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Educational Leaders Can Lead the Way for Increased Academic Achievement for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Cover Page Footnote

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Educational Leaders Can Lead the Way for Increased Academic Achievement for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Blumberg et al. (2013) explained that ASD is a complex neurological disorder that includes the following former diagnostic labels, such as autistic disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDDNOS). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2018) reported the current prevalence of ASD to be 1 in 59 children, with 1 in 6 children in the United States having some form of developmental disability from mild to severe, making autism the fastest-growing developmental disorder in the United States.

Societies care about academic achievement because these achievements affect developmental outcomes for all students that are associated with individual and societal economic prosperity and overall mental health (Byrnes, 2011). Various researchers have examined contributors to academic achievement for all students (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2014; Huang, 2011). Huang (2011) found that self-concept was the most significant factor in academic achievement, finding high academic performance associated with high self-concept as well those with a lower self-concept that underwent an intervention program, which combined self-enhancement and skill development had overall higher academic achievement.

Autism's impact on the student. Students on the autism spectrum have different academic needs depending on whether or not the student is verbal or nonverbal (without receptive language) or nonspeaking (receptive language intact), has a mental impairment or is intellectually gifted, has receptive language skills, has other learning differences or health issues, and the severity or amount of supports required as outlined in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013).

ASD and academic challenges. In *An Interview with Emily Rubin,* speech-language pathologist Rubin (as cited in Murphy 2011) described the brain wiring differences for students with AS/ASD:

> As autism is a neurological disorder that makes it difficult for a child to predict the actions of other people, their ability to cope with social expectations in less predictable environments, make transitions, and use others, a source of emotional support is often compromised. Thus, many children with autism are coping with a heightened degree of stress and have developed repetitive, soothing behaviors as coping behaviors.

Self-concept, social skills, relational abilities, self-regulation, emotional regulation, hope for a future, and encouragement were all listed as factors for academic achievement (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2014; Huang, 2011). According to the criteria outlined in the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013), students on the autism spectrum may have difficulty in all of these areas varying in severity from child to child.

***Bullying's impact on academic success*.** In general, children with special needs experience more bullying compared to the population of neuro-typically developing peers (Fink et al., 2015). The inability to interpret social skills or interacting in a socially awkward way can set students on the autism spectrum up for bullying (Carter, 2009; Hebron et al., 2017. Carter (2009) suggested that children and adolescents on the autism spectrum are more likely to be bullied, teased, or shunned for being different, but often academically appear bright or exceptional. However, even if a student does not have an intellectual impairment and is twice-exceptional or gifted academically, students who are bullied have decreased achievement, lowered ability to focus, less interest in pursuing academic potential, and more likely to skip class to avoid bullies (Hebron et al., 2017). Hong et al. (2015) reported that students on the autism spectrum have higher rates of incidence of both direct (physical or verbal aggression) and indirect bullying (social exclusion and cyberbullying).

Factors that promote inclusion. After the IDEA laws were implemented in the 1990s, Inos and Quigley (1995) outlined basic practices for inclusive education. Inclusive practices begin with the school as a sense of community devoted to a shared vision with parents and educators working as a team collaboratively to solve problems and remove barriers to inclusion (Goodall, 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Inos & Quigley, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2013; Pantíc & Florian, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015). The educators and community form partnerships to promote unity and inclusion and include students as problem solvers to bring services to the student with flexible scheduling and co-teaching teams (Goodall, 2015; Inos & Quigley, 1995). While inclusion may be defined differently from district to district, each school can build its mission and vision of what inclusion means to that school using a common language (Inos & Quigley, 1995; Pantíc & Florian, 2015).

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) argued that inclusion begins with an ethos or a commitment to all learners' growth and development and safety. Many times, school leaders assume that because, in many cases, students on the autism spectrum can handle academics, they are equally capable of coping with the social stressors of mainstream education without thought to skill-building or supports for the overall well-being of the student.

