CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION VIS-À-VIS THE BARRIERS FACED BY STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Mitu De[*], Ranjana Chakraborty, Manisha Bhattacharya, Pranabesh Bhunia and

Indrani Basu

Department of Botany, Gurudas College, Kolkata-54.

Head of Research and Academic Studies Unit (Hony), Autism Society West Bengal,ASWB, Kolkata-32,

Board Member, Autism Society West Bengal (ASWB), Kolkata-32
Coordinator, D.Ed. Spl. Eduation, ASWB, Kolkata-32,

Clinical Psychologist, ASWB, Kolkata-32,

Director, ASWB, Kolkata-32.

[*]Corresponding author e-mail: mituaswb@gmail.com

Abstract

Education can be a powerful tool to unify the students with disabilities and those without them. To accommodate a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a supportive learning environment, we need to understand the unique nature of autism. Inclusive education is not simply catering for the needs of students with disabilities instead it is reframing the teaching role that encourages teachers to respond to individual differences, including cultural, linguistic, cognition, physicality, emotional or social needs of students. Teachers need to have a better understanding of autism and how it may affect learning. Autism Spectrum is a lifelong and complex condition that broadly affects communication, social understanding and information processing & learning style. For successful inclusion to take place, educational provision must be adapted according to the pupil's individual needs. They also need help putting appropriate strategies in place. It is now widely recognized that students with ASD require attitudinal and social support to be truly integrated into a general education classroom

Keywords: Inclusive education, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), learning style, visual supports

Introduction:

Teachers are the ones entrusted with the task of making inclusion a reality. They work in complex situations and the success of inclusion is dependent on the class teacher accepting diversity, different learning styles and maintaining a flexible system. In the evaluation of

UNESCO funded project 'Special needs in the classroom' the researchers concluded that *"relatively small changes in schooling, supported by better teacher preparation, can facilitate the education of many children with disabilities and make better arrangements for many others who experience difficulties in learning"* [1].

Education can be a powerful tool to unify the students with disabilities and those without them [2]. Inclusive education is not simply catering for the needs of students with disabilities instead it is reframing the teaching role that encourages teachers to respond to individual differences, including cultural, linguistic, cognition, physicality, emotional or social needs of students [3]. Current trends in education are moving toward more inclusive educational experiences for children with disabilities, alternative learning styles, and differentiated instructional practices to support all students to succeed [4].

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are neuro-developmental disorders with characteristic core symptoms such as impairments in social interaction, deviance in communication, repetitive and stereotyped behavior, and impaired motor skills. Autism, a global health crisis that knows no borders; it does not discriminate based on nationality, ethnicity or social status [5]. Without appropriate intervention, challenging behaviors tend to persist in individuals with ASD and related developmental disabilities [6]. This can lead to exclusion from education- and community-based services (and social participation more generally) which, in turn, serves to further limit opportunities for learning and development [7]. Teachers need to have a better understanding of autism and how it may affect learning. They also need help putting appropriate strategies in place.

Challenges for the teachers:

a. Teachers who work with students with autistic spectrum disorders may be required to read a student's nonverbal cues, predict problem situations, and develop a communication system to increase learning and understanding [8]. For many teachers, especially those who are working to integrate students with autism into their general education classrooms, this can be a time consuming and arduous task.

b. Another challenge for educators is that individuals with autism are known to have splintered skills, which means that they excel in some areas of learning, such as reading or mathematics, but perform far below their developmental level in others [9]. Since many cognitive skills are mastered sequentially, a severe delay in one area of learning (such as reading comprehension) can affect learning across all domains.

c. For many educators, students with autism are among the most difficult students to reach because of their distinctive learning styles [9]. For the each student with ASD the learning style may vary. So it becomes challenging for the teacher to use different approaches to teaching in a particular class if there are more than one student with ASD as well as the general students.

