

Should Children with Autism be in Inclusive Classrooms?

Melissa Mott

Abstract

In recent years, the number of children being diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder has gone up, especially for boys. The parents of these children must make a difficult choice between having their child attend either a public or private school; many choose private schooling specializing in autism because of the more one-on-one interaction with the teacher, avoiding inclusion. However, choosing inclusion in public schooling is the better choice because of the increasing numbers of programs geared specifically to help autistic children be educated as well as students without an autism spectrum disorder. If these programs are created with care and research, they are very effective for children with autism.

Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder should be placed in inclusive classrooms, but only after they prove capable by assessment testing and with a properly trained staff. According to Marilyn Masterson (2012), Ph.D. and RN, Autism is “a group of behavior deficits in socialization, communication, and behavior” (p. 14). Having such behavioral problems restricts a child from receiving a proper education without the right help and guidance. Once both of these aspects are accommodated for each individual child, only then will a child reach his or her full potential in a regular classroom with other children who do not share the same disorder.

Ever since the early millennium, the amount of children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder has been on the rise. Ann Christy Dybvik (2004) says that the increase may be related to the fact that there are now much better procedures to test for the disorder, as well as a more keen awareness of the disorder itself. The Youth Development Clinic (2013) of Newark, New Jersey is program that “expands in-district autism education programs for pre-school children” (p.1). It states that “compared to the national autism rate of 1 in 145, New Jersey’s rate is 1 in 72...1 in 66 boys in New Jersey are diagnosed” (p. 4). Policy 2460.08 of East Hanover Township School District (2009) states that they offer free and appropriate public education for all students (p. 4). As for New Jersey as a whole, in the New Jersey Administrative Code 6A: 14-4.2 (2013a) it clearly states:

Each public agency shall ensure that: to the maximum extent appropriate, a student with a disability is educated with children who are not disabled; special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of a student with a disability from the student’s general education class occurs only when the nature or severity of the educational disability is

such that education in the student's general class with the use of appropriate supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (p.111)

Out of the twenty-one counties in New Jersey, there are 117 public schools that have specialized programs to accommodate children with autism and 81 private schools (Autism New Jersey, 2009). For more schools to have these kinds of programs to provide accommodation to students with all different severities of autism spectrum disorders, more funding needs to be made available so that it is possible to properly train their staff to teach the children accordingly, as well as provide the right tools and materials to enhance learning. Speaking in the terms of public schooling alone, when there are not sufficient funds for these types of programs, children with autism are then placed into inclusive classrooms, but with insufficient extra help. In this case, students can't have the one-on-one learning with their teachers that they typically need because the teacher is worried about educating an entire classroom full of students, not just one. Also, these teachers usually aren't properly trained and do not know how to help a child with autism learn and understand on his or her own level. This sometimes results in the autistic child feeling being left behind and, ironically enough, does not feel included in the inclusive classroom.

The funding for these programs and teacher training is supplemented by grants given by the state. In 2003 the State of New Jersey Department of Education (2002) listed public schooling in East Hanover Township receiving \$13,956 for preschool, ages 3-5, and \$179,764 for basic ages, 3-21 (p. 15). In the upcoming 2014, SNJED (2013b) estimated public schooling in East Hanover Township receiving \$13,825 for preschool and \$243,876 for basic ages (p. 16). The funding for public preschool is going down. Although it is only a little over one-hundred dollars, the start of education is very important in young children's learning, especially if they

have a learning disability like autism. Also, just because public schools receives these grants, that does not require them to use the money for that specific program. So although most, if not all, public schools are collecting money for special education, it does not necessarily mean that they will be using that money for the special education program, impairing children with autism, for example, from obtaining the best education they can from the district.

If these autistic children are placed in classrooms right from the start of their education with other children who are not disabled in any way, the teacher has to alter his or her way of teaching for the rest of the class just because of maybe one student (Dybvik, 2004). Not only that, but Alan Harchik, the Director of Educational Services at the National Autism Center, brings up the topic of putting children with autism in either specialized schools or separate classrooms. Harchik (n.d.) says, “The place where a child is educated does not make instruction effective...it is the content and method of instruction that are most likely to result in improvement in the child’s language, social skills, and other behaviors” (para. 4). Teachers also must be properly trained to teach a child with a disability, like autism. Ann Dybvik (2004) says, “It demands a higher degree of coordination and planning among regular and special-education teachers, yet few school systems allot the time and resources to promote these exchanges” (p. 5). If teachers are not trained to accommodate to autistic students, then they will end up trying to teach the entire class the way they believe will help the child with autism, which is not necessarily the best way to go about giving an education because they would be belittling both the autistic child and the entire classroom. Dybvik (2004) says teachers are “shortchanging” all the rest of their students by adjusting their teaching methods or lessons for one student (p. 3).

Some parents feel that having their child being placed in a mainstream classroom with a teacher’s aide does not entirely help their child. From a survey done in 2000 by The National

Autistic Society, one parent of a medium-functioning child placed in a mainstream school with considerable support said, “Our son's educational needs are not being met. Our son is in crisis, on occasions, we are being asked to withdraw him from school” (p. 9). Another parent surveyed by The National Autistic Society (2000) says, “[My child] needs more time for his social skills and help with his fine motor skills. The school is more interested in his academic side - he has very little time spent on life skills” (p. 9).

