Factors Affecting Autistic Children's Development during the Early Years in Elementary School: A Longitudinal Study in Taiwan

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Abstract : The present study was to investigate factors affecting children's improvement through the first two years of elementary school on a population-based sample of children with autism in Taiwan. All the children were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by clinical psychologists according to DSM-IV. Children's development was assessed by the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales-Chinese version (VABS-C) on the first and the third grade. Children's improvement was measured by the difference between the standardized total score of the third and the first year. In Taiwan, school-age children with special-education needs will be arranged into different classes, including normal classes (NC), resource classes (RC), and special classes (SC) by the government. Therefore, type of class was one of the independent variables. Moreover, as early intervention is considered to be crucial, the earliest age when intervention begins was collected from parents. Attention was also included in the analysis. Teachers were asked to evaluate children's attention with a 3-item Likert Scale. The frequency of paying attention to the class or the task was recorded and scores were summed up. Additionally, standardized scores of the VABS-C in the first grade were used as pretest scores representing children's developmental level at the beginning of elementary school. Multiple regression was conducted with improvement as the dependent variable. Results showed that children in special classes had smaller improvement compared to those in normal or resource classes. Attention positively predicted improvement yet the effect of earliest intervention age was not significant. Furthermore, scores in the first grade negatively predicted improvement, which indicated that children with higher developmental levels would make less progress in the following years. Results were to some degree consistent with previous findings through meta-analysis that the effectiveness of conventional intervention methods lacked sufficient evidence to support.

Keywords : attention, early intervention, elementary school, special education in Taiwan
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