Elements of Inclusion: Teachers and Administrators

With the shift to move students on the autism spectrum into the mainstream classroom, studies indicate teachers and peers are not taught how to properly include students on the spectrum socially beyond academic resources (Robertson, McCaleb, & Smith, 2017; Goodman & Burton, 2010). The last decade has seen an increase in programs in public school systems that are anti-bullying campaigns. Still, these campaigns have focused on differences such as race, gender, sexuality, and religion (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). School systems often mainstream a child as a must or should to carry out the mandate without inviting students with differences or disabilities to part of the school community socially (Goodman & Burton, 2010; Hornby, 2011). Therefore, mainstreaming and inclusion are often viewed differently from the perspectives of educators and parents, which lead to conflict requiring mediation or negotiation in IEP meetings (WEAC, n.d.; Wright & Wright, 2018b; Wrightslaw, 2013).

Teachers. Teacher attitude concerning inclusion is one of the highest contributing factors to how successful inclusion will be (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Elhoweris & Alsheikhm, 2004; Fakolade, Adeniyu, & Tella, 2009; Hammonds & Ingalls, 2003; Jones, 1984). What is less known is what contributes to teacher attitude but cited as possible contributors include themes such as lack of understanding of autism among teachers, lack of teacher training, and lack of resources and support of administrators to the teachers providing inclusion of students on the autism spectrum (Barnes, 2008; Carrington et al., 2016; Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Elhoweris & Alsheikhm, 2004; Fakolade et al., 2009; Goodman & Burton, 2010; Jones, 1984; Lindsay et al., 2013).

Administrators. A prevailing theme of the research indicated that responsibility for student placement rests with the administrator of the school (Bai & Martin, 2017; Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Pazey et al., 2014; Praisner, 2003; Weber & Young, 2017). Although a collaboration of stakeholders is the best equation for successful inclusion, the one responsible for planting, cultivating, and harvesting the seeds of an inclusive educational setting rests with the one who carries the weight of placement, allocating resources, and interpreting education policy for the school (Bai & Martin, 2017; Harding, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008; Weber & Young, 2017).

Factors that affect administrative attitude toward inclusion. Leadership is a shared responsibility among stakeholders wherein a collaboration of family, school community, and administration must provide an inclusive

educational environment (Harpell & Andrews, 2010). According to Staats (2015-2016), an educator's implicit bias may influence expectations for student achievement as it may shape discipline approaches for ambiguous infractions such as "disruptive behavior," "disrespect," or "excessive noise" which often this author adds are often part of the autistic student's existence in the classroom (pp. 30-31). Shogren et al. (2015) stated that inclusion is a top-down matter where administrators must lead. In studies of successful inclusion, administration role, leadership, and support are listed among factors for leadership in the area of inclusion (Casale-Giannola, 2012; Segall & Campbell, 2012; Shogren et al., 2015).

Praisner's (2003) study was one of the ground-breaking studies to examine administrator attitude, and her PIS has been used in several studies. Praisner found significant evidence that administrator attitude was primarily affected by his or her knowledge or training concerning various disabilities and interventions or methods on how to promote successful inclusion. Ball and Green (2014) found administrators with knowledge and understanding had better ideas and strategies of how to guide the school toward an inclusive environment supported Praisner's (2003) findings. Pazey et al. (2014) found more favorable attitudes toward inclusion wherein the administration has experience in special education, practical knowledge about autism, and experience with autism in the classroom. These administrators were also more prepared to include students with ASD in the mainstream classroom.

