# IRCA ARTICLES
## Education

# Educating Students with Autism: Are There Differences in Placement?

Contributed by Cathy Pratt, Ph.D. and Scott Bellini

In 1997, family members and educators of middle school-aged students were surveyed to examine the various educational services, instructional strategies, and administrative supports which were in place to assist general and special educators in teaching students with autism. For example, educators were asked to rank their access to collaboration, paraprofessional support, planning time, external professional consultants, training and administrative support. Parents were questioned about their son/daughter's educational program, and to determine those factors which promoted their satisfaction.

As a result of survey responses, students with autism were categorized according to restrictiveness of placement. Students were determined as being in a less restrictive placement if their primary placement was a general education classroom, or if the majority of the school day was spent in a typical classroom setting. Students were classified as being in a more restrictive setting if their primary placement was a separate special education classroom, or if their only opportunities for interaction with nondisabled peers came during lunch, recess, music, art, physical education, or other non-structured events. Below are survey results which highlight the comments of family members.

Family members of students with autism in more restrictive settings reported higher levels of problem behaviors. It is unclear whether these behaviors resulted from the restrictiveness of the placement, or if students were placed in more restrictive settings because of the presence of challenging behaviors. Family members who had sons/daughters in less restrictive settings reported that they were more satisfied with staff's commitment to the education of their son/daughter, and that they were more satisfied with the academic progress of their son/daughter. Regardless of the placement, parents who were more satisfied with their son/daughter's education noted that staff had a greater ability to communicate with parents, exhibited a greater dedication to team work, and had a greater commitment to the education of their son/daughter with autism. In addition to these factors, parents noted the importance of assistance from external professional consultants as highlighted in the comments below.

> "The school works wonderfully with my son and the suggestions from the outside have been helpful."

> "The education system alone provides a minimum amount of support. A parent must be truly dedicated to work within the system and to find outside support."

Once specific students were identified, surveys were sent to general and special educators in hopes of determining the differences between more and less restrictive programs. For students who were in less restrictive settings, teachers reported a greater use of cooperative learning groups, peer mentors, peer training, external reinforcers, and behavior contracts. In addition to these factors, educators identified adequate planning time, access to external professional consultants, a strong belief in inclusion as an educational goal for students with autism, and

administrators who support inclusion as critical. Because of their exposure to students with autism, general educators in less restrictive settings also noted greater comfort with educating these students.

For students in more restrictive settings, educators reported a greater use of written/visual schedules, community-based instruction, curriculum modifications and adaptations, augmentative communication, and sensory integration. Teachers in the more restrictive setting felt slightly more access to training events on autism, and believed that special education teachers were more qualified then general education teachers to work with students with autism.

While there was no difference between the more and less restrictive group in the use and perceived importance of adequate paraprofessional support, there was a concern voiced about the dependency students develop when this type of instructional support is used incorrectly. One general educator stated:

> *"She depends entirely on her aide, who accompanies her everywhere and they often leave the classroom. She never looks at me or the other children."*

## So What Does This Mean?

Clearly, schools differ in their philosophies concerning whether student's with autism belong in more or less restrictive settings. These differences did not always seem to be influenced by the perceived competencies or level of disability of students, but rather reflected a system's belief in the appropriate placement for students with autism. Therefore, it is important to realize the important role special education administrators play in determining placement options. Once in the general education setting, the support of the building level administrator is critical in setting a positive tone for involving students with autism. Likewise, the attitudes and beliefs of educators are vital in promoting students' membership and quality education. When placement decisions are made according to disability category of students rather then based on individual need, students can be placed in settings which are not appropriate or which limit their potential. These comments from parents reflect the difficulties that can occur:

> *"My child is having trouble dealing with the behaviors of the other children with disabilities. She is around these boys and has little or no opportunity to be around girls. This is one area we are trying to change for the better next year."*

> *"She is verbal and yet until this year, I could not get her placed with other verbal kids."*

