Teacher Perception of the Importance of Friendship and Other Outcome Priorities in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract: This study investigated perceptions of teachers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on the importance of friendship development in comparison to other outcome priorities. Perceptions of teachers working in special classes were compared to those of teachers of mainstream classes. Friendship was rated of similar importance to social skills and emotional development, whereas intellectual and academic skills, physical skill and motor development, and creativity were rated of lower importance than friendship. When teachers were asked to force-rank priorities, friendship was third, preceded by emotional development and social skills. Special class teachers assigned higher ranks to learning outcomes that relate to the core deficits of ASD, namely social skills, friendship, and emotional development, as compared to mainstream class teachers. Furthermore, teachers prioritized friendship differently according to student levels of autistic symptomatology. When perceptions of teachers and parents were compared, both perceived social skills, emotional development, and friendship as the three most important outcomes. The implications of these findings for future educational service delivery are discussed.

Friendship is a specific peer relationship characterized by a bond that is voluntary and reciprocal, involving a degree of mutual affection and preference (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). Friendship is associated with a greater degree of positivity in interactions as compared to interactions with non-friends, specifically with regard to positive engagement, effectiveness in task completion, and resolution of conflict (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). The diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) involves an impairment in social skills, which often affects the ability to develop and maintain meaningful friendship relations (Fuentes et al., 2012). Children with ASD characteristically have fewer friends compared to their matched typical peers (Bauminger & Shulman, 2003; Rowley et al., 2012) and a lower level of friendship quality in areas of companionship, security-intimacy, closeness, and help (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Calder, Hill, & Pellicano, 2013; Solomon, Bauminger, & Rogers, 2011).

Teachers of students with ASD have the responsibility for assessment of each student’s needs, strengths, and weaknesses, to formulate appropriate curriculum to address those needs, and to ensure successful learning. Identifying curriculum priorities for children with ASD is a complex process, due to their diverse educational needs (Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). Previous researchers have suggested the use of specialized curriculum elements that target areas of deficits specific to ASD (including language, communication, social interaction, and adaptive goals) as one of the components of effective practice for children with ASD (National Autism Center, 2015; Reichow, Doehring, Cicchetti, & Volkmar, 2010).

The need for the implementation of specialized curriculum adaptations in a school setting requires that teachers understand the needs and learning characteristics of children with ASD. This understanding of their student
learning characteristics and educator perceptions of outcome priorities shapes their teaching approach and classroom behaviors (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Nevertheless, due to limited time and resources, teachers may prioritize some learning outcomes over others and may emphasize particular areas of the curriculum that they perceive to be important. Mavropoulou and Padeliadu (2000) investigated how teachers perceived different curriculum priorities in children with ASD. They reported that special education teachers who have received specific training in ASD were more able to match curriculum priorities specific to student needs, as compared to mainstream class teachers, who tended to focus on broader areas of well-being. No other research has been identified examining teacher priorities for children with ASD.

There is a limited amount of literature regarding teaching friendship skills to children with ASD within school settings (e.g., Chang, Shih, & Kasari, 2016). As a result, teachers might feel unequipped in addressing the development of friendship skills in their students as a curriculum focus. It is possible that teachers implicitly recognize the need for improvement in student friendship skill, but might focus instead on other outcome priorities with better-defined teaching procedures (e.g., social skills, academic skills). Thus, it is of interest to see the extent to which teachers view friendship as an important priority.

There are a number of reasons for examining the degree of alignment between teacher and parent priorities. First, perceptions of teachers may differ from parent perceptions in regards to student behavioral problems and social functioning (Jepsen, Gray, & Taffe, 2012). This might influence how teachers and parents prioritize the different learning outcomes. The key role of parents in the planning and decision making process for individual programming for students with disabilities has been recognized widely (Rioux, 2013) and is a legal requirement in several countries (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004, in the U.S.; Disability Standards for Education, 2005, in Australia). In Australia, where the majority of children with ASD are educated in mainstream school settings (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012), it is crucial for teachers and parents to align students’ educational priorities. Second, the majority of interventions targeting socially related skills have generally been conducted in school environments (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Only a small number of those studies measured generalization effects, and researchers often reported the lack of generalization of learned social skills across trained and untrained contexts (e.g., home and community settings) (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Wang & Spillane, 2009). For that reason, a close collaboration between teachers and parents could therefore be a crucial component for newly learned social skills to be maintained and generalized successfully across multiple settings.

