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## A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Experiences with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning and Adjusting to Inclusion: Impacts of the Home and School Collaboration

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## A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Experiences with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning and Adjusting to Inclusion: Impacts of the Home and School Collaboration

### Abstract

Although inclusive classrooms provide unique opportunities for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these students face barriers during the initial transition from self-contained classrooms (Sanahuja-Gavaldà, Olmos-Rueda, & Morón-Velasco, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative, generic study was to identify how home and school collaboration impacted the transition and adjustment of students with ASD to an inclusive setting. Using a generic qualitative methodology, we collected data from 16 teachers who responded to a series of open-ended questions about their experiences with parental engagement during the transition to inclusion for students with ASD. Three themes emerged; teachers indicated that when parents and educators collaborated, (a) the students demonstrated improved academic performance, (b) the transition phase progressed more smoothly, and (c) the students achieved better social adjustment. Further, home-school collaboration resulted in teachers' ability to adjust the curricula to meet the needs of the students, students' increased motivation to complete tasks, and parents' willingness to reinforce skills at home.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Transition, Collaboration, Learning, School Intervention, Inclusion, Parent, Teacher

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# **A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Experiences with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning and Adjusting to Inclusion: Impacts of the Home and School Collaboration**

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*Although inclusive classrooms provide unique opportunities for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these students face barriers during the initial transition from self-contained classrooms (Sanahuja-Gavaldà, Olmos-Rueda, & Morón-Velasco, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative, generic study was to identify how home and school collaboration impacted the transition and adjustment of students with ASD to an inclusive setting. Using a generic qualitative methodology, we collected data from 16 teachers who responded to a series of open-ended questions about their experiences with parental engagement during the transition to inclusion for students with ASD. Three themes emerged; teachers indicated that when parents and educators collaborated, (a) the students demonstrated improved academic performance, (b) the transition phase progressed more smoothly, and (c) the students achieved better social adjustment. Further, home-school collaboration resulted in teachers' ability to adjust the curricula to meet the needs of the students, students' increased motivation to complete tasks, and parents' willingness to reinforce skills at home. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Transition, Collaboration, Learning, School Intervention, Inclusion, Parent, Teacher*

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Inclusion involves the process of transitioning students with special needs from a self-contained classroom to a general education setting (Goodall, 2015). This change provides a unique opportunity for students to interact with their age-equivalent peers. The purpose of this study was to provide additional insight about the impact of the home and school collaboration during the transition and adjustment of students with ASD to inclusive settings. After a thorough review of literature on students with autism, their education, and the inclusion process, we noted a gap in the area of how the home and school collaboration influenced the transition and adjustment phase.

This study also addresses a significant dilemma. As a child with autism transitions to an inclusive environment, many issues arise, which include the academic gap between the curriculum in the special education setting and the general education setting. The student's level of learning may be different, and the need for differentiated supports may pose a challenge to the teacher. Therefore, the results of this study potentially offer insights to support students who receive services and to support improvement of the systems currently in place at every school with inclusion programs.

## Literature Review

In this literature review, we summarize current scholarship about inclusive education for students with disabilities, the challenges teachers face when students with ASD transition into the classroom. The review also addresses the dynamics of typical collaborations between teachers and parents.

Inclusion involves providing opportunities for children with disabilities to engage in learning with nondisabled students (Goodall, 2015). In an inclusive setting, children receive support and scaffolded instructional techniques so that they can develop better understanding and acquire greater independence in the learning process (Ainscow, 2014, as cited in Goodall, 2015).

In general, educational settings, children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may experience difficulties with transitions during classroom routines, and they may respond with challenging behaviors (Ladarola et al., 2017). Some of these challenges actually occur during the initial transitional phase out of the self-contained classroom (Sanahuja-Gavaldà, Olmos-Rueda, & Morón-Velasco, 2016). During the transitional phase, many new challenges may arise, not only to the student but also to the parents and family (Carroll, 2013). However, the challenges associated with the transitional phase to move out of the self-contained classroom must be addressed to meet the goal of inclusion.

Even after the students transition into the general education classroom, challenges may persist. Some students who enter an inclusive setting face social rejection from their peers (Majoko, 2016). Students may also struggle behaviorally in the mainstream setting (Majoko, 2016). Students' behavioral responses to difficulties in transition range from noncompliance to total dependence on adult support (Schreibman, Whalen, & Stahmer, 2000, as cited in Ladarola et al., 2017). The difficulties result in challenging behaviors, which may include tantrums, aggression, and self-injury (Sanahuja-Gavaldà et al., 2016). Many of these newly integrated students require extensive services in school; thus, schools face an increased need for funds to support the students (Carroll, 2013).

