



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

The Right to Language Support for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, the National Council of Teachers of English sent NASSET a Position Statement on the right to language support for students on the autism spectrum. They requested we disseminate it to our members. This resolution builds on NCTE's longstanding policies on students' rights to their own languages, resolutions opposing practices that denigrate home or heritage languages, policies supporting the unique learning needs of the individual, resolutions supporting inclusion of exceptional students, and similar language and exceptionality awareness initiatives passed and affirmed throughout NCTE's history.



The Right to Language Support for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Approved by the NCTE Executive Committee, July 2014

Background

This resolution builds on NCTE's longstanding policies on students' rights to their own languages, resolutions opposing practices that denigrate home or heritage languages, policies supporting the unique learning needs of the individual, resolutions supporting inclusion of exceptional students, and similar language and exceptionality awareness initiatives passed and affirmed throughout NCTE's history.

Because of legislation mandating the teaching of exceptional students in least restrictive environments and other mandates focused on the rights of exceptional students, teachers of English language arts (ELA) find themselves teaching increased numbers of students on the Autism Spectrum in mainstreamed classrooms; the CDC puts current estimates at 1 in 68. The unique language needs, strengths, and deficits

National Association of Special Education Teachers

of these students create challenges for teachers of language-based curricula, and as such, create demand for support of teachers of students on the spectrum.

Students on the Autism Spectrum may experience a range of abilities from cognitive and developmental impairment to extreme proficiency in splinter areas and giftedness, usually tempered by social skills deficits and, often, language delays, or deficits. Students on the Autism Spectrum often experience impairments in Central Coherence, Executive Functioning, and Theory of Mind that create challenges for the ELA teacher. The enigmatic language development of students on the Autism Spectrum can affect areas of spoken language competence, word meaning and vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, acquisition of reading skills, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency that demand extensive and proper professional development addressing the needs and concerns of the ELA teachers who teach them.

Students on the Autism Spectrum may experience challenges in any or all areas of literacy affecting engagement, motivation, comprehension, and meaningful participation. Issues with making inferences, understanding others' perspectives, and the pragmatics of language often manifest in unique academic needs unlike other diverse populations, for which teachers are often unprepared. Additionally, some students may require assistive technology or other alternative/augmentative communication devices that require integration into the ELA classroom.

Conversely, some students with higher-functioning Autism Spectrum may tend toward giftedness and precocious language that perseverates on a chosen Special Interest Area (SIA). The situational language of SIAs may result in increased reading ability, increased writing motivation, and improvements with prosody and social skills. The growing body of research asserts that use of SIAs may be used by ELA teachers as language bridges to increase comprehension, motivation, engagement, and participation in ELA classes.

Where we recognize the benefits of supporting learners who are culturally, linguistically, and dialectally diverse, and where we recognize increasing demands placed on ELA teachers to adapt to the needs of exceptional students through inclusion, so must we recognize opportunities for support of students with the unique language differences caused by Autism Spectrum. Such differences in language development and ability require that we assume the inclusionary stances that consider the rights of these exceptional language learners as exemplified by Shirley Brice-Heath, James Britton, Lisa Delpit, Geneva Gay, Peter Medway, Paula Kluth, and Mary Ann Winter-Messiers, and provide explicit instruction, resources, and support for optimal success in our language-based curriculum as well as support for ELA teachers of this unique population.

The National Council of Teachers of English supports

- Policies and practices that affirm the rights of students on the Autism Spectrum to increased, systematic support of their unique language needs in all areas of communication;
- Rigorous research to explore, promote, and disseminate information on effective programs that support the unique language needs of students on the Autism Spectrum and their teachers, including the use of Special Interest Areas;
- Collaborative efforts among researchers and practitioners in both the field of Autism Spectrum and the National Council Teachers of English to establish best practices for the teaching of language arts to this population;
- Professional development initiatives that help teachers understand how such practices promote competence in a variety of communicative modes, semantic and pragmatic proficiency across all language arts, and development of positive reading and writing experiences for students on the Autism Spectrum; and
- The strengthening of an Inclusion/Exceptional Student Strand for the exploration of policies that support differently abled students in the English language arts classroom with attention by NCTE publications and conferences toward such strengthening.