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Student perceptions: Improving the educational experiences of high school students on the autism spectrum

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Abstract

Listening to and reflecting on the voices and personal stories of adolescent students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is critically important to developing more inclusive approaches to their education. This article considers the experiences of nine adolescents with an ASD on their inclusive education in a large urban secondary school in Australia. These educational experiences were mapped onto four themes emanating from a similar study by Humphrey and Lewis from the United Kingdom. The results from both studies suggest that although students with ASD are having positive and enabling educational experiences, a number of common inhibitors continue to prevent them from taking full advantage of their schooling. By listening to the voices of students with ASD, specific enablers and inhibitors to promoting successful educational experiences are identified, and recommendations for practice are put forward to better support the education not only of students with ASD but all students.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder, enablers, inclusive education, inhibitors, secondary school, student perspectives

Introduction

In Australia, as in many nations, increasing numbers of children and adolescents with additional needs, including those diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), are receiving their education in inclusive educational settings (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodger, 2010). There is growing concern, however, about the quality of the educational experiences of students with ASD (Humphrey, 2008). Research suggests that although many students with ASD have average and above intellectual abilities and adequate or better academic skills, they often experience negative social outcomes in inclusive school settings (Humphrey & Symes, 2011).

Evidence suggests that students with ASDs have fewer friends and more limited social networks (Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, & Rotherham-Fuller, 2011). They also spend more time engaged in

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solitary behaviours (Humphrey & Symes, 2011), experience more teasing, verbal aggression (Humphrey & Symes, 2011) and bullying (Bauminger & Kasari, 2003; Shtayermman, 2007), and spend more time engaging in reactive aggression (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). In comparison with their typically developing peers, students with ASD may experience higher levels of social anxiety (Kuusikko et al., 2008) and loneliness (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003).

Internationally, inclusion is steered by a range of initiatives, legislation and treaties which recognise the basic human right for all children to have equal access and opportunities to education (Kaur, 2014). Inclusive education requires a constant and evolving process of improvement aimed at supporting the participation, access and equity of all students and respect for diversity within school communities (Petrescu, 2013). According to Baglieri and Knopf (2004), 'a truly inclusive school reflects a democratic philosophy whereby all students are valued, educators normalise difference through differentiated instruction, and the school culture reflects an ethic of caring and community (p. 525)'. Key characteristics which support an inclusive school community include making the environment warm, welcoming and supportive to all, with equal opportunities and access to learn in ways that meet their needs. In addition, the school community addresses the unique learning needs and personal goals of all students. Kaur (2014) describes the five A's of inclusive education as availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability and accountability. The development of an inclusive school culture and learning environment is a priority for all schools. Schools are working hard to promote a culture that makes all students feel welcome and respected. These environments need to provide for the learning needs of all students and enable them to achieve their potential (Knowles, 2013).

To date, research regarding inclusive education for students with ASDs has focused on academic outcomes and on the experiences of children rather than adolescents. In addition, the majority of studies have focused on the perspectives of informants rather than upon the perspectives of the students themselves. Although 'insider accounts' have been examined in relation to school reform for a number of decades (Peters, 2010), examining the perspectives of students and their schooling experience, especially those with ASDs, is a relatively recent focus of research and one that is much needed to help inform positive educational experiences and learning outcomes for all students.

The purpose of the study presented in this article was to contribute to the small but growing body of research exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of students in inclusive settings who have been diagnosed with an ASD. The dataset is drawn from an Australian study that examined nine students' perspectives of the challenges and opportunities of their schooling experiences within an inclusive setting. In an earlier paper (Saggers, Hwang, & Mercer, 2011), the students' perspectives were compared with the characteristics of successful inclusive schools described by Kluth (2003). The aim of this article is to identify aspects of schooling that were considered positive and enabling, as well as to pinpoint common inhibitors that may prevent students with an ASD taking full advantage of their educational experiences, in order to present implications and recommendations for practice in the education of all students, not just those diagnosed with an ASD.