d. Teachers in an inclusive system often confront the following situation among students with autism The nature of Autism is such that during schoolwork, students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder often:
   • demonstrate poor organizational skills,
   • do not feel rewarded by the social interaction surrounding schoolwork,
    • need expectations spelled out very clearly,

- • have no way of predicting how long an activity will last,
- • are unsure where to start and when to finish an activity,
- • will often repeat an activity as they are unaware it has ended (hence many autistic repetitive behaviours such as spinning),
- • have no way of knowing or anticipating the order in which demands will be made,
- • have no anticipation of when they will get to do what they want to do, and
- • are uncomfortable with uncertainty and unable to concentrate on work to the best of their ability.

e. Other barriers include low funding, lack of knowledge and training among the teachers, lack of specialist support staff and time, lack of appropriate resourcing and class sizes.

Barriers to Inclusive Education for a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a spectrum disorder. The autism spectrum includes children with severe learning disabilities who have little or no verbal communication, through to those with an average or high IQ. This wide spectrum of needs requires a wide spectrum of educational provision, including mainstream schools, special schools, specialist units attached to mainstream schools and residential provision. For successful inclusion to take place, educational provision must be adapted according to the pupil's individual needs. All mainstream schools should be expected to teach children on the autism spectrum, and have the understanding, resources, training and specialist support to meet their needs. Where training and resource needs are not met, the principle of inclusion is undermined.

Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often demonstrate unusual and challenging behaviours, and they do not always respond to methods of discipline employed in the inclusive classroom environment. To implement effective instructional activities, it may be necessary to first focus on managing student behaviour. These behaviour problems are often the primary concern of teachers and parents, because they disrupt the learning of all students in the class, and harmony in the family. Often, children and youth with ASD engage in challenging/interfering behaviors because they are unable to use appropriate communication or social skills to get their wants or needs met [10].

Given the complexity of the disorder, it is obvious that the educational needs of persons with autism remain largely unmet [11]. Lal asserts that education for children with autism must foster the acquisition of not academic skills alone, but also socialization, adaptive skills, language and communication and reduction of problem behavior [12]. It is widely recognized that students with ASD require attitudinal and social support to be truly integrated into a general education classroom [13]. It is not surprising that otherwise skilled and competent educators and school-based professionals frequently report that they consider themselves to be less than fully capable of serving the needs of students identified as having ASD [14].

To address the above situations in a proactive manner the teachers and the educational administration must be aware of the nature and manifestation of autism. By accepting, supporting and enabling individuals with ASD in the community, with their unique strengths as well as challenges true inclusion will occur.

Understanding the student with Autism

Just as autism is a disability that varies in degree from student to student, the program that best meets the needs of students with autism should vary from student to student. So helping students to achieve their highest potential requires both an understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its characteristics. Based on epidemiological studies conducted over the past fifty years, the prevalence of ASDs appears to be increasing around the world. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a population based condition, with 1:68 children born with autism [15]. Based on prevalence rates in the West, it is estimated that anywhere between 2 to 4 million persons are likely to have ASD in India.

To reach their full potential, children and young people on the autism spectrum, wherever they are educated, must have their individual educational and other needs recognised and supported. This can be a significant challenge for schools and teachers because of the enigmatic nature of autism. What sets autism apart from other disabilities is the uneven skills development. A student with autism who may have very good verbal skills, may have poor social understanding, and therefore will require social support. A student with less verbal skills may have good academic skills, but will require Augmentative communication.

 Education is not simply about making schools available for those who are already able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion [16]. According to Grima-Farrell *et al* in 2011, "Inclusive education represents a whole-school concern and works to align special education with general education in a manner that most effectively and efficiently imparts quality education to all students" [17].

