FACILITATING
Evidence-Based Practice FOR Students WITH ASD

A Classroom Observation Tool
for Building Quality Education

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by

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Introduction

"I'll know it when I see it, but right now, I don't have a clue what 'it' is." We heard these words spoken by an elementary school principal several years ago. We were together in his office discussing strategies for supporting students with **autism spectrum disorder (ASD)** across several grade levels in his school. The principal knew they needed to improve the educational and social opportunities of learners with ASD, but he felt frustrated. He was not sure where to begin and did not have a lot of time for learning new practices. As we interacted with the principal and others like him, it became clear that although professional development for teachers was critical, principals and other school leaders also needed more information regarding a quality program for students with ASD. These leaders needed more than a list of web resources or a day-long workshop; they needed clear, concise information delivered in a user-friendly format. The idea for this book and the Evidence-Based Practice Classroom Observation Tool (EBP COT) discussed in Chapter 4 was born out of this need.

In developing this text, our goal was to provide leaders in today's schools with a systematic approach for building quality educational experiences for students with ASD. Leaders include district-level administrators, building principals, special education administrators in districts and buildings, curriculum or instructional coaches, and all other individuals who support those teaching students with ASD. Going forward, we will refer to individuals in these groups as leaders. Although intended for school leaders, this text may also serve as a valuable resource for other individuals, including family members, classroom teachers and other professionals, and preservice teachers and professionals.

THE BIG IDEAS IN THIS BOOK

- The belief that all individuals with ASD have the capacity to learn, contribute to their communities, and engage in meaningful social relationships, given the necessary structures and supports, is at the heart of *Facilitating Evidence-Based Practice for Students with ASD*. School leaders play a critical role in ensuring these positive outcomes. Although they are responsible for ensuring quality programs for students with ASD, identifying the appropriate structures and supports can be overwhelming (Livanis, Benvenuto, Mertturk, & Hanthorn, 2013). The purpose of this text is to provide school leaders, educators, and families with an accessible resource for creating engaging learning environments that promote positive behavior and academic growth

for individuals with ASD. To this end, we will address the following themes throughout this book: ASD is a neurological, or brain-based, disorder. Students with ASD do not choose to demonstrate differences. The characteristics of ASD drive the behaviors seen academically and socially.

- Federal legislation requires schools to provide quality programming for students with ASD. School leaders positively influence outcomes for these students when they are committed to building quality programs.

- Learners with ASD require specific **evidence-based practices** to be successful in school. School leaders are able to support teachers and other professionals in identifying and implementing appropriate evidence-based practices when they understand the brain–behavior connections in ASD.

- A systematic, collaborative leadership approach is the foundation for implementing evidence-based practices across classrooms and schools. School leaders are the backbone of collaborative environments that promote growth for students and teachers.

Autism, Law, and the Role of School Leaders

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (PL108-446) requires that students with ASD receive quality instruction in the **least restrictive environment** (LRE); students with ASD must have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum. Commitment and quality are equally important to the principles of placement and access (McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2014). Thus, school leaders must commit to meeting the needs of students with ASD, including those with the most significant communication, sensory, and behavioral differences. Commitment alone is not enough, however; understanding the needs of students with ASD and specific practices that support their success is essential. This understanding can then serve as the foundation for collaborating with others to create effective learning environments and quality educational programming for students with ASD.

ASD Is a Brain-Based Disorder

The American Psychological Association (APA; 2013) released revised diagnostic criteria for ASD. Although the specifics of the diagnostic criteria are discussed in Chapter 1, it is worth noting that a medical diagnosis of ASD requires that an individual demonstrate social-communication/interaction differences and restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or actions across environments. These diagnostic criteria are important, but understanding that ASD is a neurological or brain-based disorder that substantially influences how students learn and behave in school settings is perhaps more important. Although ASD is defined by differences in social-communication and repetitive behaviors, actions, or thoughts (APA, 2013), many students with ASD also experience other significant differences that influence learning and behavior throughout the school day, including:

- High levels of anxiety

- Difficulty making a transition from one activity to another

- Challenges with planning and organization

- Differences in memory and attention

Students with ASD cannot typically change or control these differences, even though it may be what they want. Thus, education teams designing quality programs must strive to proactively address the needs of students with ASD through environmental design, visual supports, and a variety of other proactive, positive interventions. Students with ASD can be successful when they are actively engaged in well-organized learning environments—a well-structured environment can often be the difference between a student who is actively engaged in learning and one who is anxious, stressed, or completely disengaged.

Evidence-Based Practices: The Foundation for Quality Programming

Creating quality programs that promote academic and social success for students with ASD during and after their school years begins with evidence-based practices. Evidence-based practices are the "practices or programs shown by high quality research to have meaningful effects on student outcomes" (Cook & Odom, 2013, p. 136). The National Professional Development Center (NPDC) on ASD issued a report delineating 27 evidence-based practices (Wong et al., 2014). The necessity of these evidence-based practices, many of which will be discussed in Chapter 3, cannot be overstated—they are critical for creating successful learning environments for students with ASD.