Method

This qualitative study was designed to explore the lived experience of nine students on the autism spectrum within an Australian mainstream high school. This study used the 'insider accounts' of students with ASD (Peters, 2010; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009) in order to develop an understanding of their educational experiences and compare these experiences with the experiences of other secondary students with ASD (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Participants and setting

The nine participants in this study were selected by means of criterion-based purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). The students, seven boys and two girls, were enrolled in a large mainstream public government high school (Grades 8–12) in Brisbane, Australia, with an average enrolment of 1300 students, consisting of approximately 560 girls and 740 boys and a 92 percent attendance rate. The school has 108 teaching staff and 45 non-teaching staff. Students from Indigenous backgrounds represented 5 percent of the school population, while 7 percent were from languages other than English (LOTE) backgrounds. This high school enjoys a strong reputation for high quality education and the school community has a high expectation that students will strive to do their personal best, both individually and as part of the team. These expectations are supported by the school vision to achieve and celebrate success through a commitment to individual excellence. The school has a proven record of academic, cultural and sporting achievements. The school also has a peer support programme and counselling programme which assists in the provision of a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. An Enrolment Management Plan dictates student enrolment eligibility. As part of the school community, there is extensive support for a range of learning needs including students with a range of disabilities such as vision impairment, intellectual impairment and ASD with approximately 80 students with disabilities enrolled in the school. The school promotes that students are able to maximise their learning outcomes and their educational, social and vocational potential in an environment constructed upon the principles of social justice. This programme provides additional teachers and teacher aides to assist teachers and students in a variety of ways and offers and delivers support based on the individual needs of students. As a result, to maximise learning outcomes and to help all students reach their potential support, provision varies but may include as needed: Individual Student Plans; extended core curriculum with teacher support focussing on curriculum content and the learning of functional skills; specialised aids and equipment to help maximise participation and access; in-class assistance; appropriate extensions of examination periods and the time frame to complete course requirements; appropriate adjustment to curriculum and environment in subjects; opportunities for inclusion into everyday activities; and, when required, additional programmes both on and off the campus. The specific support needs of the student would be determined through collaboration and negotiation with all stakeholders involved including mainstream staff, special educators, caregivers, ancillary staff and the student themselves. The type of support provided would be reviewed on an as-needed basis but set review dates are established to coincide with the development and review of individual education plans (IEPs or ISPs) every 6 months.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the human ethics committees of Queensland University of Technology and the Department of Education, Training and the Arts in Queensland. In addition, informed consent was gained from the participants, their parents and the school. All names used in this study are pseudonyms. Ethical standards for research with children were considered in planning this study, such as attention to informed consent, participatory methods and flexible and ethical interview procedures. These issues are similar to those discussed by Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke and Craig (1996) and Ward (1997). Appointments for the participants' interviews were scheduled in consultation with the students and school staff in order to minimise disruptions to the students' everyday life at school. The students were advised in advance of the time and location of their interviews and the fact that their interviews would be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data collection

To gain access to the experiential world of the nine participants, the original data were gathered by means of two semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted by the author in a private quiet room at the school where all of the students were comfortable. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Some initial open-ended questions were developed as a guide for the first semi-structured interview. These exploratory questions provided a common base for the content and structure of the interview as well as opportunities for the interviewer to develop in-depth conversations with the participants concerning their particular experiences of inclusive education practices (Patton, 2002).

After analysing the participants' first interview protocols and gaining an initial understanding of their experiences and perspectives, a second interview was scheduled with each participant to delve into the answers they had given in the first interview. These interviews, which occurred 1–2 weeks after the first interviews, were more free-ranging in content and structure, and further inform the author's understanding of the students' experiences (Charmaz, 2005) and explore in greater depth the participants' perspectives on their school experiences.

Data analysis

For the purpose of this article, the data from the original study were analysed and compared by means of constant comparative methods (Glaser, 1992) with the themes emanating from the previous Humphrey and Lewis (2008) study. This method entails a thorough systematic reading of the interview transcripts followed by active line-by-line coding. The process of constant comparison was continued until specific categories emerged that gave clear insight into how students with ASD experienced their schooling. The accuracy of the data and the analytic process carried out were assured by two external researchers and by an external auditor.

Findings and discussion

Using the constant comparative analyses, the data from the previous study were mapped directly onto four themes emanating from a similar study conducted by Humphrey and Lewis (2008), which explored the experiences and perspectives of 20 students with ASD across four secondary schools in North West England. The Humphrey and Lewis themes related to the following: relationship with peers, anxiety and stress in schools, working with teachers and other staff, and negotiating difference. The findings from this study will now be discussed under these four key analytical themes.

Relationships with peers

Positive relationships with peers were found to be a significant enabling feature of successful inclusive experiences for students with ASD. Specifically, friendships were seen as enablers by adolescents with ASD, in that they provided support and had a positive impact on their experiences of school. Many of the students discussed how they spent their lunch breaks with friends, with some of the students also describing having a range of friends from different sections of the school environment, for example, both mainstream and special needs classes. Over half of the students interviewed talked about the support provided by their peer group. Tom described having a strong friendship with a small group of peers, 'Yeah. About six really good ones', and said that they spent time together at lunch doing things he enjoyed such as 'Kick the soccer ball or play tennis'. He

went on to describe how these friends were helpful in providing support to him in the playground: 'They always stick up for me'. Although some students seem to genuinely like spending time alone, most students like Tom indicated that school felt safer and was more enjoyable when they had friends who could provide them with peer support.