Administrative attitudes and impact on teacher's attitudes.
Administrators who are favorable toward inclusion are more prone to resource professional development for classroom teachers (Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008). Feeling supported and trained are indicators listed in a previous section of the document of a more favorable attitude of inclusion by teachers (Elhoweris & Alsheikhm, 2004; Goodman & Burton, 2010). Praisner (2003) hypothesized that principals who are more favorable toward inclusion would lead the way to school climate change to foster an environment for all staff, especially those who would be teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Administrator bias.
Horrocks et al. (2008) noted that the administrator's biases and understanding of inclusion could influence placement factors for students with autism and other disabilities. Horrocks's team indicated that the principal's attitude about including children with autism sway recommendation of placement. Praisner's (2003) study over a decade ago with his *Principals and Inclusion Survey* (PIS) survey indicated only 21.1% of principals were favorable to the idea of including students with disabilities in the LRE defined as the mainstream classroom. Ball and Green (2014) also used the PIS to survey

administrator attitudes about inclusion, and a significant number of administrators did not believe that LRE specified inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream settings.

Barriers to Inclusive Education

Over the past decade, arguments rarely arise for segregation or against the educational rights of students with disabilities; however, barriers continue to exist, which make inclusive education practices challenging to implement (Lakkala et al., 2016). Lack of commitment by the administration to an inclusive climate is cited by more than one study as a barrier to inclusion (Becker et al., 2000; Gordon, 2010; Holmes, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lakkala et al., 2016; Wehmeyer, 1992). The overall system in education dedicated to behavior and classroom management, as well as financial policies that limit resources and training, provides a barrier to inclusion (Becker et al., 2000).

Policies meant to provide safety like the "zero tolerance" or policies to promote inclusion such as a "mandated full inclusion of every student" prove more problematic than helpful to inclusion argued White and Cooper (2012). White and Cooper explained that "zero tolerance" for aggression when a student with a disability may act out or behave aggressively being disciplined the same as a student with delinquent behavior is damaging as well as promotes exclusion and negative attitudes toward that student by classroom peers. Zero tolerance, while intending to improve safety, does not act with common sense in accordance with students with disabilities, such as autism, that often has a behavior component.

Research Methodology: Phenomenological

The original dissertation study from which this research is based (Holmes, 2020) is a matter of social justice and social inclusion with a call for change. This call for change is based on the social and empowerment models of disability (Crow, 1992; Moran et al., 2017; Oliver, 1990), which is indicative of a critical paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017) that considers issues of power in relationships, equality, privilege, and promotes the empowerment of often marginalized groups (Leavy, 2017).

Creswell (2014) stated that to best collect data targeting a specific audience relying on personal interviews, surveys, and documents, a phenomenological qualitative study is recommended. The design of the study was an explanatory phenomenological study (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017) in nature to address a specific population in educational leadership to examine the sample's unique experiences and challenges of inclusion with students on the autism spectrum.

Prestudy selection survey of administrators and educators. Potential participants for the administrative sample were recruited through a school district in the state of Georgia and conference attendees at autism and PBIS conferences in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia representing purposive sampling methods. Administrators received the *Principals Autism Inclusion Survey* (Workman, 2016).

An approved and modified version of the *Principals Inclusion Survey ([PIS]*; Praisner, 2003), the *Principals Autism Inclusion Survey ([PAIS]*; Workman, 2016) was used for the prestudy survey to obtain demographic information and examine if study selection criteria were satisfied for the potential participant to be part of the purposive sample for the qualitative study. Through obtained written permission and approval to Dr. Praisner and Dr. Workman, modifications will be made to the *PAIS* to administer to educators referred to as the *Educator's Autism Inclusion Survey* (*EAIS*) for the preselection survey disseminated by Survey Monkey. Praisner's *PIS* focused more broadly on administrators' attitudes toward inclusion of each type of disability, while Workman's modification narrows the focus to the inclusion of students with ASD levels 1, 2, and 3.

The *PAIS* was sent to school administrators or school personnel who are legally allowed to serve as LEA representatives for IEP meetings. The *EAIS* was sent to any other educator who has the propensity to serve on an IEP team to include general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, or other personnel that are trained to discuss and explain testing data or paraprofessionals or others that may serve on an IEP team. Because psychometrics or isometric data were not collected quantitatively from these prestudy surveys, an expert panel consisting of a clinician, parent advocate, special education certified teachers, paraprofessionals, a clinical social worker, and a person on the autism spectrum examined the appropriate prestudy survey as well as guided protocol for their respective group to provide face and content validity. The expert panel indicated approval of the face and content validity of the preselection surveys.

