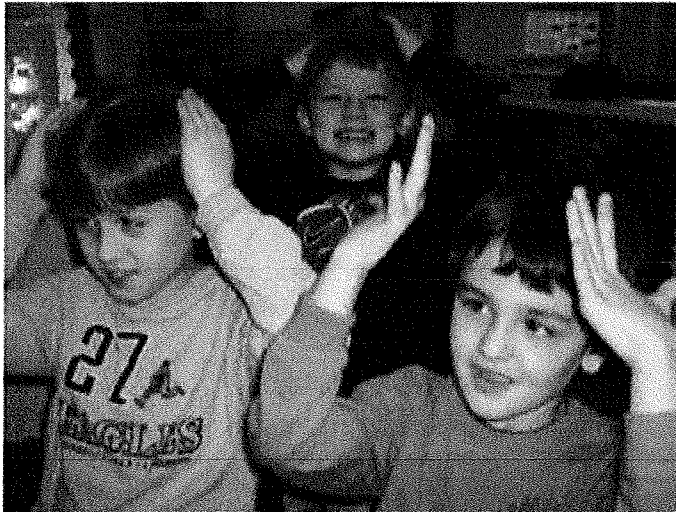


Interventions for Increasing the Academic Engagement of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders in Inclusive Classrooms



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Joseph, a student with autism in Ms. Mendez's inclusion kindergarten class, experienced difficulty attending during group activities. He spent a significant amount of time looking at his hands and quoting parts of his favorite videos. Attempts to engage Joseph resulted in vocal protests and, at times, mild aggression. Ms. Mendez realized that she needed to address those behaviors but was unsure of how to do so. She consulted with an Intervention Assistance Team (IAT) whose members had experience designing appropriate interventions for the problem behaviors of students with autism. They generated a number of hands-on activities to help Joseph maintain his visual engagement during the group learning activity. This article describes empirically supported, field-tested strategies that have resulted in increased engagement and fewer problem behaviors for Joseph and other students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who are being educated in inclusive classrooms.

Recent legislation supporting the right of all students to access the general education curriculum and instructional environment, along with empirical support attesting to the efficacy of inclusive education (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"), has redefined the roles of special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and other service providers whose expertise is required for teaching students with disabilities in inclusive educational venues. Many students with disabilities are now included in general education classes for a majority of the school day. Their success in that environment often depends on the collective expertise of educational professionals working together to assist the student in attaining prosocial and proacademic goals. This statement is certainly true for students with ASD, many of whom are now instructed exclusively in general education classes.

The increased numbers of students with ASD that educators encounter in main-

stream settings result not only from legal and empirical support for this placement option but also from increases in the incidence of this disorder. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) reported that the occurrence of autism has increased from 2 to 6 children per 1000. Between 1994 and 2003, the number of students receiving special education services with an autism diagnosis increased six-fold. Even those figures may be underestimated, because not all children with ASD receive special education services under that label.

Students diagnosed with ASD often present unique and challenging behaviors that impede their success in inclusive classrooms. For example, they may demonstrate perseverative and self-stimulatory behaviors, impairments in social interactions and relationships, and impaired communication and language skills. As a result, they often display a limited range of interests, lack peer relationships, and resist participation in games and activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000), all of which are contrary to common characteristics for same-grade peers in general education settings. Those deficits can jeopardize student learning, not only because they interfere with relationships but also because they interfere with the learning environment for students with ASD as well as for others. In

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Abstract

Children with autism can benefit from participation in inclusive classroom environments, and many experts assert that inclusion is a civil right and is responsible for nurturing appropriate social development. However, most children with autism require specialized supports to experience success in these educational contexts. This article provides a review of the empirical research that has addressed procedures for promoting successful inclusion of students with autism. Strategies reviewed include antecedent manipulations, delayed contingencies, self-management, peer-mediated interventions, and other approaches that have been demonstrated in the literature to be useful. The article concludes with a discussion of future research needs.