

**Shortcomings in Public School Support for Students on the Autism Spectrum**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper will seek to address certain issues in the American public school system in caring for and educating children on the autism spectrum. A literature review of six scholarly sources will examine how social, communication, and functional skills are often overlooked in interpersonal education programs. In addition, a media review on special education programs and teachers will articulate the public perception of children with autism while further delving into public education concerns. Lastly, a potential alternative for the public school system will be discussed through an interview with the founder of a home-based program for children with special needs.

*Keywords:* Autism, public school system, education, special education services, IEP, social skills, communication skills, functional skills, special education teacher, home-based

### **Shortcomings in Public School Support for Students on the Autism Spectrum**

Every single student, regardless of their unique abilities, is deserving of an education that is suitable to their individualized needs, growth, and unfolding potential. Transitioning from a home setting to the intensely structured environment and dynamic social atmosphere that encompasses the public education system can potentially be an overwhelming and uncomfortable experience for children. As for children who are on the autism spectrum, this transition can be especially unnerving and will only intensify throughout their public schooling experience if their independent circumstances are not properly addressed.

The decision to focus on the population of children on the autism spectrum derives from an acknowledgment of the unique obstacles they endure, not only in an education setting but also from a societal standpoint that is governed by oppressive beliefs and harmful stereotypes. Making the generalization that individuals with autism are unintelligent or lack potential is entirely false and immensely detrimental. By adopting a strength-based perspective, caregivers and instructors can help empower individuals with autism to flourish and meet their capabilities. Additionally, this approach could be a pivotal step toward eliminating negative societal perceptions of autism.

The following research will seek to explore the limitations of the American public education system in its adhering to children on the autism spectrum. Such limitations include the weakness of pedagogy pertaining to social, communicative, and functional skills. The following literature review will support the thesis that public schools lack adequacy in guiding a large portion of children with autism to obtain these particular skills, hindering their ability to achieve their full potential.

## Literature Review

Ruble et al. (2010) examine the quality of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for young children with autism, identifying concerns regarding multiple components of IEPs. An IEP is defined as a “...multidisciplinary, team-developed plan required for every child receiving special education services...” and acts as an educational guide used by teachers to instruct and support students who require special education (Ruble et al., 2010, p. 1459). The areas of weakness identified in the IEPs include the inconsistency between IEP objectives and teaching methods, unclear specification of accommodations, failure to comply with legal standards, and insufficient parent involvement (p. 1466).

The final weakness identified in the IEPs pertains specifically to students with autism, addressing the absence of social and communication skills as a goal. Ruble et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of including these particular skills in an IEP and conclude that “students with autism require specialized interventions that address comprehensive skill development, including social and communication skills, task engagement and work skills, as well as adaptive, cognitive, and motor skill” (p.1466).

Odom et al. (2022) further highlight limitations in the quality of special education services for children with autism. They express the difference in quality between structural and process components in the education programs for students with autism, conveying a significant deficiency in process quality when compared to the adequate quality of structural components. While structural characteristics, including organization and class size, were deemed as having acceptable quality, this was not the case for process quality, which involves instruction and skills development. The study determined that “the mean ratings for the social, communication, functional behavior, and independence domains were significantly below the benchmark

rating...” (Odom et al., 2022, p. 36). Wei et al. (2013) add to this finding by noting a disparity in the services received by students on the autism spectrum and state that “behavior management program[s], through which impulse control strategies and social skills, for example, could be taught” were less commonly provided despite the social and behavioral challenges related to autism (p.175). These particular studies emphasize the inadequacy of public schools in effectively supporting students with autism in the obtainment of skills such as social, communicative, and functional that require greater attention.

A study by Carlson et al. (2021) reports that seclusion and restraint approaches are disproportionately used on students with disabilities, particularly on students with autism. Seclusion is referred to as “...the involuntary confinement of a student in a room or other environment...” ( p. 290), and its excessive use on students with autism highlights a misunderstanding among school officials regarding characteristics associated with autism, calling for a more mindful approach to enriching the social, communication, and functional skills of students with autism.

Finch et al. (2022) share several lived experiences of adults with autism who reflect on their past challenges at school. One adult in particular who shared their schooling experience recounted an interaction with a teacher. When they confided in their teacher about being bullied, they were told, “Stop complaining, nobody cares about you” (p. 10). This level of unacceptance and invalidation they experienced led them to avoid school and view it as an unsafe environment. Forming positive social connections with those with autism and better understanding the social dynamics within a school setting is important to enforce a positive perception of school and create a welcoming environment where students are uplifted rather than ridiculed.