With the increase of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms, educators are expected to create an inclusive educational environment, often without any guidelines made available that describe how to create that inclusive setting (Lindsay, Proulx, Thompson, & Scott, 2013). While many teachers have agreed that schools should develop initiatives to increase social interactions in the classroom and to meet the needs of the students (Hinton, Sofronoff, & Sheffield, 2008), some teachers feel unprepared to support students with ASD socially, academically, and behaviorally (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Therefore, one of the most serious challenges teachers face is working with students with autism without knowledge of autism and lack of information regarding how to obtain support and advice.

Prior researchers have suggested children with ASD benefit from mainstreaming or inclusion because it offers them the opportunity to learn from their peers (Smith, 2012, as cited in Goodall, 2015). Some benefits include positive behaviors and improvement in social skills, and as a result, teachers and parents can develop more advanced educational goals for these children (Goodall, 2015). Direct support from teachers, paraprofessionals, and service providers helps children understand their social and emotional needs and necessary life skills. Inclusion is most successful when all stakeholders are involved in the process (Nadal, Grau, & Pierats, 2014, as cited in Sanahuja-Gavaldà et al., 2016).

Increasing numbers of students with ASD are transitioning to inclusive educational settings, and parent and school collaboration is essential for student success. To ensure this collaboration, it is imperative that teachers and parents stay informed and maintain open communication between home and school (Forte & Flores, 2014). An optimal collaborative relationship involves frequent communication (Frankel, Gorospe, Chang, & Sugar, 2011),

including parents' observations and reports of behaviors and milestones from the home and the teachers' communication of goals and achievements from the school setting.

The communication and connection between the teacher and parents are vital for a child's learning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012) and consistent communication results in more successful learning (McNeal, 2014). Teachers noted that frequent communication provides parents with opportunities to share their experiences and expertise and positively impact their child's learning (Harper & Pelletier, 2010). Parents can share information about a child's disability, strengths, and weaknesses, which increases the educators' awareness of the disability and allows them to tailor instruction accordingly (Walker et al., 2012). Use of regular and effective communication to identify and address a child's level of ability appropriately maximizes opportunities to challenge the student with rigor, enabling them to constantly achieve more.

When students with ASD are transitioning to inclusive classrooms, high levels of support are necessary. Parents, teachers, and students need consistent support in the new setting as the child learns to self-monitor their behaviors and get involved in new programs (Sanahuja-Gavaldà et al., 2016). Positive parent-teacher collaboration benefits the family, educators, and students with disabilities (Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010), and parental involvement has been linked to improved academic outcomes (Newman, 2004).

Collaboration also helps the parent or caregiver mitigate challenges in the home that may arise during the transition (Kayama & Haight, 2014). Teachers have the opportunity to educate and inform parent about new theories and resources. They can also offer parents support and guidance in implementing strategies that are effective in the school setting. Collaboration with the school is of great benefit to parents, as it provides them an opportunity to feel supported while raising a child with autism and stay informed about best practices in the field (Lasky & Karge, 2011).

Researchers have used qualitative methods to examine the linguistic and social obstacles children with ASD face in school, at home, and around the community, and findings revealed these students benefitted from the use of visual cues in instruction (Roser, Aslin, McKenzie, Zahra, & Fiser, 2015). Broadly speaking, qualitative inquiry is an appropriate way to a deeper understanding of how to improve learning for children with autism. Qualitative studies and field observations can yield vital information for improving the learning of children with autism. Barnes et al. (2008) explored the ability to learn spatial context among students with autism and concluded that spatial skills were not a weakness for children with autism. These findings confirmed the importance of applying qualitative methods when attempting to understand and improve the learning opportunities for children with autism.

Educators and other professionals who work with children with autism may be better able to understand students and their parents' involvement by exploring their experiences through qualitative methods (Vuorinen, Sandberg, Sheridan, & Williams, 2014). For example, when teachers value the home and school collaboration, they encourage it and work to establish open lines of communication. They provide opportunities for rigorous education which results in increasing performance (Josilowski, 2017). Overall, qualitative methods have served as the tool for research in the field of psychology and in surrounding disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of children with autism and their journey towards learning and becoming functional members of society.

