

The inclusion of students who require augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) presents unique challenges for the regular education classroom teacher and for the other educational team members who support them; as well as for the children who require AAC themselves and their typically developing classmates (Hunt, et al., 2002; Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003; Soto, et al., 2001a; Soto et al., 2001b).

Including children who require AAC in general education classrooms would not be a practice worth continuing, however, if it was all challenge without any benefit. To date three main benefits of inclusion in general education for children who require AAC, have been identified including: (a) the satisfaction and enjoyment that the child who requires AAC and his/her parents feel as a result of participating academically with typically developing peers; (b) the academic achievements and skill that are acquired by the child who requires AAC in the inclusive education classroom; and (c) the child who requires AAC benefits from inclusion in general education classrooms because of his/her increased interaction with typically developing peers during classroom activities (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003).

Inclusion of children with ASD in general education classrooms has also been shown to be a challenging as a result of difficulties inherently present due to the characteristics of ASD (Simpson, Boer-Ott & Smith-Myles, 2003). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV), a diagnosis of ASD requires impairment in three areas of development including: (a) social interaction, (b) communication, and (c) stereotypic and repetitive behaviors. Because of these main areas of deficit, it is generally accepted that many children with ASD: (a) have a hard time relating in appropriate ways with other people, (b) have a wide range of language and communication needs and skills, (c) have difficulty in participating in lessons following an unmodified school curriculum, (d) have a need for routine and environmental sameness, and (e) may exhibit challenging and/or repetitive, stereotypic behaviors (Simpson et al., 2003). Therefore, there is little argument in the field that educational inclusion for children with ASD is a challenging endeavor. Accordingly, inclusion of learners with ASD in typical classroom settings requires careful planning by the many professionals involved (Mesibov & Shea, 1996; Simpson et al., 2003).

In the last few years, inclusive education has emerged as an increasingly promising educational practice for children who require AAC (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1998; Soto, Müller, Hunt & Goetz, 2001b) and for students with ASD (Simpson et al., 2003). In spite of the increasing trend to include children who require AAC and children with ASD in general education classrooms, little is known about the models of instruction and/or teaching or strategies that regular education teachers employ to facilitate successful inclusion and participation of children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms (Simpson, et al., 2003). There are no published studies to date that have reported information related to strategies for including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms. Therefore, there is a critical need to understand the strategies that teachers have used to successfully facilitate inclusion of children with ASD who require AAC.

For this reason, the current investigation sought to engage regular education teachers who had experience including children with ASD who required AAC in general education classrooms in an online focus group discussion in order to identify and understand the strategies that they have used to include these children.

The results of this study indicate that there are many benefits to including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms. Specifically, inclusion: (a) promotes participation in the classroom and with classmates for the child with ASD who requires AAC; (b) promotes reduction in challenging behaviors; (c) provides children who are typically developing with the opportunity to learn about

acceptance of differences and about diversity; (d) helps typically developing with the opportunity to develop social and academic leadership skills; (e) provides the opportunity for regular education teachers to learn more about themselves as educators and about the strategies they use to teach new skills and academic content; (f) promotes regular education teacher creativity; and (g) helps parents form some social connections with other parents.

Although there are definite benefits to inclusion that were discussed, the teachers also noted that inclusion did have some negative impacts on all of the individuals involved. Some of the negative impacts of inclusion include: (a) increase in stress for the child with ASD as a result of irregular routines; (b) increase in noise level within the classroom for the typically developing classmates; (c) frequent classroom interruptions for related service provision; (d) increased pressure from parents for the teachers; (e) increased workload and responsibilities for all of the professionals involved; (f) dissatisfaction with time/attention from the teacher for parents of classmates; and (g) unmet hopes/expectations for the child with ASD for their parents.

Further, analysis of the data provided by the teachers indicated that including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms presents some specific challenges. Including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms is challenging because it requires: (a) finding an appropriate curricular match for the child with ASD; (b) time to schedule services and meetings; (c) collaboration with other professions; (d) training and knowledge about ASD and AAC (for teachers and other professionals and staff); (d) answering the questions of the typically developing children in the general education classroom; (e) dealing with increased noise and activity in the classroom; and (f) providing information and support to parents of typically developing children and of children with ASD who require AAC.

However, the general education teachers did indicate that some of the challenges can be overcome by providing specific supports. Specific supports mentioned include: (a) daily communication between parents and school professionals; (b) having a positive attitude about inclusion; (c) having time for planning and collaboration; (d) training and continuing education; (e) utilizing a push-in model of service provision; (f) providing necessary accommodations, modifications and tools for participation; and (g) providing individual instruction.

Finally, the general education teachers provided recommendations for parents, professionals, other teachers and administrators who are new to the process of including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms. The recommendations for teachers included: (a) communicate and collaborate with parents and professionals, (b) seek training on AAC and curricular adaptation, (c) remember each student is an individual, (d) provide routine and structure in the classroom, (e) maintain a positive outlook on inclusion, (f) maintain open lines of communication, (g) share your knowledge with others, and (h) be flexible. The recommendations for the IEP team included: (a) seek training, (b) maintain a positive outlook on inclusion, (c) keep students interests central to decision making, (d) communicate and collaborate with parents and professionals, (e) maintain open lines of communication, (f) meet regularly with all other members of the team, (g) ask questions, (h) keep an open mind, and (i) be consistent. The recommendations for parents included: (a) maintain open lines of communication, (b) communicate and collaborate with school professionals, (c) share your knowledge, (d) keep an open mind and a positive attitude, and (e) connect with other parents. The recommendations for administrators included: (a) ensure training is available, (b) listen to staff concerns, (c) communicate with parents, (d) stay educated, (e) keep a positive attitude toward inclusion, and (f) think about class size.

This poster session will present a summarization of the results obtained from this investigation and will offer suggestions for future directions for further research and exploration related to including children with ASD who require AAC in general education classrooms.

## References

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