Administrators. Administrators were asked for further clarification of information collected from the *PAIS*. The *PAIS* lists questions about training or knowledge concerning ASD. Administrators who scored in the as favorable or unfavorable for inclusion or consistently chose the least restrictive environment or the more restrictive environment for placement of students with ASD were asked open-ended questions from the *PAIS* as to the type of training, effective training, and how he or she chose placement for students on the autism spectrum.

Data Analysis/Explication of Data

After having the interviews transcribed through a professional transcription service, descriptive, in-vivo, and pattern coding were used to analyze the data. Triangulation of data was achieved through prestudy selection surveys, interviews, and field notes during the interview process.

Barriers to Inclusion: School Staff's Experiences and Observations

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. The first research question of the original dissertation study (Holmes, 2020) asked, "What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum both academically and socially in the general education classroom?"

Participants who contributed to research question one included seven administrators/LEA representatives with two county representatives and 11 educators to include general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, occupational therapists, and speech-language specialists. Each participant's guided protocol included questions concerning what barriers or challenges the individual faced in their experiences and role to academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. All 20 participants expressed favorable attitudes toward the concept of inclusion, yet definitions varied of what inclusion and inclusive practices entail. Answers ranged from more academic in focus to full mainstreaming to dependent on available resources. Fourteen of the 20 participants responded to their opinion as to the proper placement of LRE for each level of autism. Each qualified their answer that IEPs are individual to the student and their needs, but the administrators and educators had differing ideas as to LRE for autism levels 1, 2, and 3.

Part of the barrier or challenge to inclusion is the lack of a clear definition of inclusion and differing opinions as to placement for students on the autism spectrum. However, when asked specifically what elements or issues contribute to the barriers of social and academic inclusion, the 20 participants representing administration/LEA representatives and educators identified 28 elements that are barriers. The following themes emerged from the data as barriers from the perspectives of the school staff.

Behaviors. The number one barrier identified by 19 of 20 participants said behavior and further defined described the behaviors as unpredictable, unruly, disruptive, aggressive, self-harming, or challenging behaviors. Educator 1, a general education teacher, described the challenge of trying to manage an already over-crowded classroom of 28-32 students, and the combination of even one

student with disruptive behavior can significantly affect classroom management. Educator 2, also a general educator teacher with SPED certification, added that overcrowded general education classes could be overstimulating or overwhelming to students on the spectrum, and those elements might contribute to meltdown behaviors, which affect their learning time in the class as well as peer acceptance. Educator 9 explained:

> The barriers that I have seen are just the behaviors that interfere with the learning of students. I have a student now who is on the spectrum, but he's higher functioning. He is grade level on everything, but he just has very impulsive behaviors. He doesn't understand what is appropriate socially and what's not appropriate socially.

Educator 1 described similar behavior she has experienced in her classroom with students on the spectrum blurting out or eloping or doing something disruptive that affect the class and stops the teaching to which she said, "I don't' feel those students [general education] should have to continue to put up with it." She added, "We can teach people how to treat people, but some of those children [general education] are still going to get tired of those behaviors."

Educator 5, a SPED teacher, felt that many behaviors could be managed in the class if teachers are better trained, equipped, and confident in their approach. Still, behaviors that are aggressive in any way cannot be tolerated among general education students. Educator 8, a school counselor, stated that some teachers see these children as behavior problems instead of remembering they are children first. Educator 8 added that a lack of social skills for students, as well as a lack of clear understanding of ASD and lack of training, contribute to the behaviors that can become disruptive to the classroom.

