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Asperger's Syndrome in Education

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Abstract

This literature was about Asperger's Syndrome in the educational field. Research showed that there were many myths and stereotypes associated with Asperger's and came as a result of a lack of knowledge in the educational field. Research was conducted by surveying teachers in a suburban school district in Western New York, to get a better sense of teacher knowledge about AS and their opinions and beliefs about the condition.

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Asperger's in Education

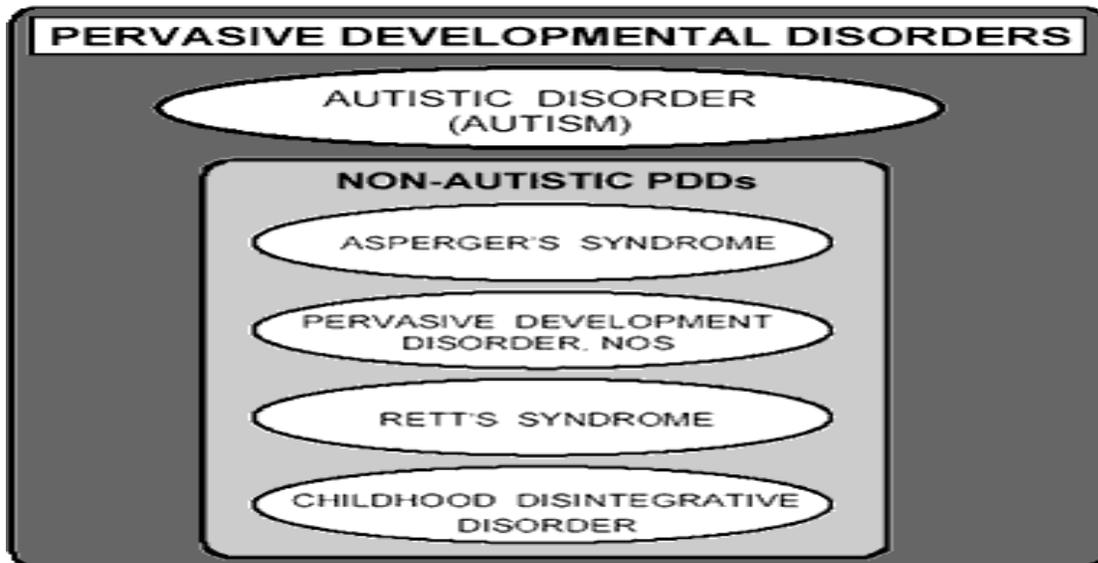
As an inclusive educator, it is my job to be not only well versed in delivering information on a given subject, but also to be able to deliver information not covered in the regular curriculum. Some of this information may include social acceptance, cultural values, teamwork, societal norms, and disability awareness. These practices should be learned, to teach to everyone across the spectrum, not just students in the mainstream regular education classroom. Inclusive education classrooms have increased dramatically across the country and it is important that educators know the importance of being able to teach students with widely different learning abilities. As mentioned by May (2005):

Since the 1960's there have been numerous legislative acts intended to protect the rights of children with disabilities. One key piece of legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides that children be placed in the least restricted environment possible for their education.
(p. 1)

The IDEA was put in place to protect the rights of students with special needs and assure them an equal opportunity to learn and function in society. One of the disabilities that teachers in regular/inclusive classroom settings deal with on a regular basis is Asperger's Syndrome (AS). This paper will cover various aspects concerning Asperger's Syndrome. The paper is broken down into these sections: About Asperger's, Myths, Interventions, Teaching Methods, and Current Research on Asperger's.

Asperger's Syndrome

Dr. Hans Asperger first identified Asperger's Syndrome in 1944. Asperger's is one of the categories that are a part of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The ASD include autistic syndromes such as Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder/Not Otherwise Specified, Retts Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (Attwood, 2008). Although Dr. Hans Asperger discovered the disorder in 1944, AS had not been recognized by the psychiatric community as a distinct syndrome until 1994. I have listed below a detailed visual example of the autism spectrum. At the top of the pervasive developmental disorders is Autism and Asperger's because these are disorders that are considered to be more highly functioning. Highly functioning is special education jargon that is used to describe someone who has autistic characteristics but can read, write, talk, play, etc. Whereas at the bottom of this spectrum are Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Retts Syndrome because these disorders do not allow the people who have them to display higher level skills.



