Amy Strange

CEP 840 – Spring 2010

Final Project

**Problem of Practice**

**Part 1: Identification of a Problem of Practice**

**Step 1: Describe the Problem of Practice.**

In my experience, children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are frequently recommended for placement in a classroom setting that is not the least restrictive environment (LRE). Instead, these students are recommended to attend either an “Autism Specific Special Day Class” or a “Non-Categorical Special Day Class.” Both of these settings encompass limited interactions with typical peer models. Moreover, these settings present exclusive opportunities for interactions with students who have similar, if not identical deficits in social interaction, communication, and repetitive and stereotyped behaviors (“Diagnosis of Autism” n.d.). As a result, students with ASD are not provided opportunities to learn alongside their typical peers, to observe their typical peers, or to learn from their typical peers.

**Step 2: Answer the following questions about the Problem of Practice:**

1. ***Why is this Problem of Practice Important to you?***

Recommendation for, and placement in appropriate classroom settings for students with ASD has been, and continues to be a pertinent area of interest for me. While working with families in their in-home Applied Behavioral Analysis program, I frequently hear about and witness families who feel frustrated, enraged, disheartened, and hopeless about their placement options for their child with ASD. Therefore, my interest in appropriate placement options for students with ASD is in part an attempt to find answers about how to effectively educate students with ASD, and how to do so in a general education classroom.

1. ***Describe the following aspects of your Problem of Practice:***
   1. ***Subject matter aspects***

Although examination of subject matter for students with ASD is relevant to their success in an inclusive classroom, my Problem of Practice will look at instruction from more of a methodological point of view.

* 1. ***Instructional aspects***

Instructional approaches are central to my Problem of Practice because I will argue that specific methodologies and techniques used to teach students with ASD are integral to their success, or lack thereof, in their classroom setting.

* 1. ***Past / current / anticipated setting of the occurrence***

There are two settings of occurrence for my Problem of Practice. These settings include the frequent placement of students in more intrusive classroom settings such as an “Autism Specific Special Day Class” or a “Non-Categorical Special Day Class,” and the infrequent placement of students with ASD in a general education class.

* 1. ***Who is involved***

In my Problem of Practice, individuals are involved at many different levels. The central individual involved is the student with ASD. Although every student with ASD is different due to the spectrum nature of this disorder, these students have varying degrees of delay in the areas of social interaction, communication, and behavior. External to the student with ASD, there are multiple individuals at different levels who are involved in my Plan of Practice. This includes the student’s family and relatives, the student’s supplemental service providers, the student’s teacher, the student’s peers, and the school administrators involved in the student’s educational program.

* 1. ***Classroom supports and / or barriers***

Classroom supports that are relevant to my Problem of Practice include the use of effective teaching methodologies; the use of effective instructional techniques; the use of appropriate modifications; the use of appropriate accommodations; the use of, and access to assistive technology services and devices; the student’s access to peer models; and the personnel needed to support the teacher. The lack of the classroom supports listed above are also the classroom barriers.

* 1. ***School level supports and / or barriers***

School level supports that are important to my Problem of Practice include implementation of effective and frequent training of school staff, collaboration between professionals working with the student with ASD, assistive technology devices provided to the teachers working with the student with ASD, and appropriate levels of staffing provided to the teacher. Like the classroom supports, the absence of these supports are also the school level barriers.

**Part 2: Problem Analysis and Goals**

**Step 1: Analyze my Problem of Practice.**

1. ***How did the Problem of Practice arise?***

Having worked with children with Autism for over 8 years, I have worked directly with over 50 children and their families. Through these experiences, I have heard about, observed, and participated in meetings to discuss the proposed classroom placement options available for the student with ASD. In the majority of these cases, the recommended placement option for the student is a version of a Special Day Class. Regardless of the individual strengths or deficits of the child, I witness the same recommendation being made meeting after meeting. To the untrained eye, one begins to think that the standard is if the child has a diagnosis of Autism, then it must be appropriate to put them in an “Autism-specific” program. To the trained eye, however, one begins to wonder what happened to LRE?