Understanding evidence-based practices is critical for school leaders. Cook and Odom suggested, however, "EBPs are not guaranteed to work for everyone" (2013, p. 137). Awareness of factors such as teacher knowledge and student differences that influence the success of individual evidence-based practices is equally important (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Simpson, McKee, Teeter, & Beytien, 2007). The EBP COT, which is a tool for identifying the foundational practices necessary for all quality programming, will help teams identify interventions that are already in place and prioritize areas for growth and development. For example, an educator and administrator might each complete the EBP COT and compare results. They can use their shared results to set an action plan of specific steps for implementing additional, important practices. We will describe the evidence-based practices included in the EBP COT and approaches for using the tool in a variety of settings (e.g., for planning, for continuous improvement) throughout the text. In addition, we will provide strategies for helping all teachers understand and implement these practices to meet the needs of students with ASD across the spectrum.

Leadership and Collaboration in Quality Programming

Real change, the kind that makes a significant difference in the lives of people, often occurs slowly. It involves both top-down (e.g., policies at state and district levels) and bottom-up activities (e.g., individual classroom and school levels) (Cook & Odom, 2013) and depends on the ability of school leaders to motivate others, build commitment, and create positive conditions for teachers and other professionals (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Thus, investing in supporting and developing staff is one of the single greatest things school leaders can do to positively affect change for learners with ASD. The EBP COT is one tool for supporting and developing staff capacity and quality programming.

THE EBP COT

The EBP COT calls on evidence-based practices from the NPDC on ASD, the **Council for Exceptional Children's** (CEC) competencies for teachers of students with ASD, and the National Autism Center (NAC). Both content validity and reliability data support use

across grade levels (K–high school) and in inclusive and special education classroom settings (Carnahan, Lowrey, & Snyder, 2014).

The tool includes three broad categories for environmental, instructional, and communication supports. Environmental considerations include organization of the physical environment, visual schedules, and behavioral supports. Instructional considerations address strategies that promote active engagement and individualized instruction. Communication factors address the need for systematic social-communication instruction for all learners with ASD across the school day.

The danger in writing a book such as this and in promoting a tool like the EBP COT is that it could be used as a tool for evaluating teacher effectiveness. The EBP COT is not intended to be a teacher evaluation tool or a comprehensive list for evaluating programs for students with ASD. Rather, it is a tool for assessing classroom environments and supporting teachers and other professionals in effectively implementing evidence-based practices for students across the autism spectrum. The EBP COT was designed to support systematic planning, assessment, and ongoing development of evidence-based practices that are the foundation of quality educational settings.

Suggestions for Educational Leaders

The EBP COT was developed for school leaders, using feedback from school leaders. The intention is to provide a user-friendly list of the practices necessary for quality programming in educational settings. It is a **collaboration** tool designed to help school leaders support new and seasoned educators. The EBP COT could be used in many way—as a planning tool for new education professionals or those new to serving students with ASD, a tool for assessing strengths and growth opportunities in educational settings already serving students with ASD, a tool for guiding professional development, or a combination of all of these.

The EBP COT provides a foundation for new education professionals, or those new to working with students with ASD, for identifying the practices expected in the educational setting and then locating professional development materials or opportunities to support the implementation of these practices. For example, school leaders might share the EBP COT with the new educator or the educator new to working with students with ASD, asking, "What do you already know about these practices? In what areas do you have the most/least amount of knowledge?" The leader could then select areas to target for development. Targeting one section of the EBP COT at a time with the new professional is another option. After ensuring the individual has sufficient knowledge to implement the strategy, the school leader could ask the professional to demonstrate how the EBP COT is being implemented or will be implemented, if the classroom is not yet operating. The school leader might even identify other professionals who excel in implementing specific strategies or practices to develop mentoring relationships for the new professional.

School leaders can use the EBP COT with educators already serving students with ASD as the foundation for collaborating on program development. For example, school leaders might invite teachers, paraeducators, and related services professionals to self-assess their own strengths and growth opportunities with the EBP COT. Other professionals or colleagues, including school leaders, could also observe the educational environment and discuss similarities or differences between the self-assessment and the outsider observation. Professionals can identify what is working well, growth opportunities, and concrete next steps for improving their educational programming.

Last, school leaders could use the EBP COT as a tool for guiding professional development for individual professionals, across classrooms and settings, or even across school districts. For example, school leaders could use the EBP COT to observe classrooms or other settings and identify areas for development for individual teachers, professionals, or paraeducators, or they might identify common strengths and opportunities for growth across settings. Based on these observations, school leaders can then gain access to a variety of resources that aid in professional development, including online professional development, educators or coaches with particular strengths, and study groups or professional learning communities.

