Chapter 14
Online Learning:
Autism Spectrum Disorder
Professional Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Bowling Green State University partnered with the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) to develop and provide an online autism spectrum disorder certificate and graduate degree program. The development of the program curriculum was created around OCALI’s numerous online autism spectrum disorder learning modules that were developed by experts in the field of autism. Today, over 300 individuals have completed the comprehensive certificate, or graduate Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) program, through Bowling Green State University. Online delivery is an alternative for ASD professionals and allows for a diversity of learners and learning styles. Selecting the right learning management system provides a more interactive on-line learning environment. This program is one example of how technology has broadened the outreach of educational preparation in ASD from local to national and international audiences, as well as met the needs of working professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been increasing at an alarming rate across the world (Kim et al., 2011; Koh, 2015; Unknown, 2012). In a recent review, Christensen, et al. (2016) found the prevalence to be 14.6/1,000, which translates to 1 in every 68 children worldwide is affected with ASD. This increase has also been felt in schools (Chalfont, Rose, & Whalen, 2017; MacKay, Greig, & Connolly, 2017). However, many educators are not equipped to meet the needs of students with autism in their classrooms. This is partially due to the lack of accessible, high-quality programs to train educators on how to meet the needs of this population, leading the National Research Council (2011) to cite educator preparation in ASD as being among “the weakest elements of effective programming for children with autism spectrum disorder” (p. 225). This article describes how one university partnered with a state agency using technology as a tool to expand the access to high quality education in ASD to educators in schools.

Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism has long been recognized as a condition that affects individuals in the areas of social reciprocity, language/communication, and restrictive/repetitive behavior (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Under a new definition, published in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), these major areas remain but are reframed under the diagnostic category of autism spectrum disorder. The areas of deficit in this revised definition are social/communication and fixated interests, and repetitive behaviors with sensory sensitivity included under the area of behavior (Vivanti et al., 2013). Once considered a low incidence disability, the rates of ASD have increased in the overall population at an alarming rate (Hansen, Schendel, & Parner, 2015).

Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Individuals with ASD come from all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, and include both males and females, although the majority of individuals are males. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012), the percentage of children being diagnosed with ASD has increased by 78% since 2007. In 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that ASD was occurring at a rate of 1 in 150 children and, most recently, the CDC estimated that ASD is occurring in 1 in 88 children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). In March 2014, the CDC issued its ADDM autism prevalence report. The report concluded that the prevalence of autism has raised to 1 in every 68 births in the United States, and almost 1 in 54 boys (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools

Along with the increase in ASD in the general population, there has been a concomitant increase in ASD in schools. Accordingly, autism has been cited as the most rapidly growing disability category in the United States under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Adak & Halder 2017; Center for Disease Control, 2009). However, the actual numbers of individuals with autism in schools may be even higher. Individuals with ASD can be categorized under other disability categories such as Intellectual Disability or Speech/Language Impairment in school, yet have a clinical diagnosis of ASD.