Adapted for the web from: Shore, S. (2003). *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, 2nd Ed. Shawnee Mission, Autism Asperger Publishing Company, p. 158. Developed from: Siegel, B. (1996). *The world of the autistic child: Understanding and treating autistic spectrum disorders*. New York: Oxford Press.

(Shore, 2003, p. 146)

The Autism Society of America states that Asperger's is "high functioning autism" (ASA, 2008). Atypical patterns of behavior, activities, and interests are used to diagnose Asperger's Syndrome. This is why AS is on the top of the spectrum of autistic disorders. Individuals diagnosed with Asperger's often have good to excellent language skills with few speech delays. People with AS may also have excellent memory and cognitive skills. Most people diagnosed with AS have normal intelligence levels with higher IQ's than that of an average person their own age (Fox, 2008). People with Asperger's also have been known to have poor social skills and lack ability to identify and comprehend sarcasm, humor, body language, facial expressions, etc. Individuals with Asperger's have a desire to fit in with groups, but are often not accepted due to their lack of ability to understand social cues (ASA, 2008). Often times people with AS develop an obsession with certain topics or behavioral compulsions.

Individuals with AS may become well versed on various statistical and/or mechanical information. For example, these skills could be memorizing NASCAR statistics, learning the functions of a dishwasher, presidents, dates, and other unique interests. These individuals have also been known to experience great difficulty in understanding concepts that are not concrete.

By the time students with Asperger's reach middle school, they are often more knowledgeable and more highly functioning than that of an average student. This is especially true when students are compared in the middle school ages, grades five through eight. (Siders, 2008, p. 1)

Myths about Asperger's

There are a multitude of misconceptions that people have when talking about people with Asperger's. One common misconception that an average teacher would make is that people with Asperger's Syndrome are intellectually disabled as mentioned on page 1 of the Fox (2008) article. This belief has been proven false time and time again. As noted earlier, most people with Asperger's are highly functioning and have higher intelligence than that of the average person.

Another belief held by those who are not familiar with individuals with Asperger's is that they are violent. As mentioned by Fox 2008 "At times individuals with Asperger's will have a temper tantrum or burst of rage, but they are statistically no more violent than other individuals" (p. 1). Most outbursts have been associated with frustration build up due to an individual's inability to properly communicate.

Another common error among the beliefs of the average person is that a person with Asperger's does not speak or verbally communicate with others. People with Asperger's often have an extensive vocabulary and elevated verbal skills. This can be noted by Fox when he said, "For example, a middle school aged student with AS will have a more complex vocabulary and understanding of that vocabulary than that of a regular education student" (p.1).

A final misconception about people with Asperger's is that they are undisciplined and narrow learners. Often times a child with Asperger's acts out because they simply do not know how to act. They lack the ability to learn and understand social cues. This misconception is overturned in Fox's 2008 article where he said, "Kids with autism can, and do, learn. Again, they often have normal or high intelligence and are capable of learning as well as anyone is" (p. 2).

Effective Treatments/Interventions for Asperger's

Currently there is no specific treatment or cure for Asperger's Syndrome (Ozbayak, 2008). Treating someone with Asperger's varies significantly from case to case. Depending on the individual's symptoms and characteristics, there are numerous interventions that can be utilized in order to help someone succeed academically, socially, etc. The first approach that tends to be used was psychosocial. These psychosocial interventions can vary from a wide variety of rehabilitation methods. Ozbayak refers to several interventions on page 1 when he said, "Some of these interventions can be done through educating and training parents, individual counseling and psychotherapy, modifying behaviors, using social stories, and training social skills in groups to people with Asperger's."

Another set of interventions that are used for people with Asperger's are called psychopharmacological. This style of intervention is known for involving the use of medications. These medications often consist of stimulants and muscle relaxants that are used to help reduce an individual with Asperger's emotions, moods, stress, anxiety, and compulsions. Often people with Asperger's will have hyperactivity, inattention, impulsivity, irritability, aggression, compulsions, anxiety, or any other combination, and may be treated with medications. By using these medical treatments Ozbayak said on pages 1 and 2, it allows people with Asperger's to have easier transitions and help them in accomplishing their day to day-to-day tasks.