Suggestions for Preservice and Practicing Professionals

The EBP COT provides preservice educators with a blueprint for understanding and implementing the supports necessary for creating high-quality programming for students with ASD. Simply being able to identify evidence-based practices while in schools may be a valuable first experience for preservice educators. Based on observations, preservice professionals can ask questions to understand why some interventions are in place or how they are implemented for individual students. Preservice educators might also identify specific practices to implement in one-to-one or small-group settings to gain experience before implementing with larger numbers of students. Similarly, preservice education professionals could identify specific areas in which they already have knowledge and practices with which they have limited experience. Based on this reflection, they can look for additional information, observation opportunities, or resources to deepen knowledge across the domains and specific indicators.

Many of the ways practicing educators and other professionals use the EBP COT parallel school leader use. Educators might use the EBP COT as a planning tool when they structure their classroom environments and systems before beginning the academic school year. Professionals might also use the EBP COT as an ongoing self-assessment and reflection tool throughout the year. Similarly, education professionals might ask others for feedback in certain categories, especially in categories they personally feel offer the greatest opportunities for growth. Or, they might use the EBP COT as a tool for structuring mentoring relationships or conversations. Last, professionals currently serving students with ASD might use the EBP COT as a problem-solving tool when a student is struggling. The tool could serve as a resource for identifying environmental factors needed to support students' engagement and learning.

Suggestions for Families

A common language or way to talk about how to create the optimal setting for a student with ASD can often serve as the foundation for collaborative problem solving. The EBP COT can provide a starting point for families to talk with school personnel about the supports their children need. During times of transition, such as those that occur between grades or schools, it can be difficult to paint a picture of the supports that helped a student be successful. Families can use the EBP COT to begin conversations about how to most effectively support their children before (i.e., identify, communicate, plan for the most important practices on the checklist), during (i.e., provide the kinds of supports necessary during the transition process), and after the transition (i.e., do what is essential to promote long-term engagement, learning, and independence).

In addition to big transitions that often occur alongside a life change, such as a move or graduation from one grade to another, transitions occur throughout the school day. These transitions often mean a change in personnel or setting. Some students with ASD manage these transitions with ease. Other students, however, find it easier to focus and participate in some settings over others. Families can use the EBP COT to facilitate conversations about why these differences occur and identify the kinds of supports necessary for increasing success across all activities in the school day.

The EBP COT can be helpful beyond the school setting as well. School is only one small part of an individual's life—equally important are community and family. Active participation in one's community promotes feelings of connectedness and a sense of belonging. Some community activities are easier than others for individuals with ASD to gain access to, however. Families could use the EBP COT as a tool for talking with other service providers (e.g., summer camps, child care, church programs) about the kinds of strategies needed for an individual to participate in different settings.

WHAT THIS BOOK HAS TO OFFER

Quality educational experiences play a crucial role in outcomes for individuals with ASD after high school. Educational leaders must ensure positive school experiences for these students and provide them with the instruction necessary for academic, social, and life skill success. Creating high-quality programs is one of the best ways to do this. This book will help you understand the cognitive profile of individuals with ASD and the evidence-based practices that support these children's needs.

In Chapter 1, school leaders will learn about the unique characteristics and challenges that students with ASD face, gaining a better understanding of these children's brain-based, neurological differences. Chapter 2 is a discussion of the laws and regulations governing the education of children with ASD—an introduction to key legislation that every school leader needs to know as well as a description of duties and responsibilities in serving students. Chapter 3 answers the fundamental question, "What is an evidence-based practice?" After defining evidence-based practices, this chapter specifically introduces proven practices for students with ASD and provides guidelines on how to recognize evidence-based practices in action. The EBP COT, introduced in Chapter 4, provides the guidelines and foundational knowledge for organizing classrooms and other educational settings to meet the unique needs of students with ASD. Finally, Chapter 5 helps leaders think about and develop strategies for ensuring implementation of evidence-based practices across classrooms, schools, and educational systems.

To enhance functionality and guide you through the book's contents, each chapter begins by telling you what important questions the chapter will answer. The "Questions This Chapter Will Answer" opener previews the most important things you will learn and gives you a glimpse of what new ideas you will discover. Additionally, important terms are highlighted throughout the text, and defined in the glossary. Attending to these terms will help you increase your familiarity with language you might encounter regarding educational policy and programming for students with ASD. Finally, each chapter concludes with a few thought-provoking reflection questions inviting you to apply new concepts and ideas to your work.

Our goal is for this book to serve as a concise, accessible reference guide for school leaders looking to ensure that every student with ASD benefits from thoughtful educational planning and well-chosen supports.

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