Risk & Protective Factors for High School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Ben Persky

Department of Educational Counseling & Leadership, Monmouth University

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Dr. Nicole Pulliam

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Abstract

"High school students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often struggle in the complex social and academic secondary environment" (Hedges et al., 2014). In relation to this, my research paper is primarily focused on high school students with autism spectrum disorder. The goal of this paper is to dive deeper into the risks that students with autism spectrum disorder face in high schools today. Bullying, building relationships, and communication skills are some of the most established issues for students with autism spectrum disorder. On the other hand, there are many protective factors that can be used and put into place in high school that would not only protect these students, but it would hopefully prevent students with autism spectrum disorder from the risk factors that they face in school today. School counselors play a major role in making sure these protective factors get into place and that they are utilized to help students with autism spectrum disorder become more dynamic and resilient members of their school communities.

Keywords: Autism, risk, protective, bullying, communication, resilient

Introduction

People who are different are not always welcomed by other people, communities, or groups, especially people who have a disorder that has visible characteristics like people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). School communities are one of those places where students with differences and especially ones that have visible characteristics like autism spectrum disorder, may not always be welcomed. Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain. People with ASD can often have problems with interaction, social communication, and repetitive or restricted interests or behaviors. This could also come with people with autism spectrum disorder having varying ways of moving, learning, or even just paying attention. No matter what kind of disorder you may have, we are all human beings, and we all deserve to be treated with equal respect, no matter the setting we are in.

Since autism is a spectrum disorder, each person with autism has their own set of strengths and challenges. You can be highly skilled, or you could be severely challenged when it comes to the way people with autism learn, think, or problem solve. Some people with ASD might need a heavy amount of support in their daily lives while others with ASD may need way less support and, in some situations, none at all and live entirely independently. Signs of autism usually start to appear by the ages of 2 or 3.

When in high school, students with autism spectrum disorder can struggle for many reasons. “Within the social environment of high school, difficulties in the areas of communication and social interaction can put students with ASD at risk for social isolation and bullying” (Hedges et al., 2014). It is so important that all faculty and all students in all schools be aware of what autism is and what the characteristics and behaviors of students with ASD are as well. School counselors play a very important role when it comes to advocacy, and it is their job

to be the leaders in educating the staff and the students about autism and what it means to have inclusion. The role of the school counselor is to create a school environment where all students feel secure and safe where they can come to you and tell you anything and they know that it won't leave your room. Not only do you want to create that feeling/environment in your room, but you also want that feeling/environment to be throughout the entirety of the school. Every child deserves to live, learn, and grow in a place where they are all accepted, appreciated, respected, and understood no matter who they are.

Being able-bodied is a privilege not many people know they have, and it is something that people who are able-bodied take for granted especially younger people, like students in high school. This can lead to the bullying and harm of students with disabilities like having autism spectrum disorder. Knowing this, school counselors need to be the leaders on educating and collaborating with teachers, parents/guardians, and administration to help students with autism spectrum disorder become more resilient and protect them from other risks they may face in school.

Statement of the Problem

High school is all about making new friends, trying new things, and learning new things. On top of that, high school tends to be more impersonal, competitive, and grade oriented. Compared to a middle school which is often organized in "teams" which gives teachers the opportunities to collaborate in regard to the needs of shared students, high school students are expected to be independent with more demand on their planning and organizational skills at the forefront. In high school, the student's bodies and brains are constantly changing and it makes social experiences a lot more complicated for them and students with disabilities, like autism

spectrum disorder, the high school experiences for them will present itself with a lot more challenges than students who are able-bodied.

Many of the social encounters that students have in high school happen outside the classroom whether that is in the hallway, lunchroom, or during extracurricular events at the school. For students that have autism spectrum disorder, the trickiness of having a social life like making friends gets overlooked by most of the school faculty because most social encounters happen outside the classroom.

Bullying, building relationships, and communication skills are some of the most established issues for students with autism spectrum disorder. Students with ASD are more at risk to bullying because they struggle to connect with one another and follow social norms. As school counselors it is so important to understand and recognize the risks that students with autism spectrum disorder face. It is so imperative that counselors and others at the school put in protective factors that will help prevent the bullying which will allow for students with ASD to have an amazing high school experience.

Literature Review

Risk Factors

"It is known that children with disabilities, especially youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), are at increased risk for victimization. For these youths, the rates of bullying are especially high during adolescence, where they may experience increased verbal and relational bullying" (Tipton-Fisler et al., 2018). Students with ASD have a harder time making relationships and just plain old relating to their typically developed (TD) school mates. Students with autism spectrum disorder often experience feeling isolated from their peers, the lack of

ability to connect to others, and most of the time they experience rejection. This can happen due to the lack of social skills and the ability to understand social cues like body language.

Students with autism spectrum disorder, have a disorder that is noticeable and that is due to people with ASD stimming. People with autism spectrum disorder tend to do this self-stimulatory behavior which is better known as stimming. Stimming is repetitive body movements or repetitive movements of objects. Examples of full body stims are body rocking and spinning which are motions that affect the body's vestibular sensory system which helps with balance and orientation of the body. There are other stims that do not affect the whole body but instead only affect one or a few senses like squinting, hand flapping, smelling objects, staring at rotating objects like a fan, and making vocalizations. Stimming is a way that some people with ASD can express themselves when they want to communicate in some instances since communication can be hard. Stimming and other behaviors can make these students stand out from other students and mainly looked at in a negative way which can lead to bullying.