Despite the ways inclusion wouldn't work in some cases, if there is a well-developed program created by the district or state, the inclusion model is then very capable of working quite well, and it may actually help children with autism to fit into society and not feel excluded. According to Karen Guldberg, there are four key developmental areas that need to be focused on for children with autism to begin learning to their full potential: language, social understanding and skills, learning with and through peers, and clear teaching of play behaviors (Guldberg, 2010). Children who have autism typically suffer lack of verbal communication (Guldberg, 2010). This is a problem because by the time a child is at that age, he or she should be able to communicate what they want, need, or have to say. Guldberg (2010) mentions that it is important to focus on “emphasizing key words, reducing the amount of language, and giving the child processing time when aiming to create communication” (p. 171). To focus on social understanding and skills, one must commence social interaction so the child will begin to understand both “verbal and nonverbal social clues,” as Guldberg (2010) says (p. 171). It is also necessary for the child to learn how to react properly to some social skills by expressing the correct emotions at the appropriate times (Guldberg, 2010). It is also very important for an autistic child's peers to become involved with him or her. As Guldberg (2010) states, by “encouraging peers to apply four simple principles: get close; follow his/her lead; talk slow; and

make it fun,” it creates “complex interactions” and helps a child with autism learn how to act through his or her peers (p. 171). Lastly, children with autism often have very “rigid routines,” according to Guldberg (2010), when it comes to play (p. 171). To gradually lean the child out of this structured comfort zone, teach the child what to play with and how to play in a controlled environment, and then subsequently allow the child to play freely (Guldberg, 2010).

There are some districts that have developed these specialized programs for maximum results. For example, East Hanover Township in Morris County, New Jersey, Frank J. Smith School has classrooms for children starting in pre-school through second grade. Carol Mott is a teacher’s aide in Frank J. Smith’s autistic-only preschool class. Before even beginning to teach in this kind of classroom environment, Mrs. Mott had to go through special education in-service training, as required by the East Hanover Board of Education (East Hanover, 2004). The East Hanover Board of Education (2004) states that each professional or paraprofessional must be knowledgeable of the skills “needed to meet the needs of children with disabilities,” use strategies to overcome behavioral difficulties that may distract other students, inform other teachers and administrators of “promising practices, materials, and technology” learned through the classroom, and participate in “training activities” with the parents of children with disabilities (p. 11).

After this is done, and the district feels that both teachers and teacher’s aides are capable and comfortable, a student that has a speculated autism spectrum disorder must go through an evaluation, either through East Hanover Township’s school, or independently, that incorporates at least two assessments in order for the child to have a diagnosed disability (New Jersey, 2012, p. 7). In the Parental Rights of Special Education booklet for East Hanover Township, next, an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, is developed according to the child’s performance

and his or her “specific instructional needs” (p. 10). Specialists may also be included in the child’s specialized education, like speech-language specialists, occupational therapists, and/or physical therapists (p. 7). It is from this that the district decides whether it would be better for the child to be placed in an inclusive or separate classroom, since children with autism usually must have very specific and structured schedule throughout the day, every day. Mrs. Mott told me the typical plans for her day in the classroom:

8:55 is when they arrive at school. 9:00-9:30, we have circle time and usually talk about the weather and say our ‘ABC’s’ or sing a song. At 9:30 we have snack time for fifteen minutes and then do a small group activity. 10:00-10:30 the kids do work with the teacher and then we do a large group activity for a half hour. The autistic kids in our room tend to learn better with computers, so we use the computers from 11:00-11:30, and then have lunch and recess. Coming back at 12:30, they do work with the teacher, followed by another small group activity, and end the day with a large group activity at 1:20 until 2:00 (C. Mott, personal communication, September 28, 2013).

The children in Mrs. Mott’s class are always encouraged to use computers, and materials like sand or clay, in which they can feel the texture. Mrs. Mott explains that sometimes children with autism either don’t respond to sensory input, or completely overreact. So to push these children to handle these sorts of materials will eventually regulate their sensory input (C. Mott, personal communication, September 28, 2013). Children should always be reevaluated for special education services every three years; however it depends on each individual child (New Jersey, 2012). Mrs. Mott (2013) says, “It depends on how the child progresses as to when they will be mainstreamed. Some kids can never go into a regular classroom. Autism is a wide spectrum and the level of the disability varies from child to child” (C. Mott, personal

communication). Mrs. Mott and the other two classroom aides, as well as the main teacher, all have the same goal for their class of eight children—to have their symptoms of autism subside and eventually being able to place them into regular, inclusive classrooms.

