

Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Model of Partnership and Capacity Building in Hong Kong

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Abstract : Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) studying in mainstream schools often face difficulties adjusting to school life and teachers often find it challenging to meet the needs of these students. The Hong Kong Jockey Club Autism Support Network (JC A-Connect) is an initiative launched in 2015 to enhance support for students with ASD as well as their families and schools. The School Support Programme of the Project aims at building the capacity of schools to provide quality education for these students. The present report provides a summary of the main features of the support model and the related evaluation results. The school support model was conceptualized in response to four observed needs: (1) inadequate teacher expertise in dealing with the related challenges, (2) the need to promote evidence-based practices in schools, (3) less than satisfactory home-school collaboration and whole-school participation, and (4) lack of concerted effort by different parties involved in providing support to schools. The resulting model had partnership and capacity building as two guiding tenets for the School Support Programme. There were two levels of partnership promoted in the project. At the programme support level, a platform that enables effective collaboration among major stakeholders was established, including the funding body that provides the necessary resources, the Education Bureau that helps to engage schools, university experts who provide professional leadership and research support, as well as non-governmental organization (NGO) professionals who provide services to the schools. At the programme implementation level, tripartite collaboration among teachers, parents and professionals was emphasized. This notion of partnership permeated efforts at capacity building targeting students with ASD, school personnel, parents and peers. During 2015 to 2018, school-based programmes were implemented in over 400 primary and secondary schools with the following features: (1) spiral Tier 2 (group) training for students with ASD to enhance their adaptive skills, led by professionals but with strong teacher involvement to promote transfer of knowledge and skills; (2) supplementary programmes for teachers, parents and peers to enhance their capability to support students with ASD; and (3) efforts at promoting continuing or transfer of learning, on the part of both students and teachers, to Tier 1 (classroom practice) and Tier 3 (individual training) contexts. Over 5,000 students participated in the Programme, representing about 50% of students diagnosed with ASD in mainstream public sector schools in Hong Kong. Results showed that the Programme was effective in helping students improve to various extents at three levels: achievement of specific training goals, improvement in adaptive skills in school, and change in ASD symptoms. The sense of competence of teachers and parents in dealing with ASD-related issues, measured by self-report rating scales, was also significantly enhanced. Moreover, effects on enhancing the school system to provide support for students with ASD, assessed according to indicators of inclusive education, were seen. The process and results of this Programme illustrate how obstacles to inclusive education for students with ASD could be overcome by strengthening the necessary partnerships and building the required capabilities of all parties concerned.

Keywords : autism, school support, skills training, teacher development, three-tier model

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