Study shows interventions, though few, can be effective for students with high-functioning autism

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Across the country, more and more young people are being diagnosed as with autism spectrum disorder, including those with high-functioning autism. Yet there is little research into how to help educators serve students with high-functioning autism, especially adolescents in middle and high school settings. New research from the University of Kansas shows that interventions can be successful in helping this population and calls for more research in the area.

Glennda McKeithan, lecturer and associate in the autism program in the Department of Special Education, was a classroom teacher for more than 25 years. She wanted to look at the research available on interventions for secondary school students with high-functioning autism, or HFA.

"I noticed more and more of my students were being diagnosed with ASD. I have experience mostly with students with HFA and wanted to look closer at the research regarding HFA for adolescents in secondary public school settings because that's where I felt the need was the greatest."

There is a good deal of research in autism, but the majority of the focus tends to be on students with more severe needs on the lower end of the spectrum who are younger and in more restrictive special education settings. McKeithan authored a comprehensive review of the literature in high-functioning autism published in peer-review journals from 1985 to 2015. The study, co-authored with Edward Sabornie of North Carolina State University, was published in the journal *Exceptionality*.

The authors reviewed 23 studies and concluded that interventions can be successful for the designated age group and helping individuals with HFA improve both academic achievement and behavioral or social problems. Of the reviewed studies, 13 focused on social interactions and decreasing inappropriate behaviors, while the other 10 focused on improving academics.

The studies, which focused on students served in general education classrooms, demonstrated effective interventions based on scientifically sound research. McKeithan argues that more research in the area must be conducted to add to the vast improvements in understanding autism made in recent decades. Many secondary students with HFA are often not served in self-contained special education classes and may be perceived as difficult, unmotivated or socially awkward. In such cases, when students' needs are not addressed, they may not be as academically successful as they could potentially be. This could lead to more problems as they exit secondary schools, such as a decreased likelihood to participate in post-secondary education, obtain/maintain meaningful employment and fewer career prospects, McKeithan said.

The review focused on studies designed with students of average or near-average intellectual ability. Students in the study were reported as being intellectually capable of succeeding in their general education classes. However, they were not making satisfactory academic and/or social progress. This can be a common issue because the needs of secondary students with HFA can be overlooked. Individualized Eduction Program teams may determine that minimal progress in academic classes does not indicate a need for special education services. It is important for IEP teams to simultaneously consider the communication and social needs of these students because there is a connection between these skills and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, McKeithan said. This reinforces the need for practical and effective evidence-based interventions to meet the needs of these students.

"Teachers need interventions that are practical. If you're a teacher with 36 students in your classroom, there's a limited amount of time to research what evidence-based practices (EBPs) are out there," McKeithan said. "Once more research in this area published, I think it will be easier to prove there are effective EBPs available."

The results showed that interventions based on an analysis of need and applied by individuals familiar with the student in a typical classroom setting were most effective. Strategies that used peer-mediated instruction and intervention and technology-aided instruction and intervention show great potential, the authors wrote.

McKeithan said additional research into interventions for adolescents with HFA in middle and high school settings is needed, and to address the issue, an increase in grant funding, enhanced focus on that area of autism studies and concerted efforts to disseminate the findings to educators are all necessary. In addition, many of the strategies could prove to be beneficial to all students. Teacher educators who work with current and future teachers can help to bridge the gap between research and practice by sharing EBPs that are appropriate and easy to use in general education settings.

"Interventions for students with HFA are a consistent need. My graduate students in the KU MSE and graduate certificate for ASD report who work with these students in different settings around the world consistently report that there is a significant need for strategies that work and are evidence-based," McKeithan said. "We have reason to believe these strategies can be effective. Now it is time to do more research and get word to teachers that strategies are available and can be applied in general education settings. This will help maximize the potential for students to achieve and be more productive as they transition out of secondary educational settings."

Provided by University of Kansas

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