There appears to have been no research examining correspondence between teacher and parent curriculum priorities for children with ASD. However, in children with a range of other disabilities (learning disabilities; moderate, severe, and multiple disability), Baumgart, Filler, and Askvig (1991) found that parents rated the importance of social skills instruction significantly lower than either special education teachers or experts in special education. Furthermore, in typically developing children, Knudsen-Lindauer and Harris (1989) reported greater emphasis by parents on the development of intellectual skills than teachers within kindergarten curricula. Thus, in other groups there is evidence of discrepancy between parent and teacher priorities, but this issue does not appear to have been addressed in children with ASD.

Parental knowledge of their children’s characteristics as learners may be valuable, especially in children with ASD, where symptomatology and capacities can vary extensively across individual students. Active involvement of parents has been shown to be crucial, specifically in regards to the development of friendship-related behaviors (Frankel et al., 2010; Frankel & Whitham, 2011). It could be problematic when teacher priorities are misaligned with the needs of the child or in conflict with parent priorities. Given that parents may contribute to the educational planning and support instruction, the process of aligning the perceptions of both teachers and parents in outcome priorities for students with ASD might contribute to a coherent service.
delivery, which may enhance the students learning opportunities.

The aim of this study is to explore how teachers perceive the importance of friendship as compared to other learning priorities. Specifically, perceptions of teachers working in special classes will be compared to teachers of mainstream classes. In addition, teacher perceptions of the importance of friendship will be compared across students with severe autism and students with mild to moderate impairment. Finally, data from teachers will be compared with previous research examining parent priorities (Petrina, Carter, & Stephenson, 2015).

Method

The data used in this study were collected as part of a larger multiyear study ("Autism Educational Outcomes Study") examining the efficacy of two different models for education service delivery for students with ASD in Australia. The first model was a special class that involved the use of satellite classes as implemented in New South Wales (NSW) by Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect). In this model, students were placed in a segregated special class within a regular school prior to a gradual transition into mainstream classrooms. The other model was a consultative support model as implemented in South Australian (SA) by Autism SA, where children were supported within regular mainstream classes from the point of school entry. The satellite model in NSW was offered as an option to parents, who could also choose mainstream class placement. Only the data regarding perceptions of curriculum priorities will be addressed in this paper.

Participants

Participants were teachers of children currently enrolled in Kindergarten (Reception) to Year 3 with a formal diagnosis of Asperger’s disorder or autistic disorder by a pediatrician or psychologist using DSM-IV diagnostic criteria and who were of normal intelligence or within the mild range of intellectual disability. There were 50 boys and 12 girls with a diagnosis of ASD in the age range of 6.9 to 11.2 years ($M = 9.40, SD = 1.10$) at the time of data collection, with a mean full scale IQ of 84.59 ($SD = 16.85$). Thirty of the students were enrolled in satellite classrooms, and the other 32 attended mainstream classrooms. A range of assessments was completed on participants, including the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV; Wechsler, 2003), Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales-II (VABS-II; Sparrow, Cicchetti, & Balla, 2005), and Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino & Gruber, 2005). A summary of the children’s characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Demographic information for the teacher participants is presented in Table 2. A total of 54 teachers contributed to the study, of whom 22 were satellite class teachers and 32 were mainstream class teachers. The 22 satellite teachers who agreed to participate in the study reported on 30 participating students in NSW. The mainstream class teachers each reported on one student. Sixteen of the teachers had completed university equivalent training in special education, and 17 more had received special education training through in-service modules. In addition, three of the NSW teachers reported having specific training in autism at a university level. The majority of these teachers in NSW reported receiving on-going autism specific training specifically through Aspect.

