Teaching & Professional Practice

Level one autism/high-functioning autism: Implications for schools, principals and teachers

Marion Shields

Senior lecturer, Discipline of Education, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

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A Contextualisation
Recently a Master of Teaching student shared with me his practicum experience at a local primary school. "If only I had done your assignment first" he said, for a new student with high functioning autism had been enrolled in the class but his supervising teacher was at a loss to manage the perplexing behaviour in the classroom.

Then a Master of Education student shared the experience of a little boy with high functioning autism who was frequently punished at his school for his 'different' behaviour.

Can these scenarios be improved? I believe they can. So this paper has been written to increase understanding and to provide some practical and easily implemented suggestions.

Introduction

Although Hans Asperger in Austria and Leo Kanner in Boston identified similar patterns of behaviour in children over seventy years ago, little was heard of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) for many years. However, in recent times the names Autism, Asperger's and ASDs have become common terms, especially in school staffrooms. When did widespread recognition of this cluster of behaviours begin?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychological Association, is recognised internationally as the definitive guide on all things related to the classification of mental disorders. Over the last sixty five years and in six editions of the DSM, this cluster of behaviours has variously been referred to as: Childhood Schizophrenia (1952, 1968); Infantile Autism (1980, 1987); Autism, Asperger's Disorder (1994); and Autism Spectrum Disorders (2015).

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Within the last twenty years not only have there been several name changes for this phenomenon, but more significantly, a very substantial increase in the incidence in the western world in particular. The US based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 1 in 88 American children had an autism spectrum disorder in 2012, but by 2014 this had increased to 1 in 68 children (Arehart-Treichel, 2014; CDC, 2016). Further, half the children in the latest report had average or above average intelligence.

So what does this mean for schools? For school principals?

Australian Schools (public and private) are covered by the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) which protects people with a disability against discrimination in education, such as by a school refusing or failing to accept an application for admission from a child with a disability (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2016). In 2005 the DDA was further developed with the publication of the Disability Standards for Education which outlines schools' responsibilities towards children with disabilities.

As children with high functioning autism have increasingly been educated in mainstream primary classrooms, so now education in mainstream secondary classrooms is perceived by the students and their families as the next step (White, Ollendick, & Bray, 2011), and onwards toward university (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). Parents also want their children who have ASDs, to be able to be educated with their siblings and peers (Zager & Alpern, 2010).

However, the reality is that this situation often provides a dilemma for school principals, especially if the school is small. Konza (2008) comments:

> Few mainstream schools are prepared to advertise that they accept students with significant special

needs for fear that they be seen as a "dumping ground". This is true even of schools that claim to offer high levels of pastoral care and an ethos that contributes to the overall development and potential of all students. Being able to claim a high percentage of students in the upper bands of ability on state-wide assessments attracts more students than does a claim that the school welcomes and caters for all comers.   (p. 41)

Further, Christian schools are also likely to attract a disproportionate number of students with disabilities, as they are perceived by many to have smaller classes and a more caring ethos (Rieger, 2010). The implication of being seen as a 'special school' has in many instances led to resistance on the part of principals from independent schools to enroll these students (Williams, Pazey, Shelby & Yates, 2013). From a Christian perspective though, should we not make a genuine effort to include these children in a faith based educational environment together with their brothers and sisters?

So what does this mean for classroom teachers?

Within the classroom, teachers interact on a daily basis with their students. However, Vaz et al (2015, p. 2) while researching teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, noted that practical concerns about how inclusive education can be implemented were the main issues. The day to day difficulties of managing and educating students who 'march to the beat of a different drum' within a regular classroom can be overwhelming. That statement, attributed to Thoreau, exactly describes the reality for many children and adults on the autism spectrum. Routine activities and many teaching methods do not align with ASD characteristics (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood & Sherman, 2015) and yet the traits of this spectrum, when understood and acknowledged, can be addressed, leading to a happier and more effective educational experience for all – students and teachers. Learning to understand the characteristics and needs of these students and then working to adjust their learning experiences validates the Christian ethos of justice, equity and compassion.

While it is openly acknowledged that all children on the spectrum are unique: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism" (Shore, 2014), nevertheless there are many characteristics that are common to this group and specific ways to address them effectively.

Some children on the autism spectrum exhibit a complete loss of behavioural control known

as a meltdown, from time to time (Koch, 2010) and sometimes these are incorrectly labelled as tantrums. However, a meltdown is the result of extreme anxiety and stress when the child just cannot cope with the situation; it is not behaviour to manipulate and get his or her own way. Meltdowns are not inevitable and can often be prevented by addressing and accommodating some of the following common characteristics for students with ASDs.

Common ASD characteristics and proactive accommodations:

1. Severe widespread anxiety—leading to low frustration tolerance, fixations, sickness, apprehension about worrying and confusing thoughts (Trenbath, Germano, Johnason & Dissanayake, 2012; Hare, Wood, Wastell & Skirrow, 2014).