Some students also discussed the fragility of their friendships. Oscar's perception was that he had friends but expressed a preference not to socialise with them at lunchtimes:

> I sit with my friends, but I hardly socialise with them . . . I sort of find that boring . . . even though it is good to socialise.

During the course of the interview, it became apparent that Oscar's inclination not to socialise often came from difficulties with engaging in conversation with friends and remembering people's names:

> it's just when somebody says hello, I sort of say the wrong thing and well, when they say hello . . . I hardly ever say hello such and such . . . cause I forget their names.

Steve and Hudson expressed similar issues and deliberately chose solitude at lunchtime. Steve went under the building to be by himself, while Hudson tried to eat and read his book without being disturbed.

In contrast, Tom and Matthew had different views about socialising. They stated that they enjoyed playing with friends in their free time. Playing sport seemed to help both of them to connect with their friends. Tom played soccer and tennis while Matthew played handball:

> We just play handball, we speak, we just speak about stuff we've seen, what we do, some out of school events; that type of thing.

For these students, playing sports with friends provided easier and more structured opportunities for socialisation and conversation.

The important enabling role of friendships was not unexpected given that peer relationships are of central importance to children, including those with an ASD, throughout the childhood and adolescent years (Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2009).

This study supported the notion of bullying and teasing as an inhibitor to learning. All the students had experienced this at school at 'different levels of severity and regularity' (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 34). However, it was not so much the regularity of the bullying that was alarming in this study but rather the fact it was only the more frequent, overt forms of bullying such as physical aggression and obvious sexual harassment which students reported. It was disturbing to realise that the students in this study did not tend to report more subtle forms of bullying such as verbal taunts and name calling. Matthew, when asked about reporting incidents of teasing and bullying, stated 'as long as they don't do anything physically harmful to me, there's no point'. Reporting tended to be to teachers they had a strong rapport with, such as the special education support staff. At least one student (Sally) dealt with the teasing by ignoring, avoiding, walking away, and occasionally telling her parent or a supportive teacher.

Anxiety and stress in schools

The concept of students with ASD having greater levels of anxiety and stress than other groups of adolescents has been discussed by a number of authors (Green, Gilchrist, Burton, & Cox, 2000;

Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kim, Szatmari, Bryson, Streiner, & Wilson, 2000; Sofronoff, Attwood, & Hinton, 2005). In addition to issues of social reasoning and specific learning disabilities which created stress for students on the spectrum, Humphrey and Lewis (2008) found the school environment as a 'considerable source of anxiety' (p. 37). For students with ASD attempting to maintain some semblance of order and predictability, the noisy, bustling and chaotic environment of secondary school can incite extreme levels of anxiety which, in comparison with typically developing adolescents experiencing similar stressors, can impair their ability to function within that environment (Wood & Gadow, 2010). A significant number of the students interviewed in this study found classroom noise, teachers yelling and crowds in the school environment something which could increase their stress levels and make it difficult for them to cope. Most of the students interviewed mentioned a preference for quiet classes and environments to work in, with noisy environments identified as difficult to work in. This was reinforced by Oscar's comment, 'Most of it's loud and it disrupts me a bit'. Matthew reinforced this with his comments:

> I think it would have to be – you know some children in class like to make a lot of noise and racket and they're just a bit too noisy and stuff like that. I reckon those type of students that try and stand out; those are the hardest thing here.

Additional stressors identified in this study were curriculum-related issues, including workload, homework and handwriting. Specifically, students identified tight work schedules with too much summative assessment due all at once, activities requiring a lot of handwriting, heavy workloads created by assignments, the amount of non-preferred work they were required to do and getting things handed in on time as central to their stress and anxiety. Rebecca summarised these issues with her thoughts on workload: 'It's too much work . . . too much writing, and too much assignments . . . I don't like homework'. Similar feelings were expressed by Sally who stated 'Sometimes it's a bit crazy how we all have to hand in all the assignments in at once . . . Sometimes I get pretty freaked out about assignments', a notion reinforced by Hudson who said the thing he worried most about in school was 'It would be assignments I think . . . Getting them done I think'. These findings suggest that to assist students to reduce levels of stress and anxiety, further consideration needs to be given to how workload is presented, organised, and negotiated with students on the spectrum. In relation to homework, discussion needs to weigh up the value of homework and, if homework is a requirement, how much over what time frames. The issue of handwriting was also common and highlights the need for students to be able to access alternative technological options to replace handwriting where possible. Key difficulties described included the following: having a requirement for too much handwriting, difficulties with performing the mechanics of handwriting and not enough access to computers and technological applications as an alternative.

