

(ISSN : 2455-8001)
Online



Vol (4), No (1), 2021

INTERNATIONAL
eJOURNAL
Disability Studies
Special Education & Rehabilitation

**Mainstream Inclusive Education for Students with ASD:
Collaboration between Special Educator, General Teacher and
Family.**

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Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, General Teachers, Special Education Teachers, mainstream, inclusive, Team teaching. Collaborative teaching, cooperative teaching, pedagogical processes, Universal Design for learning.

Introduction:

Inclusive Education, means when all learners despite of whatever challenges they may have study in age-appropriate general education classrooms. The classrooms are in the neighbourhood schools and these schools are equipped to enable high-quality support, intervention and instructional strategies to the same core curriculum.

Since the signing of the Salamanca Statement (1994), took place, the concept of inclusion was adopted on an almost global scale and the children with disabilities have now the right to be educated with children without disability. (Sevastopoulou, 2016).

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According to Friend and Pope (2005), inclusion is: “the understanding that all students—those who are academically gifted, those who are average learners, and those who struggle to learn for any reason—should be fully welcomed members of their school communities and that all professionals in a school share responsibility for their learning” (as stated in Murawski, 2010).

It is well documented that the general education teachers find the student population with ASD the most challenging. Neuro-developmental disabilities (identified and unidentified) are the largest group in any mainstream classroom. The mainstream classroom are at large under the preview of the general teachers, as per their training and skills developed.

We are aware from the time the term autism was first established more than 60 years ago in the independent paper works of Leo Kanner (1943) in the U.S and Hans Asperger (1944) in Austria, that these individuals’ major areas of concern and disability is social communication, inflexibility, limitation in imagination. It is well established that the Autistics face prominent difficulties in their social development. (Jones, 2002) They struggle with understanding social behavior and social signs, more so if they are non-verbal. We are also aware that in normal situation more than 60% of communication may be non-verbal in humans. Effective social responses are basic components of their everyday effective dialogue are interpretation. The general teachers who even if they have basic understanding of ASD, many not have the skills and pedagogical competence to embed it into their classroom transactions. So obviously they will find it challenging. This is where the special education teacher with specialization in ASD would step in to handhold. The ability to manage the task at hand and the social aspects comes naturally to the typical (normal) child and the general teacher training processes takes it as a given.

However, the child with ASD, has major difficulties when they have to split their attention between a task at hand and the social aspect of it. Now in a mainstream classroom this can be a bigger problem for the child with ASD. That does not

necessarily mean that individuals with autism are all together not interested in social relationships (Jones, 2002). However, with the teamwork of special education teacher and general teacher, appropriate strategies can be developed. The difficulties children with autism have with their communication efforts may also be because of delays in acquiring language and speech. Studies done by researchers (Kluth, 2003, Wolfberg, 1999), highlight that the child with ASD may be able to formulate sentences, even complex ones, however they may lack the ability to use them effectively. The nonverbal aspects of communication is often very baffling for the child with ASD and this often results in an aversion of social interaction. For example, when someone says to a child with ASD, 'I am very angry with you' and as would in the regular classroom it may be accompanied with non-verbals bodily actions such as hitting of the speaker's fist on the table, increase in size of the speaker's eyes, tightening of the mouth muscles, increase in the shrillness and pitch of ones voice. The child with ASD may understand the meaning of 'I am angry with you'. However, do remember that the term 'angry' is not concrete, it is abstract. One cannot touch 'angry'. One can touch the person who is 'angry'. Now look at the other non-verbal and bodily communication. Hitting on the desk may be confused with, does the teacher want to hit me? Has the desk done something wrong or is it me who has done something wrong? Why are the mouth muscles tightening of the teacher? Does the teacher have a tooth-ache? Why are the eyes become large and round? Has something gone into the teacher's eyes? Should I help and see what is irritating her eyes? The special educator who has degrees and experience with ASD would be able to understand the confusion and tension and possible socially inappropriate behavior of this child in the above stated situation. However, are situations like the above enough reasons for depriving a child with ASD the advantages of mainstream inclusive classrooms?? Or can the collaborative efforts of the general teacher, special education teacher and family and community facilitate mainstream inclusive learning processes?

