

School Life Facilities for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Regular Schools

Doumi Kenza ^{1*}, Saadi Ouarda ²

¹University of Algiers 2 (Algeria), Psychological measurement and counseling laboratory, kenza.doumi@univ-alger2.dz

² University of Algiers 2– Abou El Kacem Saâdallah – (Algeria), ouardapsy@hotmail.fr

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Abstract:

Active participation of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in everyday social life is a top priority for families. This is a very important dream for these children and their families, and school inclusion is the first step towards achieving an active social life. However, children with autism cannot achieve this goal (inclusion) without the help of other parties, namely, educational life companions. These individuals are dedicated to assisting children with autism in achieving the best possible outcomes from the primary school environment. This theoretical discussion will delve into this topic.

Keywords: Educational life Companions; Autism Spectrum Disorder; School Inclusion.

*Corresponding author

1. Introduction

A close observer of education and schooling will notice a significant emphasis on cognitive aspects, often at the expense of the overall school environment that facilitates knowledge acquisition. However, these efforts do not necessarily prevent the academic failure of some students due to their social, health, or cognitive limitations. For instance, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who are integrated into mainstream schools often struggle with communication, social interaction, and academic achievement. This highlights the crucial need for educational support for these students to ensure both academic success and a conducive learning environment.

Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the role of educational assistants for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, including their duties, responsibilities, qualifications, and required attributes.

2. Study Objectives

The current study aims to:

- Highlight the latest concepts related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
- Define the concept of school-based support for students with (ASD).
- Address the topic of school-based support for students with (ASD) in regular education settings, including the conditions and regulations of such support.
- Discuss the qualifications and competencies required for school-based support personnel.

3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of a highly important topic: the need to support students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), specifically focusing on the role of educational assistants for students with (ASD) who are integrated into mainstream schools. This topic opens up a vast array of research questions and serves as a launching point for numerous future studies and field research in this area.

4. Study Terminology

4.1. Definition of Autism

Autism typically appears within the first three years of life and is characterized by a disability that hinders the development of social skills, both verbal and nonverbal communication, imaginative and creative play. It results from a neurological disorder that affects the way the brain processes and collects

information, causing difficulties in social skills such as the inability to connect and form relationships with others, the inability to play and use leisure time, and the inability to imagine and construct imaginative and appropriate scenarios (Hassan, 2006, p. 15).

It is also a neurodevelopmental disorder in children that significantly affects the development of brain functions in three primary areas: communication and language, social skills, and imagination. According to the DSM-IV, there are two main areas: Social interaction and communication, and repetitive and stereotyped behaviors. However, the DSM-5 indicates that autism typically appears within the first three years of a child's life, although the diagnosis may be delayed until the age of seven (Chlihi, 2018).

Leo Kanner, a specialist in child psychiatry, who is considered the first scientist interested in studying the manifestations of autism in children, called it early infantile autism in (1943). He defined childhood autism as those children who show a disorder in most of the following manifestations:

- Difficulty forming communication and relationships with others.
- Low level of intelligence.
- Isolation and severe withdrawal from society.
- Routine repetition of words and phrases mentioned by others in front of the child.
- Repetition and repetition of motor activities.
- Disturbances in sensory manifestations.
- Language disorders, loss of the ability to speak, or possession of primitive language with a musical tone
- Weak response to family stimuli
- Severe disturbance in behavior and making some unnerving sounds (Chalabi , 2005, p. 15)

Studies conducted in both England and America indicated similar diagnostic indications. The prevalence of autism disorder is (4-5) children in every ten thousand, and if severe mental retardation with some features of autism is present, the rate can rise to (20) in every ten thousand. It was previously believed that it is more common in the upper social classes, but it has been proven This statement is not true, and the reason is that the disorder was not discovered and referred for treatment in the poor classes. The prevalence of developmental dysmorphic disorders was estimated at ten to fifteen cases in every ten thousand children. Autism is more common among males than females by a ratio of 1/4 but girls are more common Severe disorder and more family history of the disorder than males (Farraj, 2002, p. 23; Hassan, 2006, p. 19).

4.2. Adaptive Education

Pedagogical support for students with autism should be grounded in child psychological development, with the primary goal of integrating the child into a specific class that allows them to acquire and improve their cognitive skills. It is important to note that this process may require a lengthy period of adjustment (Belaidi, 2015, p. 56).

4.3. Inclusive education

It refers to educating a student in a regular school, whether public or private, where the school is able to recognize and assess the student's specific needs. It is also prepared to be flexible in its methods of teaching the curriculum, adapting the system, and modifying the physical environment in which the student is expected to be. Special attention is given to the relationships that the student is able to develop with other students (both with and without disabilities) both inside and outside the school (Ashbie & Misleh, 2013, p. 82).

