

Introduction to the Special Issue on Autism Spectrum Disorders Approaches to Training, Teaching, and Treatment

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Introduction

The strength of an educational system rests in its design and implementation. Part of what informs the design process is knowledge of student needs and valued goals and outcomes. As systems are designed, research evidence informs the implementation process. We are pleased to present a series of articles in this special issue that will aide special educators and administrators design and implement effective educational systems for children with autism spectrum disorders.

So much of the progress achieved in improving the lives of children with autism can be attributed to the work of Dr. Ivar Lovaas. In the lead article of this issue, K. Özerk, Ve, Eikeseth, and M. Özerk (2016) capture both the scholarly and personal dimensions of Lovaas' life. Dr. Lovaas conducted his work at a time that society was moving from warehousing people with disabilities to providing active treatment. Dr. Lovaas created a pathway for educating for children with autism. The scholarly and clinical descendants of Lovaas write many of the articles in this special issue. Özerk and colleagues provide a fascinating account of Lovaas' life. He was a complex and brilliant contributor to the field of behavior analysis and to the lives of so many children with autism and their families. One of the alarming features of our times is that are so many children with autism. In our second article, Özerk (2016) provides a comprehensive view of prevalence, especially with regard to the demographic and geographic dimensions relevant to educational policy making. To illustrate some of these points in context, Sugita (2106) provides an account of educational trends in one specific region of the world, California, USA. This paper reflects a keen understanding of the complexity surrounding prevalence and educational trends. Similarly, Roll-Pettersson, Olsson, and Alai-Rosales (2016) provide an analysis of proximal and distal barriers involved in the implementation of early and intensive behavioral interventions in educational systems serving children with autism. The issues explored in this article support the implementation science notion that successful training, teaching, and treatment are achieved through systemic planning and evidence based practice.

Given the background of ASD rapidly rising across the globe, we turn to a series of articles by authors from several different regions of the world that address issues related to effective implementation and training. T. Cihon, J. Cihon, and Bedient (2106) provide an example of an essential starting point: developing an agreed upon vocabulary to communicate between staff serving children with autism. In this article they share examples of a protocol successfully used in a very large school district in the Midwestern United States. Also working in an implementation setting, Suhrheinrich, Dickson, Rieuth, Lau and Stahmer (2016) address variables related to classrooms and fidelity of implementation. Specifically, they assess the degree of procedural fidelity of an evidence-based procedure, Classroom Pivotal Response Training (CPRT), and found that, while successfully implemented, there were variations that suggest that the procedures might be adapted to particular types of classrooms. The theme of adaptation resonates very clearly in the article by J. Leaf, J. Cihon, R. Leaf, McEachin, and Taubman (2016). The authors provide educators with a set of "Progressive DTT" guidelines for implementing responsive treatment that results in progress, as opposed to rigid, recipe based approaches that are implemented regardless of child responsiveness. Behavioral interventions such as DTT are only as good as the fidelity of effective implementation. Teikari and Eikeseth (2016) provide a useful article that clearly illustrates the superior effects of practice and feedback under performance conditions as compared to lectures, instructional manuals, or no training. Studies, such as this one that demonstrate, with social validity, effective means of insuring competent implementation are informative and necessary. J. Leaf, R. Leaf, McCray, Lamkins, Taubman, McEachin, and J. Cihon (2016) employed a similar training model. The authors developed a tool to assess entire classrooms in terms of fidelity of behavioral interventions for children with autism. They went on to show that classrooms that received direct instruction, practice and feedback indicated improved classroom performance.

The specific procedures that are implemented within a behavioral intervention program for children with autism are built upon a foundation of evidence. The next series of articles provides an exploration of the methods, concepts and outcomes of research in several areas relevant to teaching and treatment. Miramotez and Schwatz (2016) lead this section with a concise review and a data based example of the use of physical activity during school activities. They present an informative method and measurement of the changes in on task behaviors of four young boys with autism before and after physical activities. This paper is followed by a review and discussion of the recognition and expression of emotion in children with autism (Daou, Hady and Paulson, 2016). Daou and colleagues summarize the treatment research and provide directions and recommendations for educators addressing this area of core deficit in children with autism. Ingvarsson (2016) provides guidance in another area of core deficit, verbal behavior. This article is a tutorial on a behavior analytic conceptualization of language. Ingvarsson provides educators with the basic concepts, terms, and approaches found in the analysis of verbal behavior from a Skinnerian point of view. As this is one of the dominant perspectives in behavioral instruction, the tutorial will be a valuable aid for educators. Eldevik, Kazemi and Elsky (2016) present an excellent example of a behavioral teaching program to teach one class of verbal behavior. The authors validate a practical and useful procedure for producing generalized use of past tense verbs. Similarly, Tekin-Iftar and Olcay-Gul (2016) provide a comparison of the effectiveness of two different prompting procedures when teaching academic skills to children with autism. Finally, at a most necessary and practical level, Toussaint & Doa (2016) present evidence for a successful toilet training procedure. Additionally, they offer practitioners a method for assessing family preference for any behavioral intervention selected for use by educators.

We hope that you find this a useful collection of articles. We have attempted to address issues related to big picture policymaking as well as the everyday actions and goals that comprise education. All are important to improve the lives of people with autism.



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