Survey

Two approaches may be taken to establish curriculum priorities. Rating allows respondents to assign a weighting to each of the outcome priorities, but similar ratings may be given to more than one priority. Ranking forces respondents to differentiate and prioritize the importance of each outcome relative to others (Carty & Shrum, 2000; Vanleeuwen & Mandabach, 2002). Furthermore, the process of ranking might provide the best reflection of outcome priorities in school settings that may be characterized by limitations in resources and time. That is, ranking might provide the best reflection of priorities when there are competing and difficult decisions regarding resource allocation to be made. In this study, teacher perceptions were investigated using a survey, which incorporates both rating and ranking.

The survey was designed specifically for the
current study to examine teacher perceptions of the importance of six outcome priorities for their students. These were: (a) social skills (the ability to behave and interact with adults and peers in an age appropriate manner); (b) physical skill and motor development (the ability to perform age-appropriate physical activity involving both gross and fine motor skills in the child’s muscular coordination); (c) intellectual & academic skills (the ability to form and understand concepts, problem solve, possess an age appropriate concentration level which is manifested in the child’s ability to do well at the level set out by the child’s school); (d) creativity (the ability to demonstrate the use of divergent thinking and imagination to

TABLE 1

Demographic characteristics of children with ASD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Satellite (n = 30)</th>
<th>Mainstream (n = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls: Boys</td>
<td>6:24</td>
<td>6:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>9.37 (1.07)</td>
<td>9.40 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Scale IQ (SD)</td>
<td>78.70 (16.64)</td>
<td>95.32 (11.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRS Scores (Parents form)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76.17 (13.23)</td>
<td>83.63 (11.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td>68.83 (11.23)</td>
<td>71.24 (11.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Cognition</td>
<td>73.33 (12.73)</td>
<td>81.09 (11.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Communication</td>
<td>73.13 (13.16)</td>
<td>78.33 (10.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Motivations</td>
<td>64.57 (14.30)</td>
<td>69.70 (11.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autistic Mannerism</td>
<td>82.83 (16.70)</td>
<td>86.64 (13.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VABS Scores (Parents form)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>85.52 (11.20)</td>
<td>84.28 (11.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialisation</td>
<td>81.28 (10.80)</td>
<td>79.83 (13.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive behavior composite</td>
<td>80.03 (7.98)</td>
<td>80.83 (11.43)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2

Demographic characteristics of teachers who completed the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (SD)</th>
<th>Satellite (n = 22)</th>
<th>Mainstream (n = 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 or under</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 or older</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Educational Qualification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of teaching experience (years)</td>
<td>11.70 (10.01)</td>
<td>12.88 (10.67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers with training in special education</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
generate original ideas); (e) emotional development (the ability to develop perception of self, their own emotions as well as the emotions of others); and (f) friendships (the ability to form and maintain reciprocal peer relationships). The descriptors provided above formed part of the survey. The selection of outcome priorities was developed from the surveys used in previous research on parental priorities by Lim, Girl, and Quah (2000) and Pituch (2011).

**Data Collection Procedures**

The majority of the data were collected by trained research assistants through face-to-face interview, with the exception of two teachers who completed the survey through telephone interview. Prior to the interview, teachers were sent an information sheet containing the 5-point scale and the list of the outcome priorities and their descriptions. As the interviewer read out the instructions, followed by the priorities and their descriptions, teachers were asked to select their answers according to the scale presented on the information sheet. Each teacher had to complete one survey for each of his/her participating students. Teachers were also asked to provide demographic information about themselves, such as age, years of professional experience, and their highest level of education.

**Data Analysis**

In the first part of the survey, teachers were asked to rate the importance of each outcome on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*) for each student participating. The mean score and standard deviation for the ratings of each outcome were then calculated to give indication of the level of importance that teacher placed on each individual outcome.

