

Inadequate Understanding of the needs for ASD students in Integrated Education!

1. Some people use "snowflakes" to describe the diverse difference in presentations for Autism Spectrum Disorder. Using the DSM-IV, there are as many as 2027 variations! The 3 areas of deficits are Communication, Socialization and Behaviours, which to most people automatically refer to language impairment, difficulties in relating with peers, exhibition of some repetitive and sometimes disruptive behaviours but not much difficulty in learning (given their normal or Superior IQ) in a mainstream educational setting. Unfortunately, this is a misconception, not only undertaken by lay public but also educators and policy makers, which hugely underestimates the pervasive learning difficulties faced by this group of students on a daily basis in a mainstream setting. While a very small proportion of students with ASD require no support and can cope adequately in an inclusive setting, the majority, even equipped with normal IQ, require a significant amount of support in order to benefit from an Integrated Education.
2. The existing approach to Integrated Education is problematic because it fails to take into account the special learning needs of this diverse group of individuals though yet distinctive from other SEN groups:
 - 2.1. Currently, IQ is the only criteria for placement allocation. However, the amount of support a student with ASD requires cannot be informed by a score. If "support" is recommended, there is no specification to the type of support for the school to reference for planning.
 - 2.2. Albeit their normal IQ, students with ASD are not adept in applying their intellectual skills in their daily setting. A majority of these students are not equipped with basic learning skills in a group, which is a deficit that is mostly distinctive to this group of students. These include:
 - 2.2.1. Not knowing to pay attention to interaction between teacher and other students and learn observationally from these examples (i.e. they might only pay attention to the teachers alone);
 - 2.2.2. Not paying attention when the teachers keeps talking and lacks visual demonstration or other visual medium to support teaching;
 - 2.2.3. Tuning out in a bigger group setting with a multitude of background noises (e.g. other students chatting, other students fiddling with books or school bags);
 - 2.2.4. Not showing natural curiosity or interest to most topics taught or lively stories shared by teachers or classmates, which manifest in tuning themselves off;
 - 2.2.5. Not anticipating the next routine and following instructions literally (e.g. will take out the book required by the teacher, but fail to infer that the instruction also means packing up the books from the previous lesson);
 - 2.2.6. Failing to multi-task between completing the work and listening to other important instructions;
 - 2.2.7. Failing to prioritize what is important and paying most attention to unimportant things in the classroom and demonstrate compulsion to complete some rituals (e.g. rushing to close the door in the middle of a lesson; rushing to align the desks in the middle of lining up);

- 2.2.8. Failing to understand the reasons behind basic social practice (e.g. lining up) and might act disruptively when being made to wait for a longer while;
- 2.2.9. Inflexible to changes and failing to cope with sudden change in class routines or practice;
- 2.2.10. Lack of problem solving skills (e.g. Ask for help) that are age appropriate (e.g. starting to cry or acting disruptively when they fail to open a lunchbox).

3. Due to their inadequate social understanding and limited social motivation, a significant proportion of ASD students might not be responsive to the discipline system used in most local schools:

3.1. They might not understand the concept of authority. Hence, going to the principal's office might not serve well as a measure of discipline.

3.2. They might not act respectfully to authoritative figures, such as teachers and principals. This is more of the case, when they are already feeling angry about certain things occurred previously.

3.3. Instead of acting in a fearful and started to feel remorseful to their wrong doings, in the face of being reprimanded severely or being punished, they might perceive the punishment as an independent event being launched to them for no reasons. As a result, they will act explosively or violently as an act to protest.

4. Although their deficits in socialization are better understood when they are relating with peers, their socialization deficits, including challenges in social understanding, perspective taking and imagination, are also penetrated in different academic subjects, including:

4.1. Chinese:

- 4.1.1. Challenges in understanding proverbs
- 4.1.2. Challenges in reading between lines
- 4.1.3. Challenges in predicting what is going to happen next in stories
- 4.1.4. Challenges in understanding the morals of stories
- 4.1.5. Challenges in creative writing

4.2. Mathematics:

- 4.2.1. Challenges in comprehension of Word Problems
- 4.2.2. Challenges in doing mental math due to problems with visualization
- 4.2.3. Challenges of understanding math concepts illustrated in different ways, when taught away from concrete operations
- 4.2.4. Challenges in 3D geometry due to difficulties with utilizing different perspectives

4.3. Science

- 4.3.1. Challenges in describing an experiment, a concept when doing write up
- 4.3.2. Challenges in abstraction: applying a concept or a scientific rule to daily events

4.4. Religious Education or Humanity subjects

- 4.4.1. Challenges of understanding advanced human emotions and abstract concepts (e.g. guilt, racism)

5. Recesses and lunchtimes are often believed to be the times that an ASD student will truly benefit in Integrated Education, given peer relationship skills are their core area of deficits. The following evidence, on the contrary, showed that students with ASD could be harmed by Integrated Education, if the school is not prepared to provide support (a lot of support) during social times!
 - 5.1. Research showed that social exposure alone did not result in meaningful social integration. Quite the contrary, social alienation and often bullying are reported in studies on adolescents of Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism. (40-90% reported being bullied in mainstream schools) A significant proportion of these adolescents also presented traits of Depression and Anxiety Disorder (11-80%).
 - 5.2. Research showed that most bullying happened during social times in places like bathrooms or some obscure areas in school, where teachers seldom go.
 - 5.3. Research showed that children who do not have friends, or demonstrate some stigmatizing behaviours are more vulnerable targets for bullying.
6. With the knowledge that the current Integrated Education is problematic for students with ASD and considering their unique needs of learning while embracing the position of not denying students of ASD a meaningful and beneficial education, the following recommendations are made:
 - 6.1. Parameters other than IQ should be provided to schools to better plan their use of resource on a particular student. These parameters should be based on their unique learning needs listed above (See paragraphs 2, 3 & 4).
 - 6.2. Given their diversified presentations, further assessment on their learning needs is necessary in the first two months of schooling. Given the importance of these assessments in informing the amount and format of support for the student, experts should be consulted, not teachers. Educational or clinical psychologists specialized in Autism are recommended.
 - 6.3. For students who might need intensive support for a relatively brief duration (e.g. half to one school-year), accommodation and provisions (e.g. segregated classrooms in the same school premise or outside school) should be considered.
 - 6.4. Albeit their overall normal intelligence in some ASD students, some of them are not and never will be equipped with the specific profile of intelligence to cope with the learning format tailor made for typical students in mainstream schools. In order not to deny them of an appropriate education, local specials schools with curriculum designed for Intellectual Disabled students are not a solution. Provision of government funded Special Schools for the Autistic population is recommended.
 - 6.5. The unique learning needs for students with ASD call for highly specialized expertise in providing the support and training. There needs to be a central effort in providing this expertise, instead of leaving it to individual schools to locate different training resources.
 - 6.6. If one of the aims of Integrated Education is to provide equal opportunities in accessing meaningful mainstream education for all students, the public

examination system need to reflect the same ideal of fairness. In order not to penalize their deficiencies in language, inclusion of autism expertise into the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority to suggest on the format of examination and the types of provision necessary, is highly recommended.

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