Working with teachers and other staff

The students in this study strongly emphasised the important role teacher characteristics played in relation to their perceived success in school or a subject, with this being one of the most influential factors in successful inclusion. Students identified positive teacher characteristics such as relatedness, active listener, firm, fair, flexible and the ability to provide a structured, calm classroom. These features seemed to be related to students' desire for fair treatment and understanding from their teachers. Teachers with these positive characteristics presented as being well equipped with knowledge about their students' strengths and weaknesses, and they created a structured but flexible learning environment. They were also conscious and responsive to individual needs, developed a strong rapport with students and used a sense of humour. Students appreciated teachers who

made learning fun with their students, noting that this made learning easier and more enjoyable, even for the subjects they were not particularly good at. Don summed this up with his comment:

> I think it's the feeling where you can talk to them like another student, kind of thing. So you can relate to them, they can relate to you and then they can help you through the hard work as well. So it's better looking up to them, kind of thing.

Teachers who were considered either too strict or too inflexible were a concern for students. Another key issue voiced by all students as negatively influencing their school experiences was teachers who regularly yelled. Don described a subject he did not like at school being the result of characteristics the teacher displayed when teaching: 'She's very strict and mean . . . She yells at people'.

A key issue to emerge was the nature, consistency and visibility of support for students on the spectrum and the impact this had on the student's notion of difference. How support was accessed within the secondary school was recognised as a key enabler by the students. They appreciated the additional specialist support they received; however, this should be delivered in 'subtle' ways within the inclusive context. Although students appreciated support given by specialists and para-professionals, it was the 'visibility' of this additional support which was the issue, with students making it very clear that they wanted any additional support to be done subtly and skilfully, especially in the mainstream classroom. The majority of students wanted this support to be delivered in such a way that the teacher went around the classroom to help all students, and not just the student with an ASD. Students in this study found support for managing personal matters and developing social skills, as well as support for academic work, beneficial.

Negotiating difference

It was strongly evident from the discussions with students with an ASD that they felt a constant need to negotiate difference within the mainstream setting. This was reflected in their relationships with peers, the anxiety and stress they felt in negotiating school life and the issues they had in relation to working with teachers. Negotiation of difference requires schools to make some difficult choices in how they will organise their provision of support for students on the spectrum.

Some key points to come out of discussions with the students included the following: they do not like to be treated differently; they appreciated getting help and support but not in a way which singled them out; they benefitted from being able to access specialist support staff who recognised, responded to and supported their individual needs; and they liked having exams with extra time, in a quiet place with less people. Tom described the most skilful teacher from whom he received assistance in his classroom as helping him when he was having trouble by giving him hints, not the answers themselves. He also noted that this teacher or aide went around the classroom to help all students, so when she was helping Tom, he did not have to feel embarrassed in front of his classmates.

Recommendations for practice

The findings of this research enabled the researcher to identify enablers and inhibitors of inclusion as identified by students with an ASD in inclusive settings. Identification of these factors can help enhance inclusive practices in mainstream schools for students with an ASD (Jordan, 2005) and adolescent students in school. While it is important to note that although the enablers and inhibitors discussed in this article were identified by students diagnosed with an ASD, these enablers and

inhibitors are relevant to all teenage students engaging in school-based education. Founded on these enablers and inhibitors, a number of recommendations for practice were made. These recommendations consider specific adjustments teachers, administrators and peers can make in inclusive settings to improve outcomes for not only students with an ASD but all students in high school settings. These recommendations will be considered in relation to the following: building relationships and peer support, environmental considerations and curriculum supports, and teacher characteristics.

Building relationships and peer support

The results of this study reinforce the notion that there is a need for educators to ensure that strategies that promote peer support and understanding within the school environment are implemented. Nurturing a social environment that facilitates students in developing and maintaining friendships is one way to strengthen a culture of support for these students (Rowley et al., 2012). Some strategies which could assist to promote peer support include the following: educating peers about understanding ASD and tolerating diversity, as well as providing them with training in listening and social skills support, and encouraging the creation of teacher supervised but peer-based interest groups at lunchtime (e.g. handball, soccer, reading, chess, computer, drama, environmental or music lunchtime groups) which encourage peer networking.

