the student and the educator. Facilitators of professional development experiences dealing with the topic of autism and inclusion need to be passionate about this subject and carry a personal knowledge base to provide meaningful professional development experiences for both the special education teacher and the general education teacher. I will suggest further exploration of what encompasses the realm of necessary knowledge in teaching students with autism by expanding the study to not only include additional general and special educators'. I would also add other school personnel, for example, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and gym, art, and music teachers. The list would go on. Furthermore, let us not forget, what to me is the most important voices, that of the families. We need to obtain feedback from parents, siblings, other relatives and most importantly students with a diagnosis of autism.

The importance of knowledge of the diversity that is inherent in children diagnosed with autism also emerged as a category to be included in a professional development experience. All participants of a professional development experience need to be apprised of the multi-faceted needs of the individual with autism. Because of the diversity that lies within the spectrum of learners and the diversity of the knowledge that is needed for students with autism to be successful in an inclusive environment, collaboration should be embraced throughout all levels of professional development participants as found in West et al. (2006). Again, I ask that as educators, we ask those families for input on the knowledge needed to address the diversity of students with autism and a discussion on the importance of collaboration at all levels of learning.

The last implication emerged entirely by surprise. It came about through my reflection of the interviews and observations. It is a question of inclusion. What is inclusion and how do educators define it? As a parent and as an educator I am often questioned where the line is and where should it be as far as how a child is included in a general education classroom. During the observation, the student with autism took a portion of the test within the general education classroom. He was then provided additional assistance within the special education classroom. I thought this was the right choice; however, I am often asked how I feel about full inclusion of students who are highly affected by autism. The kind of inclusion where a student would not leave the classroom for testing or additional assistance. Through reflection, I thought, do we as

educators have a good grip on what inclusion is, what it looks like, and when is full inclusion appropriate? I am often faced with this question for my own daughter and I believe this topic needs further investigation.

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