

# SOCIAL ASPECTS OF AUTISM IN CONFLICT WITH NCLB

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## ABSTRACT

*Teaching children with autism presents an enormous challenge to educators. Professionals who have students with autism in their classrooms must decide how they will structure their curriculum to meet the special needs of these students. Current research suggests that educators should focus on developing the social behaviors of children with autism. In fact, much of the research on teaching autism does not focus on strategies and theories for teaching students specific subjects. Instead, most articles suggest that social learning serves as a foundation for all other learning in the education system. This type of research and philosophy seemed to be making headway in America's schools until the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This powerful piece of federal legislation intends to level the playing field for all demographic groups, including special education groups. Contrary to its own goals, the NCLB actually places students with autism at a disadvantage because of its emphasis on academic standards and goals at the expense of social aspects of education for students with autism. Under NCLB, educators have very few opportunities to build a solid social behavior foundation within their students with autism. In short, children with autism seem to be back where they started prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) provision of a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE).*

**A** 4-year old boy named Ben and his classmate Emily engage in what most people might recognize as effortless lunchtime chat. However, both Ben and Emily suffer from a neurological disorder called autism that,

according to Gross (2003), makes simple social behaviors such as lunchtime manners a difficulty for these children to understand and practice. Most educators will agree on the importance of the social exchange between Ben and Em-

ily. In fact, it is not farfetched to say that some educators might even expect that Ben and Emily's exchange of "Thank you" and "You're welcome" to be critical foundational social behaviors they expect children to have before entering a school system. Unfortunately, most children with autism enter school without any of these seemingly simple social graces. Most people view autism as a disorder that primarily affects a child's mental capacity and development. Quite to the contrary, autism is best described as a social impairment that is marked by severe misbehavior. Although many researchers indicate the need to build a social foundation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, currently the most powerful piece of educational legislation, requires educators to center their curriculum and classroom teaching around specific academic standards and goals (i.e., reading, mathematics, and science). Indeed, NCLB discourages educators to develop the necessary social skills that provide a groundwork for academic learning. This article will examine the clash between research supporting laying social foundations for students with autism and the requirements brought forth by NCLB, as well as the possibility of coexistence between these two educational philosophies.

Before examining the social aspects of autism and the challenges of meeting the needs of students with autism, it is important to consider the definition, nature, and consequences of autism. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (2003), the term autism covers a large scope of disabilities usually with the commonality of social deficits, lack of communication skills, possible mental retardation, and other delays in childhood development. Autism's spectrum of disorders can be classified into a number of specific disorders such as Asperg-

er syndrome, Rett's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD).

### **PREVALENCE**

Apparent increases in the prevalence of autism can be most accurately accounted for by more efficient diagnosis and broader definitions of the disorder. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (2003), autism currently occurs in about 7.5 cases per 10,000 children. However, all autistic spectrum disorders occur in approximately 20 cases per 10,000 children. Along with being aware of the prevalence of autism, it is important for health professionals, educators, and parents to understand that not all children with an autistic spectrum disorder also possess mental retardation. In fact, some children with autism are highly intelligent and high achieving (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). Social incapacities, not mental retardation, are the most prevalent impairments in children with autism.

### **CHARACTERISTICS**

Although some educators and parents might view autism as a barrier to academic achievement in the classroom, autism can be more accurately viewed as a social disorder that handicaps children from behaving in a fashion acceptable to society. The child's insufficient social maturity can often make it difficult to learn in a normal classroom and interact appropriately with peers. At the root of these social problems is the child's inability to learn by social modeling (Welton, Vakil, & Carasea, 2004). Since most children automatically model their parents' and teachers' behaviors in order to gain social skills, children with autism often fall behind in social behaviors first, and then academic capacities later in life. Specifically, children with autism often have trouble building social relationships with their peers and

do not comprehend many ordinary social meanings (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). Moreover, they may lack the ability to comprehend multiple meanings of words, idioms, and sarcasms in a variety of settings (Welton et al., 2004). Along with impaired social responsiveness, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication exists as a foundational problem for children with autism (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). However, Hallahan and Kauffman (2003) do not present incorrect grammar and poor syntax as a problem with communication for children with autism. Instead, they focus on the inability to perform effective social communication such as “failure to establish eye-to-face gaze or inability to perceive and interpret the emotions and intentions expressed by other people’s eyes and facial expressions” (p. 378). As described, impaired social responsiveness and communication are the primary deficiencies in children with autism, not the inability to cognitively process information.