Administrators or LEA representatives said that the local agency lacks supports to aid teachers in various behaviors that may accompany the ASD diagnosis. Admin/LEA 2 felt part of the issue with behaviors is that general education teachers become more reactive instead of proactive and often due to lack of understanding of AS will take some of the behaviors such as lack of eye contact or getting out of one's seat as personal attacks because they do not understand the function of the behavior. Thirteen of the 20 participants suggested that overall general educators lack a basic understanding of autism and behaviors associated with autism, and undergraduate curriculums and in-service training should focus on autism awareness with all educators in a school building.

Lack of supports or resources. Usually mentioning behaviors as one area supports and resources are needed, 19 out of 20 participants stated that there is not enough funding for proper supports and resources to support each student and teacher properly for inclusion best practices. Supports could include the amount

of staff, communication devices, visual supports, training, and any other resource such as sensory rooms or space for decompression in the classroom for students on the spectrum as a preventative measure for meltdowns. While the number one element educators feel they need support in is behaviors, some other supports and resources are often missing to provide both social and academic inclusion. Admin/LEA 5 added thoughts to her observations on the lack of resources and supports:

> Maybe some training in how to modify assignments, modify is not the right word, but scaffolding and task analysis so that they can only be familiar with how to do that but also build the understanding that you're not watering down the curriculum when you provide extra support.

Students then may lack supports for academic goals because teachers have lacked supports on how to make modifications or adhere to accommodations in the student's IEP. Admin/Lea 6 added that these lack of supports and resources could lead to conflict or lack of understanding with the parents of these students when she explained:

> I think it's important to know that myself as an educator, school districts, we truly do care about students, and we truly care about meeting individual student's needs. I think that sometimes parents also think the school district falls under some barriers in regards to staffing, and lack resources available for students.

School climate/culture. Former SPED teacher and now a country level representative, admin/LEA 8, stated, "Inclusion comes from the top-down." Fifteen of the 20 respondents said that a lack of school climate or culture that promotes inclusion is an obstacle to inclusive practices. Lack of inclusion was described as administrators/LEA representatives choosing more segregated or restrictive placements or lack of supports to include students who are best served in the self-contained environment opportunities to connect with general education peers. Two educators said they worked in environments where general education teachers may say, "Come get *your* kid out of my class" or "I need help with *your* kid" instead of seeing them as an equal member of their classroom simply because they had an IEP. Some educators stated this lack of inclusive climate might result in a lack of opportunities for students with disabilities or students with autism to have support to participate in sports or clubs or other extracurricular activities. Admin/LEA 3 stated:

> I think they all [students with autism/needs] should be allowed to have the same opportunities as any other kiddos. Regardless of their disability or what they got going on.

Lack of training. Six of nine administrators/LEAs and nine of 11 educators (15 total) stated that the lack of basic understanding or training in autism from administrators and classroom teachers is a massive barrier to inclusion. To become an administrator or LEA representative some basic training is provided concerning SPED law and eligibility requirements. Still, five of the nine administrator/LEA representatives and most of the educators stated that due to the lack of specifics about autism in the undergraduate and graduate curriculums and lack of in-services provided on autism specifically, that this lack of basics of autism leads to conflict on placement, discussion of LRE, supports for teachers, and proper supports for the student with autism. All 20 participants stated an observation in the number of students receiving eligibility for autism and the increase of autism in the overall student population. Yet, training and understanding have not kept up with the pace of increase with students. Educator 7, a school psychologist explained:

> From my standpoint, I do think gen ed teachers sometimes aren't as well trained or don't have as much knowledge on autism, but they know what autism is, but they may not know exactly how to address it, or some of those symptoms. They don't know how to address it within the classroom setting.