The intelligence levels of children on the Autism Spectrum Disorder may range from those who have severe or profound learning difficulties to those of well above-average intelligence to genius levels. Jones (2002), highlights that this causes difficulty is identification of the exact issues such as the child is able to convey ones learning difficulties because the child has high level of intellectual skills or the level of learning difficulties is so high that inspite of a good level of intellectual skills the child finds it difficult to convey and perform. Here in comes the role of expert of the field of ASD who can support the inclusion of the child. As professionals working in the area of disability, it is essential to always have in our minds the role of society in constructing the notion of disability, in general and the autism, in particular. A significant number of the difficulties, individuals with autism encounter with every day, are derivatives of the situations and the ideas created by society and culture. The society and culture have decided that these are the norm of people's appearance, communication, interaction, behavior, movement and so on. This may vary from culture to culture as well. Any individual who does not fall in the larger category of these norms gets to be con It is a documented that people on the autistic spectrum disorders experience things with different ways than the people without them and it is also a well researched that autism is aggravated by an inflexible society. As Paula Kluth suggests: "Autism is a social construction; it is a phenomenon that is created and recreated through culture, interaction, and social circumstances" (2003, p.19). It is interesting to observe that many studies conducted on special education teachers have shown that many believe that children with ASD should be placed in the special schools. On the other hand many general education teachers feel that the children with ASD are best in special education sections of the school. However, a deeper insight by other studies highlight that where in special education teachers and general education teachers have had enough time and resource to develop skills, they are both comfortable with mainstream inclusive education for children with ASD and also feel that that is the best way forward for

both children with ASD and those without ASD. Flourou (2007), Staikopoulos (2009).

Traditionally, there has been only one teacher to a classroom. The general education teachers and for that matter even the special education teachers are used to be solely responsible for planning and instructing their class and struggle with having to share management responsibilities with a second party like the special education teachers. So within the classroom the teacher may be the equivalent of a demi-God, however they were isolated from the rest of their colleagues during the instructional transactional time within the classroom. So if we expect the teachers to work together in the same classroom, the greatest transformation would be that the general teachers, special education teachers and other stake holders would have to evolve the skill-sets to together seamlessly work towards a common goal for all learners including diverse learners such as those on the Autism Spectrum Disorder on one hand and diversity in the goals as well for these learners. In an mainstream inclusive classroom with children with Autism Spectrum disorder and other so called typical ('normal') children, two or more teachers (general teachers and special education teachers) develop the skill-sets to enable them to share the goals and objectives, decisions- making, classroom instruction, responsibility for each and every students, assessment of student learning, problem solving, and classroom management. In other words in an mainstream inclusive educational setup, where there are children with neuro-developmental disabilities such as ASD, or specific learning disabilities (SLD) the teachers , both general and special education begin to think of it as "our" class. This requires an entirely different approach as well as developing the pedagogical, attitudinal, and interpersonal and communication skills in accordance. It surely involves time (for planning, for development, for evaluation), resources, support, monitoring and above all persistence. A major consideration that leads to a better team building between general and special education teachers is in arranging planning times for coteachers.

Further studies highlight that as and where inclusion has been possible and effective, planning sessions had been given top priorities by the general education and special education teachers and very well accepted by the larger education system. It is a given fact that teachers have to multi-task continuously, so only when the education system prioritized planning time and resources for inclusion at the cost of competing responsibilities, did inclusion happen in mainstream system (Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996, p. 260). Also it needs to be recognize that planning is a ongoing process to enable teachers to review progress, make adjustments, evaluate students, and develop strategies to issues related to engagement to learning and learning.

This process of team teaching where the general education teachers, special education teachers or at times teachers with specialization in different or allied subjects teach from the same classroom together at the same time. This pedagogical processes is often referred by different names such as team teaching, collaborative teaching, co-operative teaching and so on. The underlying process is that one teacher is an expert of one area and has working knowledge and understanding of the other area. Similarly the second teacher is an expert in another area and would have a working understanding of the area in which the other teacher is an expert. Similarly there can be a third and even a fourth or more teachers. (The author has worked in teams of upto even 5 teachers). This obviously requires very fine level of skills of pedagogy on the part of each and every teacher in the team. This also requires continuous meetings for planning and execution processes.

The largest benefits are that it can enable a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders, not only mild but moderate to be able to experience heterogeneous classrooms settings for learning and the so call typical (normal) children to learn to empathize as well seamlessly include the children with Autism into their world of learning and socialization. This is the best possible step towards taking all

children towards inclusive global society. However, it requires that each and every member of the team is a lifelong and flexible learner.

Teaming is the most advanced method of co-teaching. Both co-teachers plan and deliver the instruction to the whole class. This approach requires high levels of trust, commitment and collaboration between the co-teachers. It is crucial to feel comfortable inside their partnership and to match their teaching styles. Not all professionals can reach this level of cooperation, due to lack of mutual understanding or employing very different instructional strategies. Teaming is an extremely challenging way of co-teaching which, if it is applied successfully, it is reported that raises the students' participation and prompts the teachers to use innovative techniques and activities which they would not have tried on their own (Friend & Cook, 2013).