Effective Teaching Methods

Individuals with Asperger's along with a large number of other students who qualify for special education services are now taught in an inclusive classroom setting. When teaching students in a general education classroom, there are a multitude of effective teaching methods that can be used to have a student with Asperger's feel comfortable and have a high level of achievement in class. The first method to be used in a classroom is to make sure the classroom stays structured and disciplined. The most important part of having a structured classroom is maintaining a regular class routine. Random changes in lessons or format can cause stress for the students. It is always important to let your students know ahead of time if there will be changes to the schedule because this has been known to cause anxiety and confusion for students with AS. For example, if the teacher makes a decision to not have science at the end of the day and continues to do a math project that will take up that time, it is important to let

the student with AS know that. That way the student will be able to better handle the change, knowing it is coming, and be able to prepare to continue with his math work instead of doing science as Walden referenced on pages 1 and 2.

Another effective classroom teaching method is to use the faculty and staff to help you with your delivery of instruction and strategies. This idea is mentioned by Walden on pages 2 and 3 when he said, "These faculty members can team up with you to develop strategies to effectively deliver lessons to students in a blended classroom." By referencing other professionals who have worked with these individuals, teachers are able to obtain a wealth of pertinent information that will enable them to teach students with AS successfully.

An additional method to create a more conducive classroom for students with Asperger's is educating the other students about Asperger's Syndrome. When students are informed about what Asperger's entails, they may become more understanding and appreciative of a student with Asperger's or other conditions. A new level of acceptance can be developed through the students learning and interactions in the day-to-day activities that take place throughout the school day. As a result of this newly learned information, students will be able to develop a sense of benevolence towards students with AS, especially when they have an episode or disturbance due to their emotions. If students are taught about what AS is and about its' characteristics, then the students would be better able to understand what a student with AS is going through and be more accepting and appreciative of the

student with AS in the classroom. This idea was discussed in my special education course at Springfield College.

Creating an effective teaching atmosphere also provides a teacher the opportunity to scaffold appropriate social interactions in the school setting. When a teacher leads by example and demonstrates what is and is not acceptable, a teacher is able to indirectly teach a student with Asperger's different social cues. The teacher can teach an Asperger's student by showing how their language and actions have an effect on others as Siders mentioned on page 2.

Another method that is important to remember to use in your classroom is remaining calm and collected when students have behavioral episodes. A teacher who responds in a calm and collected manner will be better able to help a student with Asperger's get back on track. Students with Asperger's may easily become frustrated with their lack of ability to effectively communicate with people around them. This could be due to a variety of different factors such as; feeling overwhelmed, feeling uncomfortable, anxiety, etc. As a teacher it is important to try and develop outlets where students are able to express their emotions without feeling uncomfortable. For example, allowing students to self-select a timeout while waiting for a group project may be helpful; or by giving students a quiet place somewhere in the classroom to work. By having these outlets, teachers are setting up a comfortable and safe environment that may help the likelihood of student participation (Siders, 2008).

Recent Studies

A number of recent studies have been conducted to see if students with Asperger's can be effectively included

into regular education classrooms. Also, new methods to help people with Asperger's transition into everyday life have become more common. Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller (2007), conducted a study on the social acceptances of students with Asperger's Syndrome in a regular education classroom. The participants in the study were elementary students ranging from grades two through five. The researchers found that students reported feeling left out from social groups, but they did not feel lonely. The students with Asperger's reported feeling more socially accepted; however, they also mentioned not wanting to or knowing how to interact with members of different social groups.

There have been several studies conducted in attempts to find the most effective methods to get a student with Asperger's to feel more comfortable and socially accepted in the regular education classroom. Lewish, Trushell, and Woods (2005) conducted a study on the positive effects of group work on a student with Asperger's. Lewish, et al. found that students with Asperger's were much more socially active and become much more involved from a social standpoint through their group work sessions. Responses to questionnaires and interviews with these students with Asperger's indicated that they felt improvements had been made in the student's abilities to communicate socially and academically; as well as, a raised social profile among their peers.

Group work is not the only way students with Asperger's have been attempting to blend into regular education classroom settings. Sansosti and Powell-Smith (2008) conducted a study using computer games and videos to introduce and explain social interactions to students with

Asperger's and other forms of highly functioning autism. The students were given various games and video tapes to teach about social interactions over a two week period. Over the two weeks, the students showed improvements in their communication skills. These communication skills were then reinforced through the scenarios portrayed in the games and videos. The data collected from the research indicated that students with Asperger's were able to demonstrate improvements in their abilities to communicate with their regular education peers.