Educators stated the importance of ongoing training and access to outside consultants as critical in promoting success. When outside consultants are used, their expertise should be used as part of a team process. While outside consultants may have a tremendous understanding of autism spectrum disorders and effective approaches, the individual's team best understands the individual student. And, as school districts develop their comprehensive systems of personnel development (CSPD) plans as outlined in federal law, strategies for training personnel to adopt effective strategies should be embedded within those plans. One educator stated:

> *"Even with a degree in special education, I feel I could use more information on autistic students and the differences in dealing with their disability. I know the general education teachers feel the same way."*

While the need for a more practical and relevant curriculum was highlighted for students with autism, realize that the same criticism has been voiced on behalf of all students. Even when reflecting upon our own education, adults can point to those pieces of information which have been critical. Sadly, much of what many of us learned has not been necessary in our adult life. For students with and without autism, it is important to adopt a curriculum which truly prepares them for adulthood. In some instances, curricular options should involve opportunities to learn in the community. As one parent states:

> "She receives A's and B's on her report card, and makes the honor roll. However, I believe much of what she does is irrelevant and almost never retained. I understand that to be "included" means to do typical work, and I definitely don't want her in special education...it's a Catch 22."

Many strategies that have proven effective with students with autism were more likely to occur in more restrictive settings. Remember that services should be dictated by student need and not by placement. The strategies highlighted in the survey could just as easily be used in a general education setting. Below are a few examples:

- Since many students with autism are visual learners, written and/or picture schedules and other systems of support are extremely helpful. Visually presented information allows students to rehearse, prepare for activities, and can lessen the anxiety that many students feel when activities shift.
- Students learn and exhibit knowledge in various ways. For many students, modifying and adapting the curriculum can enhance participation. Possible accommodations include the use of a personal computer for written products, calculators for math problems, increased time to complete assignments, and reduced/increased assignments. Again, consider the individual learning style of each student.
- All students need to clearly understand expectations. Instruction should be delivered in a positive manner which matches the individual's learning style. When expectations are not clearly articulated and when instruction is not delivered in a positive manner, students have the opportunity to perform incorrectly which results in a corrective mode of interaction and negative feedback.
- Many individuals across the autism spectrum experience difficulties in processing sensory information. Interspersing age and situation appropriate sensory activities can serve to calm and help to focus a student. These strategies do not have to be complex and time- consuming. Sometimes simply allowing students to run or walk around the building at various times of the day can satisfy sensory needs.
- With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school districts are now required to conduct functional behavioral assessments. This type of assessment is critical in steering our focus away from consequence-oriented approaches to examining factors which may promote the occurrence of problem behavior. The end goal of this process is teaching alternative behaviors and creating a positive learning environment.

Developing an effective program will require the use of multiple and proven approaches which should be chosen through ongoing collaboration among all involved in the individual's life. An important part of this team is the family. While educators interact with these students for a relatively short time in each person's life, family members have the ongoing and long-term role of ensuring that their son/daughter receives the best possible education. Throughout this process, it is important for parents to maintain their spirit and work. One family member told us:

> "My expectations for my son academically may be unrealistic, but if expectations are too low, then he will never achieve."

## Keep the Focus on Meaningful Outcomes

As family members and professionals choose educational options for their son/daughter with autism, remember to teach skills that lead to meaningful outcomes, and prepare individuals for real work and community participation. Even at a young age, discussion should focus on desired long-term outcomes. As program options are discussed, all involved should gather a broader perspective of the type of programming available by considering the rich history, research, and literature both inside and outside the field of autism. And finally, maintain a focus on the individuality and preferences of people with autism. In the end, one parent's comment provides an important perspective:

> *"This has been his most successful year. The transition to middle school was uneventful. My only concern remains the lack of friendship. However, it does not seem to bother him. As long as he has his windshield wiper collection, he is content."*

Pratt, C. & Bellini, S. (1996). Educating students with autism: Are there differences in placement? The Reporter, 1 (5), 8-10.