"Another contributor could be the structure and schedule that those with ASD require, which could keep those children from going outside of their comfort zone and interacting with TD children" (Head et al., 2014). Many if not most students with autism spectrum disorder prefer consistency or a certain kind of "sameness." Everyone wants every single student to succeed, and it is the job of the school counselor to advocate for that student's success. School counselors need to know that every student is different and needs to be tailored too differently, even if they have ASD. "A salient theme identified in the focus groups was the profusion of inconsistencies in the high school experience including inconsistencies across the school day, inconsistencies over time, and inconsistencies between school and home environments. These issues, as reported by parents and school personnel, made success for these students difficult" (Hedges et al., 2014).

"Autism spectrum disorder is about five times more common among boys than among girls and females with ASD who are on the higher end of the spectrum typically have cognitive profiles, comorbid conditions, and altered presentations of clinical symptoms that oftentimes lead to under diagnoses in this particular subset of the population" (Matthews et al., 2019). There is a lot more information on males with ASD as opposed to females with ASD in today's age. This shouldn't be an issue, but it is. In schools everyone on staff, especially the school counselors should be informed and know how to deal with female students who have autism spectrum disorder. "This leads to the potential for misunderstanding females with ASD in current literature and identifies a need for current research to be focused specifically on females with ASD" (Matthews et al., 2019). If school counselors could educate themselves thoroughly about females with ASD, then they could educate the rest of the school which would result in potential female students with ASD becoming more resilient and having them protected from other risks they may face in school. "Findings indicate that females with ASD face similar challenges with social interaction as similar to their male counterparts, but challenges unique to females with ASD include navigating female friendships with typically developing peers, facing barriers to accessing services due to delayed diagnosis, and coping with female-specific puberty issues" (Matthews et al., 2019).

Protective Factors with Social Justice Action Plan

There are many protective factors that can be used and put into place in high school that would not only protect students with autism spectrum disorder, but it would hopefully prevent students with ASD from the risk factors that they face in school today. School counselors play a major role in making sure these protective factors get into place and that they are utilized to help students with autism spectrum disorder become more resilient and irrepressible members of their

school communities. It is so important that not just the school community understands what autism spectrum disorder is, but the community as a whole does as well. The school counselors have to inform everyone that every student with ASD is very different from each other. "Attributed to Dr. Stephen Shore, author and educator who lives with autism and asperger, there is a well-known expression among those in the autism community: "If you meet one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." This comment speaks to the varying degrees of autism spectrum disorder, as every autistic individual is affected in a different way" (Frasier-Robinson et al., 2015).

Resources are key for school counselors, and they can be used to benefit the student that they are helping, and it can benefit the education of the staff since resources can be given out. "Accompanying the surge in autism diagnoses, and the subsequent heightened awareness of the disorder, is the deluge of resources available to researchers, practitioners, and those living with the disability. In truth, the vast number of resources available on autism spectrum disorder are overwhelming" (Frasier-Robinson et al., 2015). It varies from books, peer reviewed journals, websites, visual media, etc. and no matter what the resource is, it can help at least one student with ASD, and it is the job of the school counselor to tailor to that specific student and to advocate for them.

"It appeared that supportive friends could be highly influential and act as a powerful buffer, reflecting research highlighting peer acceptance and secure friendships as protective against bullying" (Cook et al., 2016). There was a study done that looked for ways to find protective factors that would provide resilience to students with autism spectrum disorder against bullying. One way was deemed that those specific students with ASD need to build up more self-esteem. The other factor that was found was that they need a support system of good friends.

"Further, if risk factors relating to autism or the school culture were not mediated by protective factors such as self-esteem or supportive friends, various negative outcomes were identified as more likely including mental health issues and effects on learning and relationships" (Cook et al., 2016).

As the school counselor you can do as much as you can to advocate for every student because that is your job, but it is never guaranteed that all the protective factors you put in place will stop bullying 100%. You want these students that have autism spectrum disorder to feel like they belong and that they aren't bullied, and that all starts with education and putting those protective factors into place.

Social justice is a major part of the role of the school counselor. A main goal of the school counselor is to create a school counseling program that will close the gap for those populations that need the gap closed. In other words, a core goal is to have equality for everyone no matter who they are, where they come from, etc. In school everyone has to learn and see that no matter who you are or where you come from, you must respect everyone and that starts in the classrooms with the teachers. Teachers can show just how imperative it is to show respect and to accept everyone even if they have something like autism spectrum disorder. Everyone is human and everyone deserves to be treated with the same respect.

Implications for Practice

When the school counselor comes up with a plan to support students with autism spectrum disorder, they have to take into effect who the stakeholders are and how it impacts the field. If everyone comes together, the collaboration of counselors, teachers, administration, and parents/guardians could change the school climate and views on how students with ASD are

treated. This would result in those students being treated with more respect and would protect them from being bullied.

It all starts with the school counselors leading the education process. Once everyone is educated then a new part of the program plan can take effect. Teaching students about acceptance and teaching them about what autism spectrum disorder is and how it affects those students with it, then the students can realize that they should be showing respect for those students more and not making fun of them.

Conclusion

Students that have autism spectrum disorder need to be treated equally like everyone else in a high school setting. It is so important that everyone gets educated on what ASD is and how it affects each student differently. Protective plans need to be put in place in order for these students to be treated equally and to mitigate the bullying that they receive on a daily basis. Education is key and by completing that step and making everyone more aware, it brings us all one step closer to accepting more students with disorders like autism spectrum disorder so that they become more resilient members of their school communities.

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