There are new multiple effective treatments to help students with Asperger's blend into regular education classrooms. Intervention strategies vary from group therapies to video games and integration into the regular education settings as much as possible. With these proven research methods, teachers are now able to try numerous strategies to help aid their students with AS in their abilities to communicate and build their social profiles.

Summary

Asperger's Syndrome has continued to be a hot topic in the field of education. Currently, an issue that has lead to much debate is, whether Asperger's should be considered part of the Autism Spectrum. There is a large amount of people who find themselves in a debate about this issue because people with Asperger's are often so high functioning. New methods continue to be developed and researched to help teach students with Asperger's. In time, with the advances in technology and our broadened knowledge, people with Asperger's will be able to live a high quality of life.

Asperger's Syndrome is a very interesting disorder to learn about. Initial research showed that AS is a common

disorder and it can still allow people with this condition to be high functioning members of society. The research that has been conducted has covered a broad range of areas pertaining to people with Asperger's. This research has helped us to become informed, learn strategies and interventions to help people with AS develop socially, and get these students the best education possible.

After completing this research, I will be able to successfully identify someone with Asperger's and could effectively manage and teach a student with AS in a regular education setting. I will continue to research this topic to develop a thorough understanding of the disorder and to help equip myself with a bevy of interventions and strategies to help students with Asperger's succeed academically, emotionally, and socially.

Present Study

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) was originally discovered in 1944 but was not recognized by the psychiatric community until 1994. Research showed that there are numerous misconceptions that are associated with AS and are still occurring in our school systems today. With countless classrooms being inclusive as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) law put in place, this study will examine both regular education and special education teachers and their beliefs and level of competency in concern to AS.

In order for students with AS to have their needs met adequately, the staff needs to be knowledgeable about

characteristics, identification tools, teaching strategies, etc. The information discovered through the literature review research led to the questions, "Why are there still misconceptions about AS in the classroom?" and "What are the relationships between education/preparation and educator beliefs?" A survey was developed that asked teachers questions about general information regarding AS, characteristics, myths, etc. This study examines the reasons why educators were still buying into the myths associated with AS.

Materials

I used a self-report questionnaire that was designed specifically for Asperger's Syndrome (Appendix A). It was developed on the Survey Monkey Website (Perceptions of Asperger's Syndrome). This survey explores teacher's opinions, beliefs, and knowledge about AS. The survey also gains insight into the surveyor's educational background and current occupation. The weighted scale helps to clarify exactly how strongly their opinions are and really helped to analyze the data accurately.

Methodology

In this study the researcher examines the relationship between teacher preparation and their level of competency related to teaching students with Asperger's Syndrome. The

school principal was contacted via written communication (Appendix B) to request their teacher's participation. I was granted permission and data was collected through anonymous surveys completed by teachers. The self-response surveys were distributed to the teachers throughout an elementary school in the suburban area of Western New York State, this way confidentiality was preserved and the information collected was anonymous. Teachers were given a two-week time period in order to complete the survey that was noted in the attachment explaining the survey and why I was asking them to complete it. After the surveys were complete, the examiner compiled the data from the school. The data was then examined to see if there were any correlations between teacher preparation/age/experience and the level of competency in identifying and teaching students with AS. Once the data was analyzed the examiner was able to determine the impact of experience and preparation in special education had on the classification and levels of competency for educating students with AS. The goal of this study was to identify the reasons why misconceptions are still occurring in the schools for students with AS and how they are related to teacher preparation and experience.

Results

Surveys were distributed to 30 potential participants. Of the 30 surveys that were distributed, 16 of the 30 or (53%) were completed and returned as requested. The completed surveys were separated into five individual groups based on responses to the question, how would you rate your current level of knowledge about Asperger's on a scale of one to five. The data from each individual group was then analyzed and compared to find various trends within each group. Results for each individual group were then compared with the other sub groups.

When asked to report how they would rate their current level knowledge about AS on a scale of one to five, 6 of 16 or 38% of all respondents reported having a knowledge level higher than three. Of those that reported to have a higher level of knowledge about AS 4 of 6 respondents had a master's degree in special education.

Participants were then asked how he or she gained their knowledge of AS. Of the six who responded with the highest level of knowledge about AS, each respondent reported having experience in working with someone with AS and having course training or workshops on AS. Only half of those respondents had also had university training in the area of Asperger's. Of the ten other respondents who

rated their current level a 3 or lower, 9 of them responded with gaining their knowledge through media and movies.

