



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Adaptive Functioning for Adolescents with Autism After High School: A Review of Literature

By Lena Alonso

This issue of **NASSET's Autism Spectrum Disorder** series was written by Lena Alonso. Several adults with autism struggle to perform functional skills independently upon graduating from high school. Challenges in performing daily living skills may result in limited levels of independence. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the efficacy of high school curriculums and diploma options in order to determine valuable evidence-based practices which will improve the lives of individuals struggling to perform functional tasks.

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Abstract

Several adults with autism struggle to perform functional skills independently upon graduating from high school. Challenges in performing daily living skills may result in limited levels of independence. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the efficacy of high school curriculums and diploma options in order to determine valuable evidence-based practices which will improve the lives of individuals struggling to perform functional tasks.

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by impairment in social communication, emotional reciprocity, and restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests (American Psychiatric Association 2016). Students attending transition programs in high school are expected to work towards meeting individualized goals designed specifically for them. These goals measure their proficiency in the following domains: self-determination, social, academic, functional, self-advocacy, vocational, and communication skills. Students within these programs fall between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two. Once students graduate they are no longer eligible for the same services obtained during high school and must apply for services offered by the state.

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Vocational rehabilitation agencies offer assistance by helping adolescents receive certain services such as, day programs, housing assistance, supported employment and job training, however, services tend to be limited and carry prolonged waiting lists (“Coming of Age: Autism and the Transition to Adulthood,” 2014). This leads one to question: How can struggling adolescents receiving limited support upon graduating from high school adapt to the demands and challenges the ‘real world’ provides?

Matthews et al. (2015) refers to adaptive functioning as “a multifaceted construct that includes skills necessary for age-appropriate independent living”. The daily living skills needed upon graduation are not fluent for many adolescents with autism, therefore, curriculum modifications could benefit many individuals struggling to perform functional skills as independently as possible. In order to measure the level of retention for adaptive skills, various performance scales are utilized, some of which include the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Adaptive Behavior Assessment System, and the Leiter International Performance Scale—White, Smith, and Schry (2014).

Although, it has been suggested that adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and intellectual disabilities (IND) face difficulties regarding information processing and retention, many intervention strategies have helped these individuals recall functional skills (Speirs, Rinehart, Robinson, Tonge, & Yelland, 2014). Previous research has been conducted to prove the efficacy of instructional tools and interventions implicated in transition-based school programs. Based on the research, beneficial and evidence-based practices include but are not limited to: task analysis, video modeling, functional behavior skills training (FBST), and virtual errands task (VET). These forms of intervention are useful during school and upon graduating. Programs which fail to reinforce necessary functional skills hinder a student’s progress towards living as self-reliantly as possible after high school.

Guidelines on Diploma Options and Their Implications

Upon entering high school, the transition process begins for the students and caregivers involved, requiring planning, goal setting, and decision making. States hold the authority to choose how they implement graduation requirements and accommodations into the policies which regulate special education laws. According to the University of Minnesota’s National Center on Educational Outcomes (2009), various forms of diploma options are offered across the country, ranging from standard diplomas and alternative diploma options such as, certificates of completion, special education diplomas, and occupational/vocational diplomas. Almost half of all states in the country also require students to pass a state assessment prior to earning a high school diploma. The requirement of a passing score on an exit certification made it challenging for many individuals to earn a diploma, therefore, several states implemented specific measures of performance and several other indicators of academic growth as an additional basis for graduation, reducing the emphasis and value held on an exit exam. During this time, it is crucial for families of the students to reach out to the school and district for resources and information regarding graduation and post-school living. Towards the beginning of high school, the family members, caregivers, and the student must discuss the advantages and disadvantages for all of the diploma options in order to come to a decision for further planning on an appropriate approach. Working closely with school professionals will help caregivers and the student choose the best diploma option, ensuring an appropriate education which will help the student meet the individualized goals necessary for living as successful and self-reliant as possible.

How to determine between adaptive functioning and general curriculum

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all students receive access to the general education curriculum but does not specify how a student will access it or how the term “access” applies to the general curriculum. Caregivers and students must meet with the school’s exceptional student education (ESE) team to determine which diploma route would best suit the needs of the student.