To further explain, if we were to be taking a class on **how plants make food**, at the **middle school level**, the collaborative team of teachers would have a special educator with specialization in ASD (in this case) and specialization in the strategies which facilitate learning in children with ASD such as picture exchange communication system and other visual strategies systems. These and other communications strategies fall under the umbrella of Augmentative and Alternate Communications (AAC). With specialization in strategies for teaching children with ASD, this special education teacher would have working knowledge of the process of photosynthesis. The general teacher would have obviously have indepth knowledge of the process of photosynthesis which would be beyond the level of middle school because this teacher specializes in the pedagogy of teaching science and also in subject content of science. This general education teacher may have only basic understanding of the characteristics of a child with Autism.

Now the two teachers in this case, namely the science teacher and the special education teacher and maybe a teacher intern will have meeting on how to merge the LP and the IEP (Lesson Plan and Individualized Education Plan). So say, as the general science teacher develops Blackboard writing steps and the

blackboard summary, the special education teacher puts together the AAC and at which point in the lesson would they be introduced while team teaching is happening. May be a buddy (peer-support) would also be part of the lesson transaction and so on.

Now while the lesson actually is getting transacted, the general teacher, the special education teacher, the buddy, the assistant teacher would move to any child who needs assistance, irrespective of whether it is a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder or any other typical (normal) child in the classroom.

When the students are asked to answer the question, 'what is the name of the material which gives the leaves its green colour?.' Most of the children may write the word 'chlorophyll' while the child with autism will use picture exchange communication to show that he/she knows the term 'chlorophyll'.

At the planning stage the expertise had come from the special educator but at the execution stage in a mainstream inclusive classroom, even the buddy can facilitate this for the friend who has ASD. This is just a very tiny glimpse where the boundaries at the specialisation stage, planning stage are very clear but gradually by the time it reaches the classroom transaction of the topic, the boundaries seamlessly begin to disappear.

This also results in that each and every child in the school system is the learner of each and every teacher instead of the children with special needs only the children of the special education teacher and the other children of the general education teacher. This is also referred as the 'yours' and 'mine' students in the school system. Hence the team teaching/collaborative teaching/ co-operative teaching etc lean heavily upon the Universal Design of Learning (UDL) processes.

Approaches such as the Universal Design of learning (UDL), Differentiated learning-teaching processes, Multiple Intelligence theories, VAKT (Visual Auditory Kinesthetic and Tactile), Information Processing Theories, Student Centric Approaches and pedagogies, Hybrid and Flipped classrooms,

Multidisciplinary team approach and an offshoot of have stakeholders such as parents, family and community as integral and important partners in the learning teaching processes of children enables better mainstream inclusive classrooms. These classrooms have the general and special education teachers as the major pillars.

Dieker & Barnett (1996) in their work have found that both regular general teachers as well as the special education teachers when they work together are better able to understand that they both have expertise in many areas and many of them are different but complement and supplement each other. All the teachers in particular and the education system in general realized that when they worked as a team combining these skills, they were together more effective. They also realize that even if they worked individually, but in consultation with each other their effectiveness in meeting the needs of all students increased many folds.

The inclusion of the student with ASD is not the only reason that makes collaboration between the general and the special education teachers imperative. The struggles that the students with ASD face, both in their social interactions, as well as their cognitive functions, can be a source of distress from the side of the classroom teacher. The majority of the students with ASD are in need of different kind and degree of interventions or IEPs for their academic and social advancement. In these cases the individual teacher is not able to cope on his/her own, and find himself/herself in dire need of a specialized colleague with whom he/she will work with towards a common goal (Kirk et al., 2011). For accommodating the collaboration between the co-teachers (one general education teacher and one special education teacher), the Autism Inclusion Collaboration Model was designed (Simpson et al., 2003). Four are the main components of the model:

1) Environmental and curricular modifications and general education classroom support. Since the students with ASD have unique educational and other kind of needs, a wide range of modifications and support services is in need. Changes in the classroom environment, provision of appropriately trained personnel and paraprofessionals, as well as establishing collaborative relationships between them and the general education teacher are the final steps for supporting the students with ASD.

2) Attitudinal and social support. All the persons who are stakeholders in the educational procedure (administrators, general and special education teachers, the students with ASD and their typically developing peers) need to understand, respect, support and collaborate with each other for accomplishing the higher level of success.

3) Team commitment. All the members of the support group would need to keep the common goal in focus, all the time, which is to assist and include the students with ASD in all the activities of the school system

4) Home-school collaboration. Inclusion of the students with ASD takes a great leap forward when teachers and the family work as a team for organizing a personalized program based on the student's individual needs and for expanding its outcome to the home and community environment (Friend, 2011).

In conclusion, when it involves learning to the possible best potential of children with ASD and the typical child in the classroom , it can be stated that the collaborative role between the General Teachers and the Special Education Teachers is being experimented and applied in many educational institutions and emerging as a win-win situation for all. However, it needs a complete rethinking of attitudes, pedagogy, development of soft skills between the stake holders, readiness to be a life-long learning and the in situation and the epic education bodies to accept the need for lifelong learning and skill development.

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