In the second part of the scale, teachers were asked to assign a rank to each outcome (e.g., 1 was assigned to the most important outcome and 6 was assigned to the outcome with the lowest importance). In reporting data on ranking, the numbers were reversed to maintain consistency with the reporting of the rating scale. Thus, higher values were always associated with higher rankings of importance.

Data from the current study was compared with parallel data collected from parents six months earlier (see Petrina, Carter, & Stephenson, 2015). Parents were asked to rate and rank the same curriculum priorities as teachers using the same procedures as the current survey. Comparisons were limited to the 55 children for whom data were available from both teachers and parents. Comparisons were made in two ways. First, overall differences were explored by examining the mean ratings and rankings for each group. Second, differences at an individual level were examined by deducting the scores of teacher’s ranking from parent’s ranking for the same student. Frequency distributions of differences were then plotted.

**Results**

Initially, it was of interest to determine whether there were differences in the priorities of teachers in satellite support classes and those who were in mainstream classes. Some of the satellite class teachers reported on multiple students: hence, data were not independent and inferential analysis was not conducted.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that teachers in satellite classes and in mainstream classes rated friendship as similar in importance to social skills and emotional development, and mean scores for all these areas were within a 0.25 range. Intellectual and academic skills, physical skill and motor development, and creativity were rated approximately a half point lower than friendship. When teachers were forced to rank areas in order of priority, friendship was third, preceded by emotional development and social skills for both groups of teachers. As seen in Figure 2, satellite teachers assigned higher ranks to learning outcomes that relate to the core deficits of ASD, namely social skills, friendship and emotional development as compared to mainstream teachers. Mainstream teachers rankings of intellectual and academic skills were considerably higher than that of satellite teachers (mean score difference = 0.89).

Teacher priorities for different outcomes
were compared based on student level of autistic severity as measured by the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino & Gruber, 2005). As shown in Figure 3, all teachers, regardless of the severity of their students’ autism, rated friendship, social skills, and emotional development as the top three outcome priorities. Teachers ranked friendship

Figure 1. Mean ratings (and standard deviation errors) of importance reported by teachers.

Figure 2. Mean rankings (and standard deviation errors) of importance reported by teachers.
as the third priority behind social skills and emotional development for both students with mild to moderate autistic symptomatology and severe autistic symptomatology (see Figure 4). A large difference was observed in the ranking of intellectual and academic skills (mean score difference = 0.76) and friendship across the two groups (mean score difference = 0.70). Higher importance for intellectual and academic skills was reported for students with severe autistic symptomatology compared to those with mild to moderate autism.

Figure 3. Teachers’ ratings (and standard deviation errors) of curriculum priorities as grouped according to their student’s level of autistic severity.

Figure 4. Teachers’ rankings (and standard deviation errors) of curriculum priorities as grouped according to their student’s level of autistic severity.
level of autistic symptomatology. Friendship was ranked as more important in the group with mild to moderate levels of autistic symptomatology as compared to those with severe levels.

Teachers and parents reported similar patterns in their rating and ranking of the outcome priorities. Both teachers and parents rated and ranked social skills, emotional development and friendship as the three most important outcomes when compared to intellectual and academic skills, physical skill and motor development, and creativity (see Figures 5 and 6). Parents consistently rated all curriculum outcomes as more important in their children’s development than did teach-
ers. When forced to rank, friendship was ranked similarly across parents and teachers. Furthermore, parents ranked social skills and emotional development, and physical skill and motor development as lower priorities than teachers.