4.4. Inclusive Education for Children with Autism

Inclusion is not merely about the physical presence of the child in the school; it goes beyond that to encompass a culture of acceptance, cooperation, and support for these children. True inclusion means treating all students as equals who can learn from one another. There is a significant difference between placing a child in a special education classroom and only integrating them into extracurricular activities, and between fully integrating this child within regular classrooms throughout the year with the support of a teaching assistant or a special education teacher within the classroom.

4.5. Pedagogical Conditions for Integrating Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder into the School Environment

Dr. Muwaffaq Nasser emphasizes the need for several critical elements to ensure the successful integration of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into mainstream classrooms. These include the attitudes of parents of neurotypical children, the attitudes of teachers and educational staff in those schools, and the societal attitudes towards individuals with autism, as well as those with other special needs. Additionally, the availability of specialized educational staff, a tailored educational system, programs, curricula, and assessment methods for this specific group is essential. Without these elements, the integration process could lead to a humanitarian, educational, and ethical disaster.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that results in a range of difficulties and obstacles that hinder the achievement of educational goals and the integration of these children into regular school environments. Some of these challenges include:

- Disorders in processing sensory, visual, and auditory information.
- Difficulty with planning, central coherence, and cognitive difficulties that hinder learning and social interaction.
- Inappropriate behavioral disorders that reject social norms.
- Behavioral disorders and difficulty managing changes and transitions.
- Sensory-motor difficulties. However, these difficulties can be mitigated and reduced over time with adequate and ongoing support, in consultation with all stakeholders involved -a multidisciplinary team- in the child's care parents, speech therapists, psychologists, psychomotor therapists (Chlihi, 2018).

4.6. School Life Facilitators

Are professionals who work in kindergartens, primary, middle, and high schools. They support the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular or specialized classrooms to facilitate the integration of students with special needs into the school. The School Life Facilitator intervenes in the student's daily school life to support both the student and the teaching team (Alem, 2023) .

4.6.1. Types of Support Personnel for Children with Autism (School-based, Social, Behavioral)

4.6.1.1. School-Based Support

A child with autism spectrum disorder requires specific adjustments to their academic program, such as: providing educational materials in various formats and using multiple teaching methods, offering breaks when necessary, assigning customized homework, and providing additional academic and educational support.

4.6.1.2. Social Support

A child with autism needs social support. Specialized services can be provided to help develop communication and social interaction skills, promote independence, and offer psychological and emotional support when needed.

4.6.1.3. Behavioral Support

A child with autism requires specialized support for behavior management. Specialized services can be provided to help develop emotion regulation and behavior management skills, provide positive behavioral support, and reinforce positive behaviors. The needs of a child with autism should be individually assessed, and the necessary support and services should be provided at school in collaboration with parents, school staff, doctors, and educational official (Alem, 2023).

4.6.2. Definition of the duties of a school life facilitator/assistant

School life facilitators are required to have completed the full third year of secondary school. Employment is through a fixed-term contract for each academic year, renewable depending on circumstances. The number of vacancies is determined by each education directorate and is based on the number of students requiring school accompaniment for the current academic year (Salah, 2023).

4.6.3. The Role of a School Life Companion

The role of a school life companion is specifically to reduce barriers and difficulties that can make school time complicated, thereby facilitating the student's integration into the school, easing their social development with others, and ensuring they receive learning support while also providing support to the teaching team. Among these tasks are the following:

- Preparing and arranging the classrooms where the child is taught.
- Assisting teachers in supervising the child with autism and helping them understand instructions to achieve learning.
- Providing support in various areas: specifically, assistance with hygiene, feeding, toileting, etc.
- Helping them carry out specific procedures that are difficult for them due to their disorder.
- Organizing the temporal and spatial structure for the child with autism.
- Adapting the immediate environment to promote adaptive behavior and learning acquisition.
- Ensuring necessary monitoring and guidance.
- Contributing to the adaptation of pedagogical tools and methods.
- Participating in consultative and guidance meetings with various stakeholders involved in care.
- Supporting the child in activities that take place outside the institution: these may be school trips or extracurricular activities.

- Accompanying the student with autism when entering and exiting and throughout their movements during study (going to the bathroom, moving around the school during break, going to the cafeteria, and other sports and cultural activities).
- Assisting the autistic student in studying and organizing their required work.
- Assisting the autistic student in completing educational tasks (writing, coloring, following text, simplifying questions asked, helping the student with what the teacher asks of them, participating in full group activities).
- Accompanying the student during breaks and intervening immediately and urgently in the event of any mishap (Salah, 2023).