In summary, previous researchers have addressed students' transitions to inclusive mainstream educational settings. Inclusion involves providing opportunities for children with disabilities to engage in learning with nondisabled students (Goodall, 2015). Children in an inclusive setting receive differentiated instruction and academic supports which provides opportunities for them to improve comprehension skills and acquire greater independence in the learning process (Ainscow, 2014, as cited in Goodall, 2015). Studies on the transition for

individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including ASD, focused on challenges of managing individual behaviors (Lindsay et al., 2013), and close the achievement gap which resulted from the rigorous instructional levels in the inclusive setting (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). However, it is important to note that one way to address these challenges may be by developing a strong relationship between the school and home. Research suggests that a good collaborative relationship between the home and school, aids in student performance (Frankel, Gorospe, Chang, & Sugar, 2011). Through the course of this review, it became apparent that a gap in the literature persists because no researchers have addressed the issue of transitioning and adjusting to the inclusive classroom with a focus on the role of the home-school collaboration. Through conducting this study and delving into past research about the transitioning and adjustment of students with ASD, we intended to provide information to teachers, other educators, school administrators, district officials, and most of all, parents. Our hope was the information will smooth and improve the transitions of children with autism, and students can increasingly start moving to a less restrictive environment, as indicated by the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; Justesen, Gilmore, & Morrow, 2006).

### **Role of the Researchers**

Author 1 is a professor of psychology, and instructional leader in a setting for students with disabilities, and Author 2 is an instructional leader in a general and special education setting. As educators, we were interested in the inclusion process as we are aware that some students with ASD are being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. Through observation, we identified the students who transitioned easily into the program and those who experienced withdrawal and struggled emotionally, socially, and academically. We developed a deep interest in exploring what impacted the students' transitions and adjustments to the general education setting. We began speaking with general education teachers and special educators who experienced students' transitioning to or from their classrooms. We then conducted a confidential four-question open-ended interview to teachers of students with ASD and teachers in the general education and inclusion classrooms to obtain feedback about the transition and adjustment for students with ASD. For teachers who had the time, we sat down for a face to face interview, however, some preferred to write their responses at their convenience, but made themselves available for follow up questions.

### **Methods**

Generic qualitative methods supported exploration of the following research question: How does the home-school collaboration impact the transition and adjustment of students with ASD in an inclusive setting? This method provided an opportunity to explore the transition and adjustment phase experienced by students with ASD who moved to an inclusive classroom.

### **Rationale**

Methodology is of utmost importance when investigating key social concerns through research (Patton, 2014). Researchers' intentions and the information they seek determine their choice of method. In this case, generic qualitative methods provided an opportunity to learn about individuals' thoughts, opinions, and feelings, as they related to a particular topic (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Since the focus was the transition and adjustment of children with autism, generic qualitative methods were suitable to explore the teachers' experiences and opinions of the role the home and school collaboration played in that transition.

## Sampling

The following steps were taken to secure participants for this study. First, snowball sampling was employed (Patton, 2014) through word of mouth to contact teachers who were interested in sharing their experiences about students who had either entered their classrooms from a self-contained classroom or moved from their classrooms to a general education setting. Teachers who were interested signed informed consent forms and had the opportunity to ask any questions they and were informed that their participation would be confidential. Both special education and general education teachers were invited to participate, to improve reliability and validity of the study and capture multiple perspectives. Teachers were informed that they would be required to respond to a series of open-ended questions pertaining to their experience in teaching children with autism who transitioned to the inclusive classrooms. Data from teachers were associated with a number in order to protect their confidentiality. Only the researchers had access to the list of names and codes assigned to each participant's personal information as well as the information obtained.

## Data Collection

The sample for this study consisted of 16 general and special education teachers whose students transitioned from a self-contained classroom to an inclusive setting. Teachers were encouraged to reflect on the impact of the home and school collaboration in the transition process. Teachers participated in interviews, which consisted of 4 open-ended semi-structured questions, to provide information about the impact of the home-school collaboration during the transition and adjustment phase. The process allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions. The following questions were developed to solicit teachers' descriptions of the home-school collaboration:

1. How would you describe the collaborative process between yourself and parents of students transitioning to inclusion?
  - Frequency: Daily Weekly Biweekly Monthly Other
  - Mode of communication: Phone E-mail Notebook Other
2. How is the transition phase impacted by home-school collaboration?
  - Describe the experiences you had with children whose parents were involved in the collaboration between the home and school when their children were transitioning to an inclusion setting?
3. How would you describe the students' adjustment to the inclusion classroom when parents were involved, when they were not involved?
4. Can you give an example of a specific experience you had with the home-school collaboration and student transitioning to inclusion?

## Data Analysis

Analysis of the responses from the interviews provided an understanding of the role the home and school collaboration played in the transition and adjustment phase of children with ASD. The data analysis process began after all data collection was complete, according to Percy et al.'s (2015) method of inductive thematic analysis, which follows the following steps:

1. The first step was to carefully read through the first set of responses and color code the data (using highlighters) for each participant. For example, if three participants shared

that the students had difficulty making friends in the new general education classroom, we highlighted all similar statements in the same color.