Once an agreement has been met, the appropriate curriculum which will meet the diploma's requirements will be implemented. In reference to Timberlake (2014), policy provisions put in place for special education curriculum can seem vague or obscure, and can therefore make it challenging for teachers to implement appropriately. Timberlake's study examined the curriculum put in place by several special education teachers in one state and discovered that many educators had contrasting ideas as to what IDEA suggests as "access" to the general curriculum. Timberlake reported that several special educators believed the term implies "adapting" the instruction in order for it to meet the general education curriculum standards while others felt as though it was not necessary to plan for 'access' to the general curriculum at all. The findings of the study implied that although the integration of general education standards within lower functioning curriculum holds significance, a larger emphasis should be placed on "important priorities such as independence and skill acquisition". Therefore, general curriculum standards should be adapted and implemented within the adaptive functioning curriculum to an extent, however, students' individual needs should be a special education teacher's priority.

Maximizing student success

According to Shogren and Plotner (2012), an important factor to a successful transition process from high school to post-school living relies on the parents obtaining a comprehensive understanding of services available for their child as early as possible. The study examined the overall involvement from all parties involved in the transition process and found that the special education teacher was the most likely individual to be most involved in the student's transition. Following the special education teacher were the direct caregivers, and the student. It was also reported that very limited support was offered by other agencies such as, vocational rehabilitation. Results of the study also suggested that students with intellectual disability or autism were less likely to take a leadership role in the IEP/transition process than students with other disability labels. Timberlake referred to one of the largest factors of successful outcomes after high school being parent and teacher collaboration. The study suggests that parents must form substantial and beneficial partnerships with their children's special education teachers in order to collaborate efficiently to help their child be as prepared as possible for life after high school. Teachers must also emphasize all adaptive functioning skills in their curriculum which includes self-advocacy skills in order to help students participate more frequently in IEP meetings for skill acquisition purposes as well as to provide helpful information regarding their individualized needs. An additional hurdle Timberlake identifies which affects adaptive functioning skills for students with autism after high school includes the stigma and low expectations associated with disabilities such as autism which interfere with accessing postsecondary employment, education, and community involvement.

Conclusion

Adolescents with autism will typically struggle with adaptive functioning skills after high school due to a variety of factors, some of which include: limited adaptive skill instruction due to integration of the general curriculum, limited collaboration between the parent/guardians and the teacher, and stereotypes which promote low expectations for the individuals' abilities. One study conducted by Smith et al. (2015), examined the effects of generalizing functional skills for adolescents with autism in a high school setting by using a video modeling approach on an iPhone to learn how to perform functional tasks. The results indicated that most of the participants were able to self-instruct themselves to perform the tasks in various settings with the use of the videos in the iPhone. With the use of modern technology and strategies such as video modeling, students who have yet to master certain functional skills can still practice and master the tasks which may seemed out of reach for them during high school.

In reference to Timberlake's (2014) comment towards the blurred concept of "access" to the general curriculum stated in IDEA, I feel that further clarification is needed for special education teachers in order to understand how the general curriculum and standards should be integrated within the special education curriculum for all levels. Although it can be expected for most ESE students with specific learning disabilities or functioning at a higher degree than those with intellectual or developmental disabilities to work at a general curriculum pace with appropriate accommodations put in place, student with disabilities which impede their learning cannot have the same general curriculum expectations put in place for them.

Partnerships between teachers and parents must also improve in order to see an increase in better adaptive functioning skills after high school. It is imperative that parents maintain active communication with their child's teacher in order for them to better help their child achieve. By directly acknowledging and addressing these issues, students will demonstrate much more improvement in adaptive functioning skills at work, school, home or in the community.

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About the Author

Lena Alonso obtained her Bachelor's and Master's degree from Florida International University in the area of Special Education. She is currently a Special Education and English Language Arts teacher at Coral Gables Sr. High School located in Coral Gables, Florida. Her research is centered on assistive technology, and transitional skills and services for adolescents/adults with autism.