According to Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm, (2007), the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) indicates that students with disabilities must be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Additionally, LRE states that students with disabilities should be educated in a general education classroom with their non-disabled peers unless their education cannot be satisfactorily addressed in this setting. Moreover, as per LRE, a student should not be moved out of a general education environment unless that student is not able to receive a satisfactory education in the general education setting when the use of supplementary aides and services are utilized. Based on my experiences, however, the majority of the students that I have worked with are never even afforded the opportunity to learn in a general education classroom alongside their peers. Who’s to say that their education wouldn’t be satisfactorily addressed in a general education setting? Let’s give them a chance.

Although I do not know for certain how or why students with ASD are continuously recommended for more intrusive classroom placements, I would like to postulate that there are tools that can be utilized to effectively teach these students in a general education classroom (Vaughn, Gerten & Chard, 2000; Wilson & Wesson, 1986). Through an increase in knowledge of what strategies are effective in teaching students with ASD, I am hopeful that my students will be given a fair shot to learn in a school setting alongside their typical peers.

1. ***What impacts does the Problem of Practice have?***

The recommendation for, and placement of students with ASD in restrictive classroom placements has multiple implications for both myself and others. First, it impacts the families of the children that I work with because of the distress it causes them when they feel that an inappropriate placement was offered for their child. It also impacts the working relationships that I have with school district personnel because I often do not agree with their placement recommendations; thus making me more of an enemy rather than an ally. Most importantly, it impacts the children that I work with because they are being recommended for and sometimes placed in settings that are inappropriate.

**Step 2: Outline three major goals you intend to accomplish.**

There are a few goals that I intend to accomplish by addressing my Plan of Practice. Through exploration of research on how to effectively teach students with ASD, I hope to prove that there is plenty of validated support for instructing students with ASD in a general education classroom. Specifically, I will examine research regarding effective teaching methodologies for students with ASD, effective instructional strategies for students with ASD, and modifications and accommodations that can be used in the classroom. I would also like to postulate and respond to other potential variables that affect why students with ASD are not recommended for and placed in general education classrooms. These variables include lack of training for general education teachers; lack of professional development for general education teachers; lack of resources in the classroom, including personnel and materials; and lack of collaboration with other professionals.

**Part 3: Plan of Action**

**Step 1: Develop a plan of action.**

1. ***Steps taken to address the goals / how the objectives were addressed***

In order to address the issue of over recommendation and subsequent placement of students with ASD in settings that are not the least restrictive environment, I will examine research on the following: effective teaching methodologies for students with ASD, effective instructional strategies for students with ASD, and modifications and accommodations that can be used in the classroom.

There are an abundance of effective teaching methodologies that can be used in inclusive classrooms with students with ASD. Some of these methodologies include the following: co-teaching, universal design techniques, differential instruction, responsiveness to intervention, direct instruction, cognitive strategy instruction, and grouping strategies. The first approach that will be explored is co-teaching. This is a teaching approach where two teachers work together to lead the class (Vaughn et al., 2007). This approach usually involves a general education teacher instructing the class along with a special education teacher. With a universal design approach, teachers create a lesson from the start that will accommodate all learners in the classroom. Although it takes more time, this approach will guarantee that all students will be successful with the lesson. With differential instruction, teachers modify the current lesson to meet the needs of students in their classroom. This approach is not as time consuming as a universal design approach but it still enables all students to participate in the lesson. Responsiveness to instruction is a teaching methodology where students receive scientifically proved, research-based instruction as a method to prevent the student from falling behind. Once the student has received this high quality instruction and still falls behind, they will receive additional instructional support. In a direct instruction teaching format, the instruction is centered on big ideas, key concepts, and principles (Burke, Hagan & Grossen, 2002; Simmons & Kameenui, 1996). Additionally, with direct instruction, the teacher provides scaffolding, integration opportunities, and opportunities for review. Cognitive strategy instruction revolved around teaching a new concept and making sure that the student has practice with and understands that concept (“Cognitive Strategy,” n.d.; Ellis et al., 1991). Finally, with grouping strategies, the students in the class are separated into any of the following groups: whole class learning groups; small same ability, or mixed ability groups; cooperative learning groups; class wide peer tutoring; peer assistance or peer buddies; and peer tutoring (Vaughn et al., 2007). Although each of these teaching methodologies will benefit students with ASD, every student in an inclusive classroom will benefit from these approaches.

