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Education

School Cultures that Support Students Across the Autism Spectrum

Contributed by Dr. Cathy Pratt, Director

On any given day, a parent or educator may call asking for recommendations for a student on the autism spectrum who is engaging in problematic behavior or who is experiencing failure in school. Typically, comments revolve around the nature of the difficulties, the impact on the student and others, and the precipitating events (e.g., asked to do a difficult task, unstructured time, noise, an unexpected change) that have occurred that might provide insight into the situation. While all of these factors are important, one part of the equation is typically missing from these conversations: What role does the school culture play in supporting the student?

Students are educated in systems that either set the context for success, or that set the context for failure. Clearly, students on the autism spectrum can experience challenges in even the best educational environments. However, if the school culture has certain positive qualities, the scene may be set for greater success. Below are factors related to school culture, teaching climate, and school-wide discipline practices that can aid or hinder a student's educational progress.

School Culture

Upon entering any school, one is quickly able to locate the vision/mission statement that presumably guides the daily practices of the school. Typically these statements include phrases such as lifelong learner, community membership, diversity, and support for all students. However, it quickly becomes apparent whether all truly means all, or if all refers only to students who excel academically or athletically. For example, if front office staff are unaware of the student, or refer a visitor to another end of the building, then the school has likely not taken ownership of their students with disabilities. If the classroom is hidden in a secluded area of the building, providing the students with little or no opportunities to interact with others, then those students are not really part of the school. A lack of involvement in the overall culture of the school can be isolating for both students and teachers, and can eliminate potential learning opportunities.

In contrast, schools that practice their vision/mission statements, and openly demonstrate a commitment to their core values are settings that are likely to be willing to explore options and to acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual student, including those without a disability. These schools are typically able to work in a more collaborative fashion and operate according to the principle that each student deserves the collective efforts of all involved.

A key player in the process of establishing a healthy school culture is the building level administrator. In truth, the building level administrator has a greater impact on the daily educational opportunities offered students on the autism spectrum then does the director of special education. Principals who take ownership for all students and who consider any challenge affecting an individual student as a challenge for the entire school team, are most effective in working on behalf of these children. In contrast, if the principal does not take ownership, both the student and the teacher may flounder.

Teaching Climate

Some schools know how to engage teachers and create exciting environments for teachers to work in. Other settings are more oppressive, and make creativity and enthusiasm difficult to maintain. In positive teaching climates, teachers are empowered and are more likely to have an attitude that supports looking at possibilities rather then at barriers. In negative teaching climates, teachers tend to address problems with a mindset that highlights all of the reasons why a particular strategy or approach may not work. For these teachers the glass is always half empty, an attitude that most definitely has a negative "spillover" effect on students. On the other hand, educators who are open to change and who are flexible are able to make great strides in educating students.

Another important aspect of the teacher climate involves teaming. In some schools, teaching is a very isolating process. This may suffice until a crisis occurs. If teachers do not have a well established support network, and if there is not a climate of teaming and collegial support, then difficulties are magnified. Schools that place a high priority on collaboration are better equipped to handle any challenge by providing an opportunity for collective problem solving.

School-Wide Discipline Practices

In this time of zero tolerance and fear of school violence, the school district's response to disciplinary problems has much to say about school culture. Some schools take the approach of creating stricter guidelines and heightened use of suspension and expulsion. Other schools have begun to take a more proactive approach geared toward prevention. Realizing that classroom management and discipline issues hinder learning, these schools have chosen to develop school-wide programs that focus on providing more supportive environments for all students. For example, realizing that bullying is on the rise and realizing that some students feel diminished by the school experience, some schools have begun to examine strategies for connecting students to adults and to each other. By creating a sense of community, there is less opportunity for students to get lost in the system.

Other schools realize that students may not be able to put school rules into practice. For example, what does "be respectful" look like? How should one act or what should one do when being respectful? To ensure that students can operationalize these rules, some schools have begun to directly teach students how to carry out the rule. These schools are focused on teaching students how to behave rather then on the consequences of their actions. As such, staff focus on rewarding positive behaviors as opposed to merely focusing on the negatives. As a matter of practice, their positive comments outweigh negative comments in their interactions with students.

Finally, some schools have decided to develop programs based on data collected. If for example, the data demonstrate that students have a greater chance of engaging in problem behavior during recess in the weeks preceding a holiday, then the school may choose to provide more adult supervision during those weeks. If the data demonstrate that certain teachers are less successful in maintaining classroom order, then support might be provided to assist them in gaining new tools. Most important, in the end, these schools report fewer disciplinary problems.

Sometimes parents choose to send, or desire to investigate, autism specific schools for their sons and daughters. When the culture of the public school is not supportive or conducive to the child's learning, this is understandable. Notwithstanding, this decision is one that must be carefully considered, since placing a student in a setting that isolates him or her from the demands and stresses of the community may not prepare the child for the realities of life after school. Neither will it enable the student to benefit from the positive aspects of community life. Hence, schools that actively collaborate to create supportive learning environments overall, benefit everyone—students on the autism spectrum and their typical peers.

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