Although bullying and teasing negatively influenced the students' experiences of inclusive schooling, problems such as these can alert staff and community professionals of the need to strengthen the culture of support within a school. The importance of staff developing a rapport with students is reinforced by the students disclosing they only feel comfortable reporting incidences of bullying to teachers they had a rapport with, such as the special education support staff. Helping students with ASD to identify key staff in a school setting they can disclose information to would be helpful. In addition, students on the spectrum need support to understand what is 'teasing and bullying' (Rowley et al., 2012) and to develop a culture of acceptance and one which values diversity (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007). Teaching a better understanding of what constitutes teasing and bullying to students with an ASD can help them to identify these acts and help ensure they report all incidences (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). It is also important for the students to know teasing and bullying is being followed through with and appropriately dealt with by the administration of the school, so a strict no-bullying policy which is followed through consistently across a whole school and by all staff is essential.

Environmental considerations and curriculum supports

The environment the student with an ASD is required to work in can influence their learning and performance. Therefore, consideration to providing adequate quiet times/spaces for individual students and helping students with an ASD identify quiet and less crowded places in the school they can access would be useful. They may need to access these spaces regularly (on an as-needed basis) to help them maintain their stress at manageable levels. Careful thought would need to be put into how this may be managed or supported within the school environment. In addition, the opportunity for students with an ASD to work in smaller groups at times throughout the day should also be considered. Other comments students made during interviews suggested additional support for exams is important. These supports included having a quiet, less crowded place to complete exams and additional time for the exam. These features were also valued when completing assignments and other forms of assessment. Students with an ASD would benefit from extra support, scaffolding and visual aids to plan, organise and complete assignments within set timelines. It is

also important to consider workload and how much additional work such as homework is required of students with ASD and only the most essential additional homework should be required. Providing a balance or a break from non-preferred activities, with something more motivating or rewarding, would also be of benefit (Ashburner et al., 2010). In adolescence, this could be negotiated with the student in a work-based contract or schedule.

It was evident in this study that handwriting had a negative impact on students with an ASD, their performance in specific subjects and their learning outcomes. With current advances in technology and the flexibility with which technology can be applied to education applications, it is important that students have access to a range of technology supports so there is minimal requirement for handwriting (e.g. digital pens, laptops, iPads, computers, software applications such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking).

Some of the students' responses provided evidence that they liked the opportunity for withdrawal to a resource room and support in smaller groups. It is therefore important that inclusive schools are able to provide an array of services and support and that inclusive programming is flexible enough to allow a withdrawal type of support to be available to students based on their individual needs. While withdrawal support is not generally perceived as an 'inclusive' practice (e.g. it takes them away from the mainstream, creates inequity and prevents participation), in this instance, where the student's view is that this practice supports their individual needs, helps improve their educational experiences, provides a supportive environment for their learning and allows them to reach their potential, it is considered an inclusive practice which meets their learning needs and helps support access, equity and participation. We need to develop services and support that are based on what the students need to meet their learning potential and which will help their access and participation to education that meets their needs. Students also suggested that they valued the opportunity to work on aspects of schooling that were not academic, such as being able to access support for things of a personal or social nature, suggesting a need for regular opportunities to receive social skills support and skilling.

Teacher characteristics

Teacher characteristics were paramount to students with an ASD and their view of school and their success in school. With this in mind, professional development to teachers is critical to not only highlight the learning characteristics of ASD but also highlight some of the key teaching practices and strategies useful when teaching students on the spectrum. Furthermore, while the need for additional support was endorsed by the students, careful consideration must be given as to how this support is delivered, taking on board different stakeholders' views. From an administrative point of view, where possible, the selection of teachers who practice ASD-friendly teaching strategies will be beneficial to students with ASD who are negotiating the mainstream schooling system. In addition, ensuring the support put in place for students on the spectrum is aligned with their individual needs and allows them to participate and reach their potential.

Conclusion

While it is acknowledged that this study is limited by a small sample size from only one school, a careful and extensive analysis of the students' thoughts and ideas is provided. Social justice means that the rights of all people in our community are considered in a fair and equitable manner. While equal opportunity targets everyone in the community, social justice targets the marginalised and disadvantaged groups of people in our society. Public policies should ensure that all people have equal access to health care services. People living in isolated communities should have the same

access to clean water and sanitation as a person living in an urban area. People of a low socioeconomic background should receive the same quality health services that a person in a higher socioeconomic income receives. Information designed to educate the community must be provided in languages that the community can understand. Similarly, with an increased incidence of students with ASD attending mainstream schools and entering high school, it is imperative that their voices are heard. By listening to their voices and taking the above recommendations on board, schools can meet these students' needs more effectively in the mainstream school environment.

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