Additional barriers. Other barriers listed by over half of the participants centered around lack of social skill groups and peer mentoring programs as well as lack of flexibility in administration and general education teachers to brainstorm creative ways to bring about social and academic inclusion. Most of the participants listed the broadness of the spectrum itself and that a one size fits all approach does not work when a student has mixed exceptionalities. Participants noted that students with autism lack social skills or understanding of social norms and this could lead to the exclusion by peers and the social nature of the classroom from interacting with the teacher to working in groups to participating in a class discussion can all be overwhelming and confusing for students with autism; therefore, more specific training and modeling is necessary to bridge the gaps in social and academic inclusion. The overcrowded classrooms and lack of sensory understanding were among barriers mentioned by over half the respondents in addition to scheduling and working around strict academic schedules to work social skills and social-relational learning for best inclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

Bias can be a contributing barrier to proper inclusion from teachers and administrators if behaviors from students with autism are repeatedly described as "disruptive," "disrespectful," or "excessively noisy" with overly punitive measures and practices (Staats, 2015-2016). In addition to bias, lack of knowledge of disabilities, interventions, and instructional methods (Ball & Green, 2014;

Praisner, 2003) and lack of understanding SPED law will impact the inclusion of students with autism because lack of knowledge about the specifics of autism will shape placement and disciplinary practices. For student IEPs that were submitted for the study, IEPs were heavily behavior focused, there was not an understanding of the function of the behavior, and often a behavior was punished instead of a skill taught or replacement behavior.

The belief or observation that scored the highest among this population was the behaviors of the students on the autism spectrum as the most significant barrier to inclusion. Nineteen out of 20 said behaviors that are unruly, unpredictable, challenging, aggressive, or self-harming are the number one reason they feel students with autism have barriers to inclusion. Nineteen out of 20 also said that there is not enough support and resources to support the inclusion of students with autism, and this could mean staff support, communication devices, visual supports, and other means. Perhaps this explains why students and parents of students on the spectrum stated that they often felt the number one focus in IEP meetings and goals are behavior focused instead of academic, social, or independent functioning or skill-building. Parents with students that had these types of behaviors, and students interviewed who had behaviors felt the personhood or individualization of the child is neglected when behaviors are the number one focus.

The lack of understanding about behaviors of autism and the lack of supports for skill-building and replacement behaviors and building compensatory strategies are more helpful with students on the spectrum than zero-tolerance punitive policies. This supports what 15 out of 20 participants stated as a barrier concerning lack of training in autism of administration and general education teachers as well 16 out of 20 stating the climate of the school is set by educational leadership. Lack of an inclusive climate will drive the direction of how behaviors are viewed and dealt with by administration and teachers. Evidence-based domains of proper administrator support of inclusion are described by Shogren et al. (2015) as strong, supportive administrative leadership, the infrastructure of a school that supports inclusive efforts, multitiered support systems in the school for all staff, and building collaboration through mutual trust and cooperation with all of those who are supporting students with needs at school and in the home. Inclusion is not just an educational concept; school-based inclusion is an aid in building an inclusive society at large (Dillenberger et al., 2015).

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) are found to be more helpful with students on the autism spectrum than the punitive measure that calls the student the out and exacerbates their differences to the other students in the classroom. Twelve out of 20 felt that inflexibility of administrators or general education teachers on creating strategies for inclusion for individual students was

a barrier to proper inclusion because of the overuse of punishment instead of creative strategy building.

The school population also listed students with ASD lack appropriate skills or norms concerning appropriate class and social behaviors as well as the nonacceptance of peers for lack of understanding, discomfort, or fear of behaviors observed by students with autism. Social skill goals mentioned by educators in their interviews and social skill goals examined in IEPs reflected language such as "Student will respond to teacher prompting" or "Student will raise his hand or point to a visual when help is needed instead of disrupting the class" or "Student will respond appropriately in class too." These social goals were targeted toward classroom management more than teaching social skills, social norms, or building peer relationships. The specialist that were interviewed understood and explained the importance of having peers and belonging and social pragmatic language, but mentioned scheduling and interference with academic time as barriers to having more social groups or peer social skill building within the school day. However, they believe students with autism need these skills not only for school but for life.

Finally, the mixed exceptionalities and capabilities academically students may have in addition to the broadness of the spectrum are factors mentioned that can become barriers to proper inclusion. In an interview, Bonanno (2020), coordinator of graduate programs in special education for Bay Path University, stressed the "I" in IEP to keep IEPs individualized to address the "unique needs of the student," as mandated in the federal law, and focus on educating the whole child.