4.6.4. Qualities and Qualifications of a School Life Companion

The Ministry of Education, in a ministerial circular dated July 4th, stated that in implementation of the instructions of the Minister of National Education, Abdelhakim Belabed, the door has been opened for "direct recruitment" to select qualified contract workers to hold the position of "school life companion" and carry out the task of caring for children with autism spectrum disorder. They will be granted the authority to perform a set of tasks within a legal framework. This includes accompanying the student within the educational institution, as well as accompanying them in various educational activities they undertake and developing their social relationships with their peers, parents, and teachers. They must possess emotional resilience in their work, as well as patience, fitness, moral and physical strength, and empathy. Active listening and knowing how to create a climate of trust, and understanding are essential qualities for practicing this profession, which is considered a difficult one due to the difficulties encountered with children with autism spectrum. Most importantly, the companion must have a comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the conditions for carrying out their duties in the classroom, with the teacher, the director, and also with the parents. Among the qualifications that must be possessed by the school companion are:

- Technical qualifications: They have a strong knowledge of psychology and education.
- Personal qualifications: They must be available, patient, and possess good emotional resilience (Qawadri, 2023).

4.6.5. The Importance of Accompaniment

Accompaniment is the first step in school for an autistic child who is integrated into regular schools. The step of integrating autistic children into the general education system is also considered a direction that achieves a system of equality between them and their peers and breaks the restrictions of isolation that may make them distant and unable to contribute to society. It is an opportunity to develop their capabilities and activate their societal integration to ensure their future to live a decent life with full rights like other members of society. The integration has contributed to reducing the burden on the guardian in searching for specialized centers to receive their children.

Also, the process of integrating autistic children into educational classes will contribute to the speedy treatment of these cases, which need to be present among their peers and come into contact with them in an educational and pedagogical framework. This matter is considered a major step towards treatment, as well as sensitizing the public, including parents, medical and educational professionals, and all associations and bodies concerned with the nature of the methods of care for children with autism, as well as the importance of educational and pedagogical accompaniment appropriate to their natural environment, away from the field of medicine.

The psychological system to which they are often enrolled makes them more able to communicate with their peers, and the integration system also makes them more capable of communicating with their peers. In formal education, it breaks the restrictions of isolation for autistic children. The process of integrating children with disabilities in general and, especially for autistic children, in general and special education is important as a step to break the chains of isolation and make the child more in contact with society.

5. Study Recommendations

The most important recommendations for optimal care for this category of students revolve around the horizons set by the government, School Life Companion implement them to improve their living conditions, transform them from a state of dependence to self-reliance, and contribute to advancing development in the country. This will only be achieved by:

- Expanding the network of care for students with autism.
- Formation of school life facilities and official assignment to schools.

- Preparing the school environment to suit the needs of integrated students, including educational means and equipment help.
- Advance preparation for people with special needs by developing their social behavior and basic learning skills.
- Preparing regular school teachers to receive some special cases before applying integration through training courses and lectures that explain the characteristics of these students, how to teach them, and how to deal with them.
- Gradual integration of students with autism spectrum, for example, starting with one lesson and then two lessons.
- Including initial training programs for regular professors or in-service training for standards related to special education and everything related to dealing with the category of people with special needs.
- Encouraging scientific research in areas related to people with disabilities and holding special conferences to discuss the difficulties encountered and offer solutions in medical, educational, social, psychological, and other areas.
- Reconsidering the classification of people with special needs in the law to make it equal to the laws applied in developed countries, in terms of determining the degree and type of disability, schooling, and the consequences on that regarding rights.
- Providing psychological and social counseling centers to follow up on these cases and their families, to empower them to coexist with the rest of society in general and the school environment in particular.
- Finding an entity interested in following up on the conditions of this group and ensuring that it takes care of them by providing all their needs within the family and school, and obtaining all the services necessary for them.
- Increasing the number of schools and institutes for people with special needs, especially with the increase in their number, and providing rehabilitation and training centers to cover their needs.
- Finding school solutions to adapt the school program and not deprive them of education.
- Reconsidering the tests to determine the mental level in the educational aspect for admission at the appropriate educational level, while reconsidering the role and effectiveness of the exploration and follow-up committees in primary schools to identify special cases of adapted education.

- Working to improve the level of education for people with autism spectrum disorders, keeping up with developments in this field, and paying attention to the level of care provided to them in schools.
- Preparing society and individuals in schools to integrate some people with autism spectrum disorder into regular schools, while benefiting from the experience of some countries with expertise in this field.
- Creating a specialization in universities for educating people with autism spectrum disorders, which includes all subjects taught in their schools, to graduate qualified cadres to teach this segment.
- Speedily finding appropriate solutions to provide suitable books and educational aids for people with autism spectrum in schools, universities, and institutes.
- Supporting and encouraging gifted people with autism spectrum disorder to participate internally and externally in the nation, providing conferences and competitions, and providing everything that helps them achieve effective participation.
- Encouraging and facilitating the role of associations that care for people with autism spectrum disorders, and providing necessary support for them.

6. Conclusion

The issue of school life facilities for children with autism spectrum disorder in regular schools is one of the latest and most significant topics in the field of autism spectrum. It is expected that researchers will prioritize it in discussions, research, and investigations due to its positive impact on students, their families, and educational staff. School accompaniment ensures the successful integration of autistic students into regular schools and guarantees their effective participation in various fields and professional services, thereby contributing to the building and development of their homeland.

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