The agreement levels between teacher and parent rankings of outcome priorities are presented in Figure 7. Positive scores indicate that teachers viewed a particular outcome as more important than did parents. Conversely, negative scores indicate a greater importance for a particular outcome as viewed by parents as compared to teachers. A score of zero indicates that teachers and parents give the same importance to the rating or ranking of a particular outcome. Thus, the more closely clustered the graph is around a score of zero, the greater the degree of agreement between parents and teachers. The majority of the differences in rank were of one point in both positive and negative directions. There was a very high level of absolute agreement with regard to creativity and a high level of agreement for social and motor skills. Agreement on remaining curriculum priorities was lower and the lowest level of absolute agreement (i.e., scores of zero) was between teacher and parent perceptions of friendship.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate teacher perceptions of the importance of friendship in relation to other outcome priorities in children of ASD with varying level of autistic symptomatology across satellite and mainstream classroom setting. In addition, where available, teacher views of the importance of friendship and other outcome priorities were compared to those of parents of the same children. The investigation of teacher perceptions was conducted using both rating and ranking approaches. In rating, teachers were able to assign a weighting to the importance of each outcome priority. Ranking, however, required teachers to prioritize and differentiate the relative importance of each outcome. Teachers rated all of the outcome priorities as highly important, but a greater differentiation of outcome priorities was seen when teachers were asked to rank the importance of the outcomes.

Overall, both mainstream teachers and satellite class teachers rated and ranked friend-
ship, social skills, and emotional development as the top three most important outcome priorities. This may reflect recognition of the broad learning needs of children with ASD in the area of social and emotional development as well as friendship, all of which may be seen as related to core socio-communicative deficits.

Teachers of satellite classed ranked friendship, social skills, and emotional development for students with ASD as more important compared to mainstream class teachers. It is possible that specialist satellite teachers had a greater depth of knowledge regarding core deficits of ASD, even though similar percentages of satellite and mainstream teachers reported having completed specific training in ASD. It should be noted that satellite class teachers were provided with extensive autism-specific systemic curriculum and pedagogical support structures from Aspect and a lower teacher to student ratio (typically a teacher and aide per six to eight children). Given that social skills programming is likely to need to be individualized, satellite teachers might give it a higher priority as they have better support and resources to address socio-communicative need. Only 11% (5 out of 44) of children in the mainstream classroom received itinerant support, which ranged from 1.25 hours to 16.42 hours in one academic year, so the level of autism specific support was far more limited in this setting.

Mainstream students were more cognitively able (as reflected in the FSIQ) but had higher SRS scores, indicating greater severity of autistic symptomatology. Nevertheless, their teachers ranked intellectual and academic skills to be of greater importance than teachers in satellite classes. It is possible that this reflected a view that students in mainstream classes would benefit to a greater extent from a focus on academic instruction. This result might suggest that mainstream teachers’ perception of their students’ potential to progress in a certain area might influence the way they prioritize the importance of learning outcomes. Teachers might possibly have prioritized areas where students were more likely to be successful.

Friendship was ranked third by teachers from both satellite and mainstream classes behind emotional development and social skills. Despite its importance for children with ASD, friendship development and maintenance may not necessarily be seen as a focus of instruction. Fostering successful friendship relations requires the mastery of a complex set of skills (e.g., social cognition, language, emotions). Although it is possible that teachers may consider friendship as one aspect of the broader curriculum area of social skills, teaching of social skills may be necessary but not sufficient to facilitate friendships (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2009). Another possible reason that friendship was ranked lower than social skills and emotional development could be because friendship is a concept that is difficult to operationalize (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). There are limited intervention studies that target friendship as an outcome (e.g., Solomon, Goodlin-Jones, & Anders, 2004; MacKay, Knott, F., & Dunlop, 2007; Owen-DeSchryver, Carr, Cale, & Blakeley-Smith, 2008). As a result, teachers have limited guidance on how to facilitate friendships. This might cause teachers to feel less capable to target improvements in the area of making and keeping friends, and thus to make it a lower priority.

The curriculum priority areas (i.e., social skills, emotional development, and friendship) related to core socio-communicative deficits of children with ASD were rated and ranked higher for children with mild to moderate levels rather than those with severe level of autistic symptomatology, as measured by the SRS. This result is unexpected and counterintuitive, and we do not have an explanation other than that, as previously noted, in this sample, children showing higher levels of autistic symptomatology were in mainstream settings where teachers may have had less specific knowledge of ASD.