As health professionals, educators, and parents become increasingly aware of impaired social responsiveness as the foundational problem in children with autism, they can assess how much social instruction each student needs. Keeping in mind that most children with autism are unable to naturally replicate appropriate social behavior, educators and parents alike must begin their educational focus with social learning rather than diving into academic subjects immediately. Welton et al. (2004) states that, “Behavioral and social issues must be viewed as areas of educational need that deserve instruction and intervention” (p. 42) suggesting that meeting children with autism’s social needs presents a great challenge, but that appropriate social development lays the foundation for all other learning. Keeping this philosophy in mind, Welton et

al.(2004) recommends that, “The natural environment of the classroom allows for social learning activities to occur throughout the day” (p. 43). With this in mind, it seems only logical that educators, especially K-2 teachers, design their curriculum to include activities and assessments that provide their students with opportunities to practice and master fundamental social behaviors before learning academic subject matter. Even though it is still difficult to meet the social needs of children with autism, current research and methods for dealing with social behaviors in autism have recently provided guidance for the fair and equitable education of autistic students. Unfortunately, these breakthroughs in classroom instruction for children with autism have been halted by the most influential piece of education legislation currently existing, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

### **IMPACT OF NCLB**

While educators could at one time focus on developing social behaviors in children with autism under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), NCLB has changed the direction of teaching children with autism. The legislation of IDEA, once the governing legislation of special education, called for educators and schools to educate students with special needs in appropriate environments that were not restrictive to the students. Under IDEA, educators enjoyed much freedom in determining what specific skills needed to be developed in each of their students, and teachers possessed the freedom to enhance their students’ social skills. However, NCLB inadvertently places a large road block on the amount of social development teachers can achieve in their classrooms. According to Rose (2004), NCLB requires schools and teachers to confront disparate

student achievement in all demographic groups, including special education students. Although it is a noble sentiment to raise expectations for all students, the act absurdly requires “that each group reach 100% proficiency in twelve years, no matter the achievement level at which it began” (p. 122). No Child Left Behind requires educators to transform students into academically competent individuals at the expense of meeting their individual and special needs. In a more realistic clause, NCLB does refer to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for special education students requiring schools to provide evidence that these students are making progress towards the overall goals of the general curriculum. However, these goals also state, “that such students catch up with all other students within twelve years” (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004, p. 154). The expectation to level the playing field for all students, regardless of their special needs, places an enormous amount of pressure on students, teachers, and schools today. In fact, Rose (2004) suggests that NCLB’s single goal guarantees failure for most schools and educators that enroll a large number of special needs students.

Besides placing lofty long-term goals on educators of special needs students, NCLB also affects how educators structure their curriculum for students with autism. Instead of gearing their curriculum around the specific educational and social needs of a student, teachers may be hard pressed to adjust their curriculum to attain the goal of a standard number or proficiency for each specific grade level. If teachers and schools cannot meet these standards set forth by the NCLB, then the teacher and school can be sanctioned and public funding can be lost for the school. With this pressure to meet academic standards, educators might neglect children with autism’s

social needs in order to help a student move on from one grade to the next (Allbritten et al., 2004). Although concentrating on academic progress in other students with special needs might seem plausible, students with autism suffer consequences stemming from the NCLB mandate because social skills are such a basic component of these students’ learning. As previously discussed, children with autism cannot start to meet academic standards until they have successfully mastered appropriate social behaviors that allow for them to participate in classroom learning. If NCLB does not allow educators of children with autism to build their curriculum around the social needs of the student, that student is unlikely to build the foundation necessary for academic achievement throughout the student’s schooling. In the child’s early years, the development of appropriate social behaviors should be assessed rather than applying grade-level testing that does not monitor student progress and achievement in social skills. No Child Left Behind Act leaves educators with a lack of direction on how to meet the social needs of children with autism, and unfortunately, leaves many children with autism without the opportunity to develop the necessary social skills to function in school and in society.

#### ALTERNATIVES STRATEGIES

If educators are unable to structure their general academic curriculum around the social needs of children with autism, they must find other strategies to teach students with autism the essential social skills needed to function properly in the classroom. Kluth (2003) offers educators a number of strategies that can help teachers meet the social needs of students with autism in normal classroom settings. She suggests that the most important consideration educators must make with one

or more children with autism is effective communication. In order to communicate effectively with children with autism, she suggests that teachers help students understand language, do not seek eye contact with children with autism, and consider their own tone of voice when speaking. Besides these tips in teacher communication, she also recommends that educators use visuals to teach material and independent work and projects to accommodate their tendency to be independent. Interestingly, Kluth (2003) also suggests that educators bring students' own interests into the classroom and use a range of assessments. Although these two strategies would help meet the child's social needs, they are not always easy to implement into a classroom that is following the guidelines of NCLB. Furthermore, Kluth and other scholars recommend that role-playing games and social activities be implemented into normal classroom settings, but again, these are difficult to implement in regards to NCLB.

Even if these strategies are implemented by teachers, students are still likely to fall short of the goals presented by NCLB. Unless NCLB is modified beyond the academic standards that it holds for all to include students with disabilities, the needs of children with autism are unlikely to be met. If NCLB would modify its standards for children with autism, these children could have more opportunities in the classroom for development of the social skills they need to make strides in their academic education. Professional educators can attempt to find a balance between meeting academic standards and meeting social needs, but this teeter-totter approach is likely to sway towards the government-sanctioned standards set for students under NCLB. It is plausible to assume that current methods for helping children with autism might disappear under the influential radar of NCLB. Leg-

islators and educational policy-makers must evaluate the current discrepancies of the NCLB in regards to special education and decide whether the law can be modified to provide a more equitable education for students with autism.

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