Triad of Impairment in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

To accommodate a student with autism in a supportive learning environment, we need to understand the unique nature of autism. Autism Spectrum is a lifelong and complex condition that broadly affects communication, social Understanding and Information processing & learning style. The three areas of difficulty are often referred to as a 'Triad'. They are not separate compartments; they areas of overlapping skills and each area affect each other. Autism affects various aspects of a child's cognitive and social development, and individuals with ASD often have atypical ways of thinking, learning, paying attention, and reacting to sensations. Bellini *et al* in 2007 asserted that people with ASD often found verbal and nonverbal communication challenging [18]. Education is carried out primarily by communication therefore when implementing any kind of academic adaptation we need to take into the communication support needed by the child with Autism and having a fair understanding of autism.

Reasons how the Triad of Impairment in autism may become a barrier to the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in an inclusive education system.

  1. **Communication**

Communication in Autism Spectrum it is not just about speech. It means the whole range of communication. That is both verbal and non verbal communications. Non verbal communication includes gestures, use of eye contact, facial expression, body language and use of tone in speech. Individuals with Autism do communicate, and do so in a range of ways that may be different from ours.

2. Social cognition

All individuals with autism have difficulty in social functioning although, as they grow up and learn about their social world, it is the subtle social cues & issues they miss out on.

Some difficulties in the area of social cognition are:-

- Understanding and using gestures and facile expression in a social context.
- Using and understanding the use of eye contact and gestures to regulate and give meaning to social interaction.
- Poor Theory of Mind, which is difficulty in understanding other people's mental state (other people's thoughts and emotions). Therefore the responses of a person with autism may at times appear strange or even out of place.
- Difficulty in understanding of how social communication may need to change according to the person one is interacting with. This difference in communication is based on relationships and that is defined by age, gender, and social status of the other person in relation to one's self.
- Difficulties in judging how close one stands to a peer, teacher and the Principal.

3. Processing information & Learning

The information that needs to be processed by the student with autism is wide ranging. There is the instruction of teachers and care givers. There are words spoken by the peers and various sound happening all around, even in the class next door. So from the point of view of the student with Autism what does he pay attention to?

In a classroom there is also information spoken, and implied. Implied information may be; is the student expected to copy from the black board? Listen or respond to questions asked by the teacher? Unwritten rules, unspoken expectation may be very difficult for persons with autism to understand and implement.

Challenges for teachers in Inclusive Education:
Inclusive education is defined as the concept that students with disabilities, regardless of the nature and extent of their disability, should be educated with age-appropriate peers in regular classrooms (with needed supplementary aids and services) in the neighborhood school [19].

Creating an enabling environment for persons with ASD:
The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning. The extent of disability is not determined by levels of pathologies, impairments, or functional limitations, but instead is a function of the kind of services provided to people with disabling conditions and the extent to which the physical, built environment is accommodating or not accommodating to the particular disabling condition.

The other most important part of creating an enabling environment is support. That is support the individual with disability needs not what parents and teachers thinks he should have. It is time to shift the focus away from talking about individual communication 'deficits', to looking at how we can develop environments, attitudes and curricula that are more communication enabling and empowering for these autistic persons.

Attitudinal and social support for students with ASD:

Sharma *et al* in 2007, stated that the importance of positive attitudes towards inclusive education is pivotal for the success of inclusive practices is influenced by how teachers perceive students with disabilities [20]. When a student with autism is placed in a fully inclusive environment, a number of issues must be taken into account. As mentioned previously, the appropriate supports for both children and teachers must be established for fully inclusive education to be effective [21]. It is widely recognized that students with ASD require attitudinal and social support to be truly integrated into a general education classroom [22].

Conclusion:

It is therefore vital that teacher education prepares teachers to be inclusive – not just by teaching them the theory of inclusive education, but by equipping them with the practical skills they need to identify barriers to access, participation and learning, to be reflective, critical thinkers and problem-solvers, and to actively challenge discrimination. By planning to incorporate different strategies such as visual aids, structured teaching, and tiered assignments, a teacher can help to set up a child with autism for success in the classroom socially, behaviorally, and academically.

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