Implications

The climate of the school is crucial to promoting inclusion (Carrington et al., 2016; Goodall, 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2013), which was echoed by Admin/LEA 8 who stated that climate is created by the administration. Administrator attitude toward inclusion is one of the greatest impactors of teacher attitude toward inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014; Hardin, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008). Administrators will decide what training will be offered, how teachers will be supported, and how funding is allocated for resources and supports. In this study, all but two administrators/LEA representatives were SPED certified. In this study, those LEAs interviewed with SPED certification were supportive of inclusion and getting necessary supports and resources to their teachers; they stated a belief that all administration could benefit from SPED training or certification as more and more students with special needs, such as those on the autism spectrum, are served in the public school system.

The first practical advice from administrators, educators, and parents from the study is to create school-wide awareness of disabilities, such as ASD, for all staff and student body. Participants stated that administrators and all education staff should have training on autism, an understanding of the function of ASD

behaviors, training in how to make accommodations and modifications for students with autism, and training in PBIS. One educator stated, "Less punitive approaches for behaviors are needed. If you treat the child like a 'problem-child,' it will create a stigma with peers and other teachers."

It was also suggested to create autism awareness in the study body by creating more opportunities for neurotypical students and students with developmental disabilities to interact in clubs, activities, and lunch by creating a buddy system. Schools need to go beyond anti-bullying campaigns to teaching social skills to all students on how to befriend and accept students with different abilities and disabilities. Three students on the autism spectrum interviewed advocated for teaching social-emotional skills curriculum to all elementary students in the mainstream class for students with ASD and neurotypical students to learn together. Educators noted that buddy systems or clubs for special education students tend to exist at the elementary level, but a better job is needed to create this at the middle and high school levels. Educators and parents in the study suggested more inclusion of both neurotypically developing and students with developmental delays in social skill groups instead of all students being students with social deficits.

A second practical solution is creating a collaborative environment between administration, educators, and parents to address the whole child and their needs academically, socially, functionally, and behaviorally in the IEP. Of the participants, 24 of 27 stated open, honest, transparent, and consistent communication is needed to build collaboration in the IEP team. Relationship between the IEP team, especially with the parents of the student with ASD, was mention by 21 of 27 participants as key to creating a collaborative process. Parents stated they wanted to feel heard and their concerns known. At least 20 of the 27 participants stated it was crucial for an IEP meeting to being on a positive note by stating positives and growth points of the student before discussing challenges and issues.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that social-communication deficits will impact all areas of the student with ASD in their educational goals. Instead of measuring academic impact simply by grades, educational leaders must understand that even if a student with ASD is doing well academically and does not need academic support, it is essential to provide social-pragmatic communication and emotional support. Most educational leaders in the study stated that overall educational impact should be assessed and not simply yearly academic progress. One educational leader encouraged leaders to "Think long-term and not short term. What does this student need to be functional and independent outside of school? What helps this student after school in making IEP goals every year! How can we help this student transition to whatever is after high school?"

Conclusion

This study examined and discussed barriers to academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. Educational leadership can empower and equip educational staff to best serve and include students on the autism spectrum, both academically and socially. While there is a cost to better training and more funding for consistent resources to support students on the spectrum, there is a more significant cost to society economically when students who could achieve more are limited due to lack of resources and mental health issues, due to exclusion and bullying, that can occur due to their school experience of 12-16 years of their lives.

Not only is the focus of this study on empowering students on the spectrum and their parents, but a need for empowerment of educators and administrators through knowledge, supports, understanding, and training impacts outcomes for all parties involved in the process. The more meaningful message and finding of this study underscore the research of White and Cooper (2012), who argued we must de-institutionalize education, and only educational practices that are inclusive should be approved and implemented. White and Cooper further explain that if the education system continues to marginalize students with differences, this marginalization will be a continuance in society at large.

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