

School Cultures

that Support Students Across the Autism Spectrum

Cathy Pratt, Ph.D.



ON ANY GIVEN DAY, a parent or educator may call asking for recommendations for a student on the autism spectrum who is engaging in problematic behavior, or who is experiencing failure in school. Typically, comments revolve around the nature of the difficulties, the impact on the student and others, and the precipitating events (e.g., asked to do a difficult task, unstructured time, noise, an unexpected change, etc.) that have occurred that might provide insight into the situation. While all of these factors are important, one part of the equation is typically missing from these conversations: *What role does the school culture play in supporting the student?*

Students are educated in systems that either set the context for success, or that set the context for failure. Clearly, students on the autism spectrum can experience challenges in even the best educational environments; how-

ever, if the school culture has certain positive qualities, the scene may be set for greater success. Below are factors related to school culture, teaching climate, and school-wide discipline practices that can aid or hinder a student's educational progress.

Components of School Culture

Upon entering any school, one is quickly able to locate the vision/mission statement that presumably, guides the daily practices of the school. Typically these statements include phrases such as *lifelong learner*, *community membership*, *diversity*, and *support for all students*. However, it quickly becomes apparent whether *all* truly means all, or if all refers only to students who excel academically or athletically. For example, if front office staff is unaware of the student with ASD, or refers a visitor to another end of the building, then the school has likely not taken "ownership"

of their students with disabilities. If the classroom is hidden in a secluded area of the building, providing the students with little or no opportunities to interact with others, then those students are not really a part of the school. A lack of involvement in the overall culture of the school can be isolating for both students and teachers, and can eliminate potential learning opportunities.

In contrast, schools that adhere to their vision/mission statements, and openly demonstrate a commitment to their core values, are settings in which people are likely to be willing to explore options and to acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual student, including those with a disability. These schools are typically able to work in a more collaborative fashion and operate according to the principle that each student deserves the collective efforts of all involved.

A key player in the process of establishing a healthy school culture is the building level administrator. In truth, the building level administrator has a greater impact on the daily educational opportunities offered students on the autism spectrum than does the director of special education. Principals who

What role does the school culture play in supporting the student?

take ownership of all students, and who consider any challenge affecting an individual student as a challenge to the entire school team, are most effective in working on behalf of these children. In contrast, if the principal does not take ownership both the student and the teacher may flounder.

Teaching Climate

Some schools know how to engage teachers and create exciting environments for teachers to work in. Other settings are more

oppressive, and make creativity and enthusiasm difficult to maintain. In positive teaching climates, teachers are empowered and are more likely to have an attitude that supports looking at possibilities rather than at barriers. In negative teaching climates, teachers tend to address problems with a mindset that highlights all of the reasons why a particular strategy or approach may not work. For these teachers the glass is always half empty, an attitude that most definitely has a negative “spillover” effect on students. On the other hand, educators who are open to change and who are flexible are able to make great strides in educating students.

Another important aspect of the teaching climate involves teaming. In some schools, teaching is a very isolating process. This may suffice until a crisis occurs. If teachers do not have a well established support network, and if there is not a climate of teaming and collegial support, then difficulties are magnified. Schools that place a high priority on collaboration are better equipped to handle any challenge by

providing an opportunity for collective problem solving.

School-Wide Discipline Practices

In this time of zero tolerance and fear of school violence, the school district’s response to disciplinary problems has much to say about school culture.

Some schools take the approach of creating stricter guidelines and heightened use of suspension and expulsion. Other schools have begun to take a more proactive approach geared toward preven-

tion. Acknowledging that classroom management and discipline issues affect learning, these schools have chosen to develop school-wide programs that focus on providing more supportive environments for all students. For example, recognizing that bullying is on the rise, and realizing that some students feel diminished by the school experience, some schools have begun to examine strategies for connecting students to adults and to each other. By creating a sense of community, there is less opportunity for students to get lost in the system.

Other schools realize that students may not be able to put school rules into practice. For example, what does “be respectful” look like? How should

one act, or what should one do when being respectful? To ensure that students operationalize these rules, some schools have begun to directly teach students how to carry out the rule. These schools are focused on teaching students how to behave rather than on the consequences of their actions. As such, the staff focuses on rewarding positive behaviors as opposed to merely focusing on the negatives. As a matter of practice, their positive comments outweigh negative comments in their interactions with students.

Finally, some schools have decided to develop programs based on the data collected. If, for example, the data demonstrate that students have a greater chance of engaging in problem behav-

ior during recess in the weeks preceding a holiday, then the school may choose to provide more adult supervision during those weeks. If the data demonstrate that certain teachers are less successful in maintaining classroom order, then support might be provided to assist them in gaining new tools. Most importantly, in the end, these schools report fewer disciplinary problems.

*What does
“be respectful”
look like?*

*... the school
district’s
response to
disciplinary
problems has
much to say
about school
culture.*

Conclusion

Sometimes parents choose to send, or desire to investigate autism-specific schools for their sons and daughters. When the culture of the public school is not supportive or conducive to the child’s learning, this is understandable. Notwithstanding, this decision is

one that must be carefully considered, since placing a student in a setting that isolates him or her from the demands and stresses of the community may not prepare the child for the realities of life after school. Neither will it enable the student to benefit from the positive aspects of community life. Hence, schools that actively collaborate to create supportive learning environments overall, benefit everyone—students on the autism spectrum and their neurotypical peers. 🏠

Bio



Dr. Cathy Pratt is the Director of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community located at Indiana University. She is on faculty at Indiana University, and presents internationally at conferences and workshops. Dr. Pratt serves on numerous Advisory Boards, including those of Maap Services, Inc., Autism Society of Indiana, and the Indiana Autism Coalition. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the national Autism Society of America and is Chairman of the Conference Committee, Member of the Government Relations Committee, and first Vice Chair. Dr. Pratt served on the Steering Committee for Training and Dissemination for the National Research and Training Center on Positive Behavioral Support. She has written articles and presents on the following topics: autism spectrum disorders, functional behavior assessment/positive behavior supports, instructional approaches, systems change, and policy. Prior to pursuing her doctorate degree at Indiana University, Dr. Pratt worked as a classroom teacher for students with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities.

Dr. Pratt's article appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of *Autism Spectrum Quarterly* (<http://www.asquarterly.com/>).