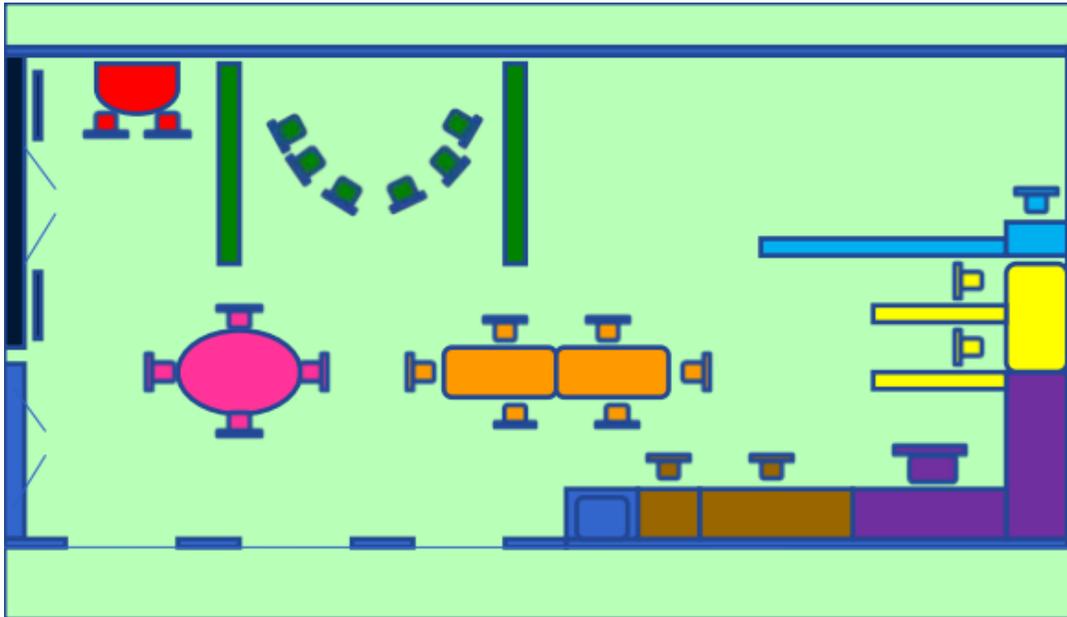
Inclusion should always be the number one priority when thinking about where to place a child with autism, regarding schooling. Lhendup Bhutia (2013) says that placing autistic children in with other children who do not have special disabilities “helps such children understand and engage society at large, while ensuring that regular children accept those who are not like themselves” (par. 5). Bhutia (2013) also says that for schools to be successful in the inclusion model, they must have the “right staff, experienced counselors, and special educators” (par. 11). It also gives autistic children the ability to learn in natural environments and even make friends with non-disabled children their own age. Alan Harchik gives a list of components that each parent should be looking for when considering choosing inclusion in a public school for their autistic child. Harchik (n.d.) says to make sure there is:

A language-based curriculum, a curriculum that progresses in an orderly manner throughout the day and addresses multiple skill development, effective instructional techniques based upon research..., frequent opportunities for the child to respond to instruction, little time when the child is not engaged in instruction, daily recording of academic work and behavior problems, and frequent review of progress and timely changes in procedures if progress is not occurring (par. 9).

In the Autism Speaks presentation slides, the topic of room structure was brought up. Having a classroom that is physically structured well will lead to the maximization of the autistic

child's functional developmental skills, as well as increase their independence and self-motivation (Autism Speaks, 2013).

Sample 1



Black – Transition Area

Red – Computers

Green – Circle Time

Pink – Small

Orange – Large

Blue – Sensory/Leisure

Yellow – Work Alone

Purple – Teacher Prep

Brown – Work w/Teacher

Note. The sample picture on classroom structure is received from Autism Speaks. (2013).

Neurons to Neighborhoods Presentation [Presentation Slides]. Retrieved from

http://www.autismspeaks.org/docs/family_services_docs/N2NPresentation.pdf

In this sample classroom, everything has been placed according to how well a child with autism will react and be stimulated by it. Everything has been color-coated for easy visualization in the Autism Speaks presentation, and is labeled below the model. Using this classroom model and almost the same program the East Hanover Township schools do, the Youth Development Clinic from Autism Speaks (2013) developed a classroom for eight autistic children, one teacher, and four paraprofessionals saving up to \$500,000 in just the first year alone. They also had

“improvements in academic, social and self-help skills for students, and increases in knowledge and job satisfaction for teaching staff” (p. 21). Since this program and model was such a success, the Youth Development Clinic expanded this to two more districts in Essex and Union county and is now working on creating like models for classrooms in preschool through eighth grade (Autism Speaks, 2013).

Inclusion is not always the right choice for children with autism, but if public schools have specific evaluations for each student that is believed to need special education, as well as train both teachers and teacher’s aides, actual educational learning for autistic children should develop. Also, having these children being placed into classrooms that are specifically designed for their enhancement of learning and going through detailed routine schedules daily should eventually lead to their symptoms subsiding. Autistic children can then be placed into inclusive classrooms with a teacher’s aide once they go through this type of schooling first. In these inclusive classrooms, there will be a teacher who is highly trained for teaching children with autism spectrum disorders, as well as a teacher’s aide for those students who will still need the extra help and attention. If more public schools both receive and use more money from grants given for the development of special education, both inclusive classrooms will work very well and less parents will feel that their child is being excluded in the education system.

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