Effective instructional approaches that can be used with students with ASD include the following: allocating more time to instruction, managing the classroom, minimizing transitions, reducing free time, keeping the instructional pace brisk, presenting clear and simple instructions, provide directions in multiple forms, making instruction explicit and visible, reducing independent work, using task variation and selection, being an active teacher, and moderating the level of task difficulty (Vaughn, Gerten & Chard, 2000; Wilson & Wesson, 1986). Moreover, when a new concept is taught to students with ASD, the following can be taken into account: teach using meaningful activities, use areas of interest to introduce new material, obtain and maintain the students motivation, use pre-learning strategies before a lesson by activating the students background knowledge, use demonstration and modeling, conduct a listener-friendly lecture, ask questions to assess understanding, and teach for visual thinkers by utilizing hands on teaching. This helps make abstract concepts more concrete (Grandin, 2006; the National Association of Educators, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2007). Moreover, students with ASD benefit from using visual supports during classroom instruction. Some of these visual supports include the following: activity schedules, token systems, graphic organizers, task analysis, social stories, scripts, cartooning, and video modeling (Biederman & Freedman, 2007; Chan & O’reilly, 2008; Corbett & Abdullah, 2005; Hart & Whalon, 2008; Myles et al., 2005).

Finally, there are accommodations and modifications that are effective in teaching students in an inclusive classroom. Before we review the multitude of accommodations and modifications for students with ASD, the difference between these two terms will be outlined (“Cognitive Strategy,” n.d.). Accommodations are changes that help the student overcome or work around their disability. Modifications, on the other hand, are changes in what is being taught to or what is expected from the student. There are seven different domains of accommodations and modifications that can be used to help support students with ASD in a classroom. These include the following: supplementary aides and services, adapting instruction, adapting scheduling, adapting the setting, adapting the materials, adapting the text, and adapting the student’s response (“Cognitive Strategy,” n.d.; Myles et al., 2005; Vaughn et al., 2007). Supplementary aides include assistive equipment and assistive technology. Instructional adaptations include changing what is taught, changing how the student learns, reducing the difficulty of the task, providing a model for expectations, varying input, varying output, varying the type of learning, and varying the level of learning. A few examples of scheduling adaptations include allowing the student more time on a task, or breaking up the assignment into a few sections. Environmental or setting adaptations include altering the lesson format, altering the teaching style, or changing the grouping format. A few examples of material adaptations include using audio taped lectures, or providing a copy of notes. Text adaptations include altering the input, simplifying the textbook, highlighting key concepts, and reviewing the main ideas. Response to adaptations, which incorporates testing and grading, includes changing the type of assessment; changing the structure of assessment; changing the level of response; allowing verbal responses; or altering the grading system.

Based on the research that was conducted, the following tools can be utilized to effectively teach students with ASD in a general education classroom: use effective teaching methodologies, use effective instructional strategies, and implement accommodations and modifications. As a result of these conclusions, I would like to propose additional steps that need to be taken in order to help ensure that these tools are being utilized in a general education classroom for students with ASD (Vaughn et al., 2007). First, we need to provide education and training to school staff to ensure they have the skills necessary to teach students with ASD in their general education classrooms. Then we need to ensure that there is ongoing professional development. We also need to make sure that there are adequate personnel resources available for the general education teacher. Similarly, we need to ensure that there are adequate and appropriate materials available to the teacher in order to support the inclusive students. Finally, there should be frequent collaboration occurring between specialists, parents, and outside providers who work with the student with ASD. With these steps in place, students with ASD will have the resources and supports necessary to be successful in an inclusive classroom.

**Step 2: Develop an evaluation plan.**

In order to ensure that the plan of action and goals above are helping address the Problem of Practice, the steps in the plan need to be monitored and adapted over time. As a result, the proposed steps in the plan of action can be assessed via a brief teacher questionnaire that can be filled out on a monthly basis (See Attachment A). This initial survey can help determine if the goals are being met. Subsequently, if the survey is returned with results reflecting that the goals are being met, then a more detailed survey can be disseminated to the teachers the following month (See Attachment B). If the survey is returned with results reflecting that the goals are not being met, however, then a similar survey will be sent out two weeks later to follow up on the goals (See Attachment C).

I am hopeful that through the explanation of my Problem of Practice, I have shed some light on the importance of educating students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in an inclusive classroom.

**Attachment A – Inclusive Education Survey #1:**



**Attachment B – Inclusive Education Survey #2:**



**Attachment C – Inclusive Education Survey #3:**

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