   Proactive accommodations set 1.
   - Communicate clear structured organisation throughout the day, including well-defined requirements, instructions and clear expectations.
   - Establish and maintain consistent routines.
   - Schedule calm times in the classroom.
   - Post a visual timetable close to the child.
   - Make provision for cognitive behavioural therapy to assist in correcting misperceptions of reality.
   - Consider using dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT, Koch, 2010) which assists in regulating emotions.

2. Hyper-sensitivity to sensory stimulation—touch, smell, sound, light and people (Lawrence, Alleckson, & Bjorklund, 2010).

   Proactive accommodations set 2.
   - Anticipate events and conditions that may trigger a sensory stress-reaction in the student and make relevant adjustments to the student's timetable and/or classroom/environmental conditions.
   - Adjust transition between activities and classes, allowing the child to exit earlier or later than the main group.
   - Allocate the child a locker on the end of a row, not in the middle.
   - Provide a quiet place in the room as a refuge/or have a signal or card to indicate stress and a need to leave.

3. Difficulties with executive functioning—such as cognitive control, reasoning, problem solving,

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planning as well as organisational skills (White, Ollendick & Bray, 2011).

Proactive accommodations set 3.
- Use colour coding for documents.
- Provide visual timetables.
- Train in the use of checklists, daily planners, post-it notes, a memory notebook.
- Train in specific problem solving strategies and processes.

4. Time management (Roberts, 2010).

Proactive accommodations set 4.
- Practise reference to clocks, timers, alarms, and written timetables.

5. Problems understanding social conventions—including social cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Zager & Alpern, 2010).

Proactive accommodations set 5.
- Engage in role plays.
- Share 'Social Stories' (intentionally written for the student).
- View short video clips depicting correct behaviour or the student's own behaviour as a learning tool.

6.. Difficulties interacting and communicating with others—that are often blocks to successful group work (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010) including different vocal intonation and lack of eye contact.

Proactive accommodations set 6.
- Train in social skills (including communication and conflict management).
- Carefully select and assign group membership.
- Alert to and prevent bullying.
- Organise buddies and create a 'caring-class' approach.
- Have options for some work to be done individually.

7. Dealing with change—including unexpected changes in schedules and locations (Roberts, 2010).

Proactive accommodations set 7.
- Train the student in change management, even rehearsing a particular event and how to problem solve.
- Plan early for any foreseen change (advising

some time ahead/notifying both parents and the student).

8. Intense personal interests—in particular topics/'obsessions' with a corresponding lack of interest in (or motivation towards) areas not related to these interests (Schlabach, 2008).

Proactive accommodations set 7.
- Incorporate (where possible) their personal 'interests' into other curriculum areas.
- Use the 'interest' as a motivator or reward for other work completed (this could include a project on a stand-alone screen phone/tablet/computer).
- Draw on their extensive knowledge of their high-interest 'topics' where appropriate and allow them to demonstrate their expertise.

Individualised Plans

In addition, students with ASDs need to have an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) sometimes known as an ILP (Individual Learning Plan) or similar. This plan, designed by a transdisciplinary team which includes the teacher, the parents, the student (if aged 14 or over as recommended by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2005), and other educational/therapy/medical/behavioural support as needed, sets out the relevant major goals for the student for the next six months. The omission of students from this important aspect of transition was described by Strnadova and Cummings' (2014) Australian research as alarming. When students are encouraged and taught how to participate meaningfully in their transition programs in high school they are three times more likely to undertake further study and five times more likely to be in work some years after leaving school (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

Secondary schools have a critical role in preparing young people with ASDs for post-school life with practical life skills. In addition, assisting their transition into tertiary education is essential, for research (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Pillay & Bhat, 2012) has demonstrated that many university providers are not well-prepared to support students with ASDs. Therefore, Support Teachers (and parents) need to assist the student through a number of visits that familiarise the student with locations, facilities, procedures, interviews with lecturers and the Disability Support Officer.

Conclusion

An understanding of these characteristics and incorporation of the suggested accommodations will ease the educational path for both students

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with ASDs and their teachers. The role of the principal is also critical in providing both emotional support (scheduled conferencing on concerns, casual intentional affirmation and encouragement, discussing a suitable mentor with ASD experience), and practical support (such as—assessment of need for a classroom assistant, relief time for significant meetings with parents and IEP meetings, and relevant professional development for teachers). Further, it should always be remembered that parents of students with disabilities must be included in this educational process and treated with understanding and respect; they know their child well and can be an invaluable resource and support for the teacher.

A willingness to understand, differentiate and make accommodations for the student on the autism spectrum will lead to a happier student, teacher and classroom! This foundational experience facilitates a positive transition to post-school training, successful employment and a fulfilling life.

"willingness to understand, differentiate and make accommodations for the student on the autism spectrum will lead to a happier student, teacher and classroom!"

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