When examining central tendency, teachers and parents in this study similarly rated and ranked social skills, emotional development, and friendship as the three top learning outcomes, followed by intellectual and academic skills, physical skill and motor development and creativity. Comparison of mean rankings between the two group showed similar results to that of Baumgart et al. (1991), who found that parents rated the importance of social skills instruction slightly lower than either special education teachers or experts in
special education. In regards to intellectual skills, parents reported greater emphasis on the development of academic and intellectual skills than teachers, which is consistent with previous study of typically developing children by Knudsen-Lindauer and Harris (1989).

The understanding of how each stakeholder views the importance of specific learning outcomes is a good starting point in the process of aligning priorities for a cohesive service delivery. Further analysis at the individual level, however, shows considerable variation in the level of agreement between the perceptions of teachers and parents with regards to ranking of learning outcomes. In terms of outcome of absolute agreement, friendship was ranked as one of the learning outcomes where teachers and parents had the least number of complete agreements (n = 18%). In general, teachers ranked friendship skills to be of higher importance than parents. Teachers might be more likely to observe the child in social situations with a broader range of peers, necessitating behaviors pertaining to friendship skills. Hence they might be more aware of the need to prioritize friendship skills.

It has been previously noted that in the Australian context and internationally, it is mandated that parents play a key role to assist in the process of programming for personalized learning and support. When parents and teachers priorities are not clearly aligned, a number of issues could arise. The first one could be that parents often report a low satisfaction in the service being provided because it does not fulfill their expectation of what needs to be targeted. Second, the lack of teacher-parent collaboration might jeopardise the effectiveness of the program implementation across school and home settings (Carter et al., 2014; Hurth et al., 1999), hindering the process of skill generalization.

Future Research

Further research is needed to replicate and extend the findings reported in this study. A comparison study of teachers and parents perception of the importance of friendship, using a larger and broader sample of parents and teachers of children with ASD is needed to extend the current preliminary data presented. This data will clarify further the level of congruency in perceptions between these two stakeholders. In addition to quantitative data, it would be beneficial to collect qualitative data on stakeholder perceptions of the importance of friendship and their reasons for their perceptions. Furthermore, it is of interest to investigate the relationship between teacher training and the depth of their knowledge in core deficits of ASD and how this impacts on the way they prioritize friendship skills in relation to other outcome priorities. It would also be valuable to examine the perceptions of students with regard to priorities.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. Samples of teachers and parents were recruited from schools across two states in Australia. Hence, the results of this particular study might not be reflective of broader teacher and parent perceptions. Furthermore, the data on the importance of friendship and other outcome priorities in the current study relied on teacher reports of their perceptions, and not on their actual practice. Finally, an unavoidable six-month time gap existed between the collection of parent data and teacher data. Nevertheless, the data collected was within the same academic year, so a degree of consistency within perceptions would be expected.

Conclusion

This is the first study to compare the perception of teachers and parents on the importance of friendship and other learning outcomes in children with ASD. Three major conclusions arise from the results of this study. First, friendship was ranked as a less important outcome priority by both teachers and parents in comparison to social skills and emotional development. Second, satellite class teachers ranked the outcomes that relate to the core deficits of ASD as higher in priority as compared to the mainstream class teachers. This might indicate that in mainstream class, teachers might be less sensitive to the needs of students with ASD, hence as compared to satellite teachers, they rated intellectual and academic skills as higher priorities as compared to other areas of core deficits, namely
social skills, friendship, and emotional development. Third, significant disparities in teacher and parent perception were observed, especially in the areas of friendship, emotional development, and intellectual and academic skills. This lack of alignment in perception of priorities can impact on the success of learning both in and outside of the school. This finding highlights the need for schools to examine the alignment of school and parent priorities in the development of educational programs.

References


Evidence-based practices