2. The highlighted data was reviewed to ensure the research question was addressed and that the responses related to the transition and adjustment of children with autism.
3. Unrelated highlighted data was set aside for later review and reconsideration.
4. Sets of similar phrases were labeled to identify the patterns that emerged from the data.
5. This step-by-step process was completed for each participant. Duplicate patterns were added to the categories and labeled novel statements as new patterns.
6. Results of the pattern-development process yielded several themes.
7. As each new set of data was analyzed, the patterns and themes shifted.
8. Once the analysis process was complete, the themes were reported with supporting patterns to elucidate the results.
9. The data were synthesized in response to the research question, How does the home-school collaboration impact the transition and adjustment of students with ASD in an inclusive setting?

A discussion of the findings follows.

## **Findings**

Findings of the study provided insight into the home-school collaboration and the impact on students with autism who transition to general education classrooms. Inductive thematic analysis yielded seven patterns from the data. More specifically, the patterns indicated that when parents were involved in the inclusion process, (a) their input helped teachers design appropriate instruction, (b) the transition progressed more smoothly, (c) the students adjusted better, (d) the students were more motivated to complete tasks, (e) the students functioned at a social and emotional advantage, (f) the students demonstrated an improved academic performance, and (g) the parents reinforced academic and social skills with children at home. After further analysis and synthesis, we condensed these patterns into three themes. The three themes all suggested that when parents are involved, students experience improvements in academic adjustment, the transition phase, and social adjustment.

### **Theme 1: Improvement in Academic Adjustment**

Findings related to academic adjustment indicated that teachers believed that parents' involvement in the transition and adjustment period greatly improved the academic performance of students with autism. According to our participants, when parents are involved during the transition to inclusion, the children exhibit better academic adjustment. In addition, parental support and interest in the child's education, helps the teacher design instruction appropriately. Our findings also indicated that parental collaboration with teachers helped the children adjust better to the new setting. Participants asserted that children accepted the changes that occurred around them when parents were involved.

Participant response to some items suggested that transitioning from a small environment to our larger classroom setting was challenging for the students. When the parents were involved, however, the children were able to adjust better and demonstrate more confidence, according to some participants. The students were also more engaged and stayed on-task, resulting in improved learning outcomes. Teacher 9, who collaborated all year with the parents of a child transitioning to inclusion, described: "By the end of the successful year, the reports of incidents and negative behavior had greatly reduced." Most participants

characterized parental involvement as paramount to a child's academic success during the transition to inclusion.

A key component of successful academic adjustment is motivation to complete tasks. Parents had a positive impact on the child's academic adjustment. Teacher 8 explained, "They were more engaged, answered questions, and worked well in groups." Some participants reported that parents' lack of involvement negatively impacted students' performance. Teacher 5 stated, "Students know what is expected and perform better," when their parents were constantly involved. These children had their homework completed, performed well on the exams, and were able to do better during class activities.

Another benefit of collaboration between the home and school was the opportunity for children to generalize skills they learned in the classroom. Several participating teachers reported that involved parents reinforced the skills that the child learned at school when they were at home. When parents were involved, children were comfortable with the new material, because parents could review with them and practice the skills at home. Parents play a vital role in the child's success while transitioning and adjusting to the inclusive setting. Participants stressed the importance of parents' taking initiative, collaborating, and communicating with the child's school.

## **Theme 2: Improvements to the Transition Phase**

Inclusion is an educational process by which all students, including those with disabilities, learn together for the majority of the school day. Effectively implemented inclusion results in academic and social benefits for all students, those who have special needs and those who do not. Friendships develop, nondisabled students come to appreciate individual differences, and students with disabilities exhibit improved motivation. The results of this study indicated that when parents were involved, students had few or no problems adjusting. Parents understood why their children were transitioning to a less restricted environment.

Other responses illustrated ways in which parental involvement eased the transition period for students with ASD. Some teachers noted that after one concerned parent became aware that a paraprofessional was part of the team that helped the child become acclimated to the larger class, the parent relaxed and encouraged the child to adjust to the new environment. Teacher 14 emphasized the importance of a team of collaborators: "Quality transition is achieved when effective planning and meeting takes place not only with the parent but with all the providers who have roles in supporting the student during the adjustment period." Teacher 10 echoed the same idea and explained that overall, the home school collaboration is the sharing of knowledge about the student's strengths, interests, and preferences in order to create a plan to provide help where needed.