Love et al. (2019) analyze the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, or a “...teacher’s beliefs in his or her own skills” and the IEP outcomes of students on the autism spectrum (p. 47). They uncover a positive relationship between the two variables, revealing that “teacher self-beliefs are likely to have a significant impact on teachers' decisions, teaching environment, and interactions with students with ASD [autism spectrum disorder]” (p. 53). This result calls attention to a possible intervention for improving the quality of IEPs for students with autism, suggesting that more research on training approaches for teachers to help in areas where they feel incompetent could be beneficial (p. 53).

### **Public Perceptions**

In a Virginia news article, Cline (2023) addresses concerns regarding the Virginia Special Education program due to failure to meet requirements under federal law. Some areas of concern identified include issues with state support toward families and children with disabilities, the state’s complaint and due process systems, and inconsistency with IDEA regulations. Additionally, a “state report found one of Virginia’s most critical teacher shortage areas is in special education.” This finding conveys that the shortage of teachers could potentially be a determinant of the inadequacy of the special education system.

In a TikTok video published last month, BB (2023) shares her firsthand experience of being a special education teacher. She argues that she is not fairly compensated for the level of work she attends, stating that “the compensation for extra duties in [her] contract are covered under the same amount (which is not much) as a P.E. teacher.” This unjustness that special education teachers endure highlights one possible cause for the shortage of special education teachers. This shortage, in turn, could directly affect the quality of care and education that

students with autism receive in the public school system, highlighting its failure to deliver education on social and functional skills.

### **Population Advocacy**

An insightful conversation with Gerd Winkler, director of Global Autism Solutions, presents a home-based approach for children on the autism spectrum aimed at training parents to work with their special needs children in a home environment. Gerd, who has been working in the field of autism for over 35 years, discusses the advantages of a home-based program while also expressing the strengths, challenges, and future hopes for the population of children with autism. Gerd emphasizes that a more successful transition from a child's home to a public school will occur if certain fundamental social skills including eye contact, attentiveness, flexibility (not rigid and controlling), and a level of communication are established with a team of people, including the caregivers of the child, at home. Gerd illustrates the difference between a public school setting and a home-based approach by stating the following: “[in a public school], the amount of time that any teacher, with the best of intentions, can give attention to a specific child is tremendously minimized. . . .at home, in [his] approach, children are only worked with one-on-one, and that person can give a child their full attention with no distractions.”

When describing the strengths of a child with autism, Gerd identifies several significant characteristics, the first being that they are extremely intelligent; however, their intelligence may often be overlooked by others because of their repetitious behaviors that many are not familiar with. The second strength is described by Gerd as “the uncanny ability to pick up on people's emotions.” Additionally, he notes that a special needs child's cognitive ability to understand and read language is severely underestimated, emphasizing that “most children understand whatever is talked about around them, even if they don't talk.” Another strength lies in their ability to be

clear about their wants and needs; however, Gerd explains that the majority of the time, a child's indication of what they want or don't want is often ignored, and "the agenda of the adult is taken over". A particular challenge experienced by children with autism that Gerd notes is that "the world in [their] eyes can look very unpredictable and unsafe" and can lead them to feel a lack of control. This is due to their struggle to comprehend everything that is happening in their over-stimulating environment.

When asked about his future hopes for children with autism, Gerd voices that he hopes for a continued raising of awareness in the general population about autism and its prevalence. Additionally, he hopes that the general society will "have more compassion and understanding that people on the spectrum need to be treated with respect and a lack of negative judgments." (G, Winkler, personal communication, November 17, 2023).

### **Reflective Summary**

My knowledge of the current experiences of children with autism expanded greatly during the process of writing this paper, especially during my interview with Gerd. His identification of the strengths that children with autism obtain stands out to me most as those strengths are, more often than not, overlooked by the general public. In addition, his sharing his hopes for the future inflicted a sense of hope within me that the societal perception of children with autism is on its way to being more positive and compassionate. My brother has autism, and I am often disappointed with the way the public negatively perceives him and jumps to make assumptions about him. However, speaking to an individual who has worked with countless families and children with autism, my feelings about the future have shifted to become more positive. Whenever I interact with someone with autism, I will keep in mind what Gerd said about a child's ability to understand language, even if they do not speak. Myself and others can



advocate for children and other individuals with autism by spreading awareness of characteristics of autism, sharing experiences of individuals with autism, and working to eliminate harmful stereotypes. The most important thing that I want my social work peers to know about children with autism is that, when working with or interacting with them, developing a sense of trust with them is extremely important. Since environments can be extremely overstimulating, creating a safe and welcoming space for them is crucial for their well-being.

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