To get a better sense of the respondent's knowledge of Autism, they were asked to rate their current level of Autism on a scale of 1 to 5. There were 11 of 16 or 69% of respondents who recorded the same level of knowledge as they reported about Asperger's Syndrome in question 1. The other 4 respondents reported having more knowledge about Autism than Asperger's Syndrome.

Interpretation/Discussion

The data collected for this survey provides enough evidence to demonstrate that there is a lack of knowledge about students with AS in the educational field. Over the last fifteen years Asperger's has become a hot topic in the field of education. Just in the last year I have seen several news specials related to Asperger's Syndrome and education. Elementary level educators are the ones who are often first to notice or refer students who they feel may qualify for special education services. However, with so many general education teachers lacking knowledge about AS, it is unlikely that these students will be identified and the appropriate services, teaching strategies and accommodations will be implemented into their curriculum.

Many of the respondents who reported having a low level of knowledge about AS, got their information from media and movies. Unfortunately, there have been many stereotypes and misconceptions that have evolved due to misrepresentation in media and movies. The literature review and survey proved that there is a need for training in the education field in the area of Asperger's. There is a clear need for teacher training to help identify students with AS, accommodate their needs, help them use their skills in talents to best succeed academically/socially and teach other students, faculty and staff about their characteristics and condition. It was disheartening to see that there were so few educators who were confident in teaching and properly accommodating a student with AS in their classroom. Many of these students will go unidentified because they can succeed academically, so teachers do not hone in on their other defining characteristics that would help them to be identified.

In order for our educational systems to properly provide services to students with AS, there needs to be more teachers, faculty and staff trained or educated in the area of Asperger's. These students social needs are often times not being met, stereotypes/myths about AS are still occurring in education and their academic

needs/modifications are not being implemented into their curriculum. Until AS becomes a part of educational training and educators become properly informed of its characteristics, there will continue to be myths and stereotypes about these students and their needs will continue to not be met to the best of the school's ability.

Conclusion

My field research results aligned with the academic literature I reviewed on Asperger's Syndrome. There is a lack of knowledge in concern to AS in the field of education and as a result myths and stereotypes have formed over the years. Student's with AS are going unidentified and their academic/social needs are not being met as a result.

My literature review and field research have led me to identify a focus for future research. My research proved that general education teachers lack of level of knowledge about AS that would allow them to properly identify students and help to meet their needs accordingly. Researchers stated the many myths and stereotypes that have provided people with a negative image of people with AS. As a future educator I want to play an active role in eliminating these stereotypes and educating people about AS.

An interesting area to research would be how much special education training or information about the 13 IDEA categories is being taught in teacher curriculum at the university levels. With inclusive classroom settings and elementary teachers often times having students with these classifications in their classrooms, they should be trained in how to educate them, identify them and meet their needs. Elementary educators play a crucial role in helping to identify students and help to get them the appropriate services to succeed academically, socially and behaviorally. It would be insightful for elementary teachers to have knowledge about conditions like AS so that they are prepared in how to best meet the needs of their students.

Appendix A

1. How would you rate your current level of knowledge about Asperger's Syndrome on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 knowing little and five being very knowledgeable?

1 2 3 4 5

2. Please indicate how you have gained your knowledge about Asperger's Syndrome?

Experience with AS
 University Training
 Course Training/Workshops
 Media/Movies
 Internet
 Other please Specify

3. How would you rate your current level of knowledge about Autism on a scale of 1 to 5?

1 2 3 4 5

4. What is your highest degree of education?

5. When did you graduate from high school or highest level of education?

6. What is your Occupation?

7. Please indicate how much you believe the following are characteristics of a child with Asperger's Syndrome? There are no right or wrong answers, please mark the response that reflects your belief/opinion for each question.

Topics	1	2	3	4	5
Difficulty understanding social situations					
Intense interest in certain topics					
Poor motor skills					
Does not like changes in daily routine					
Displays angry outbursts					
Difficulty reading					
Difficulty understanding jokes and sarcasm					
Works well in regular education classrooms					
High intelligence level					
To what extent do you think a diagnosis of AS would impact the child's life					
To what extent do you think a diagnosis of AS would impact the family's life					
Is there are difference between autism and Asperger's Syndrome?					

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