## **Theme 3: Improvement in Social Adjustment**

When included in the regular classroom, special needs students have the opportunity to observe their peers' working habits and adopt those habits and behaviors to enhance their own. The participants' insights on the social effects of classroom inclusion on learners with disabilities aligned with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, which holds that behavioral learning takes place through the observation, modeling, and imitation of others (Ahmed, Windsor, & Scott, 2015). For example, Teacher 11 shared,

When the student entered my class, he was constantly screaming and appeared upset quite often. However, the students and I demonstrated patience and talked

about expectations in the classroom. Within a week, we noticed that the student came into the classroom, sat quietly at his desk, and waited for instructions.

Findings further indicated parents who are interested and invested in a collaborative relationship with the school create an opportunity for student success, increased accountability, and improvement in behavioral and social skills. Teacher 14 described a child who was shy when he first entered the classroom. With the collaboration of his parent, paraprofessional, and classroom teacher, the student's social skills improved, he related positively to his peers and his academic skills improved as well. A successful home-school collaboration satisfies the student's social and emotional needs, as the student feels valued by the parent and feels happy when he sees the parent communicating with the teacher.

## **Discussion**

### **Findings Compared to Current Literature**

In general, findings of this study aligned with previous research regarding the importance of the inclusion process (Carter et al., 2017; McIntyre et al., 2017; Roleska et al., 2018). Carter et al. (2017) asserted that an inclusion setting benefits children with autism. While social skills represent a challenge, the findings of this study aligned with previous research indicated that academic rigor in the general education setting can also be challenging for students (McIntyre et al., 2017). Further, providing students with opportunities and exposure to the general education setting is of utmost importance in the development of the core skills that will help them become functioning members of society and reach their potential (Roleska et al., 2018). This study contributed to the body of knowledge in the field of educating students with autism in a least restricted environment, by revealing that strengthening the home and school collaboration, mitigates the challenges associated with the transition and adjustment in the inclusive classroom.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. A small sample size impacts the researcher's ability to generalize the results to the population at large (Patton, 2014). Teachers who participated were from one of four schools in a single city, and this limited geographical orientation may also limit the generalizability of the results. Another potential limitation of this study derived from the fact that researchers cannot ensure that participants will relate their full experiences accurately and fully. This limitation is inherent to qualitative research and may have impacted this research investigation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Recommendations based on the findings include that future researchers focus on the frequency and duration of the home and school collaboration to determine whether those factors influence students' success in transitioning to the inclusive setting. Additionally, future researchers should explore other environmental and situational aspects which may improve the transition for children with ASD. Ultimately, recommendations are for focused, nuanced inquiry to help improve the lives, learning, and success of students.

## Implications of the Findings

A robust home-school collaboration results in teachers' gaining a more complete understanding of their students' individual needs. This knowledge empowers them to transform the classroom to meet the needs of the children transitioning from a self-contained classroom. Participating in the home-school collaboration during this critical period enables teachers to design instruction that is clearly organized based on the child's needs in a structured, consistent, and reinforcing environment. As a result, the children with ASD are likely to receive an appropriate education, which may enable them to be successful.

Administrators play a key role in their organizational members' attitudes and beliefs. The principal ensures that the culture and attitudes are inclusive, pro-growth, and accommodating for students with special needs. Being an active part of the home-school collaboration during a child's transition to inclusion ensures that administrators are supporting teachers, parents, and students during this time. They also play a key role in providing resources, professional development for staff, and advocating for the appropriate placement and support for a student with special needs which aligns with district and state regulations.

For parents, participating a child's education and more specifically, a child's transition to the inclusion setting provides tremendous benefits. Findings implied that parents who are involved students tend to become more accepted in the inclusion program, they benefit from their peers, teachers, and parental involvement. Parents' awareness of their child's needs and services enables them to advocate more effectively for their child. Parents are able to share their observations to support their child's advancements towards their goals and their cognitive, social, and behavioral development. These insights enhance the teacher's and school's ability to meet the child's educational needs. The parent can also gain insights from teachers regarding best practices for the home to benefit the child through the transition to the inclusive setting.

Students with ASD are the focus and the main beneficiaries of a successful collaboration between parents and educators. A smooth transition to an inclusive setting may provide a child with special needs the opportunity to learn from their peers in the general education setting. Benefits may also include improvement of students' social and emotional behaviors and advancement of their education goals. In addition to being motivated to work, the students are actually able to perform better in the classroom when their parents are involved. Another benefit of collaboration between the home and school is the opportunity for the child to generalize the skills they learned in the classroom to other environments. Children with autism truly benefit from their parents' involvement when transitioning to an inclusive setting and a less restricted environment.

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