



Meeting the Needs of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Essential Role of School Social Workers

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ABSTRACT: Autism spectrum disorder is a complex developmental disorder that affects a child's social communication, behavior, and cognitive skills. This article reviews current literature on Autism spectrum disorder and the challenges that children having this disorder face in schools. It also examines the role of school social workers in providing support and intervention for children with Autism spectrum disorder, including individual and group counseling, family support, and collaboration with teachers and other professionals. The article emphasizes the importance of supporting autistic children in the school context and the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach that includes the involvement of school social workers. The findings of this study suggest that school social workers play a critical role in promoting the academic, social, and emotional well-being of children with Autism spectrum disorder in the school environment and can contribute to the better outcomes for these students.

KEYWORDS: autism spectrum disorder, school, school social worker, support.

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that affects a child's communication, social interaction, and behaviors. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in 54 children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder in the United States [7]. In Vietnam, the estimated prevalence of autism spectrum disorder is around 1.1%, but the actual number of affected children is believed to be much higher due to limited diagnostic capabilities and lack of social awareness. Autism is still a relatively new issue and there is a lack of in-depth research and case studies on the causes, symptoms, and intervention methods to help autistic children integrate into vietnamese society. Most of the available resources are translated from foreign languages into Vietnamese. There is a need to establish a team of experts and social workers to provide appropriate intervention, counseling, and support for children with autism [1].

Children with autism spectrum disorder face many challenges in their daily lives, especially at school. They may have difficulties with social interaction, communication, and processing their senses, which can lead to difficulties in making friends, participating in group activities, and receiving instruction and learning. Therefore, it is necessary to address the needs of children with autism spectrum disorder in the school environment, in order to ensure their success in learning and social interactions.

Social workers play an important role in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder at school setting. They provide a range of services, including individual and group counseling, case management, parent education, advocacy, and linkage to comprehensive support resources. School social workers need to collaborate with teachers, parents, and other experts to develop and implement effective individual support plans for children with autism spectrum disorder.

The purpose of this article is to explore the supportive activities of school social workers in helping children with autism spectrum disorder based on previous research worldwide, and propose appropriate support activities for the context in Vietnam. Specifically, the article will examine the activities of school social workers in addressing the needs of children with autism spectrum disorder, their families, and schools. This article will provide an overview of the current literature on this topic and highlight the importance of addressing the challenges of autism spectrum disorder in the school environment. Based on the results indicated from previous research, a question is raised: What activities can school social workers in Vietnam undertake to support children with autism spectrum disorder in the school environment?

2. MAIN BODY

2.1 What is Autism spectrum disorder?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects how an individual interacts with others, causing difficulties in communication, learning, and social behavior [7]. This condition creates challenges in social interaction and



communication, and the individual is limited by repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities [9]. Children with autism spectrum disorder face challenges in the school environment, including difficulties in communication, social interaction, challenging behavior, and learning difficulties.

2.2. Difficulties autistic children often face at school

Difficulty in communication is often the most common obstacle for children with autism spectrum disorder in school environments. They may have difficulty in understanding and using language, as well as effectively conveying their needs and desires to friends and teachers [2]. This can lead to significant frustration and behavioral problems, as well as difficulties in academic achievement. Additionally, children with autism spectrum disorder may have difficulty in nonverbal communication, such as understanding facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and emotions of the other person, which can make it very difficult for the child to understand social signals and interact appropriately with others [8].

Social interaction difficulties are another major challenge for children with autism spectrum disorder in school settings. They may have difficulty in making and maintaining friendships effectively and may not understand social norms and rules [3]. This can lead to isolation and lack of support from other children, which can have negative effects on the child's mental health and their happiness in life. Additionally, children with autism spectrum disorder may have difficulty in processing emotions, which can make them difficult to participate in social activities, when the child cannot remain calm in noisy or crowded environments.

Behavioral difficulties are also common in children with autism spectrum disorder at school. They may have repetitive behaviors or habits, which may seem strange and different from other classmates, such as arranging objects in a particular order, tics behaviors or repeating certain phrases [2]. Children may also have difficulty adapting to changes in term of habit and their surrounding environment, which can lead to behavioral problems and make it difficult for the child to adapt to new situations. Additionally, children with autism spectrum disorder may have difficulty regulating their emotions, leading to impulsive behavior, violence, or feelings of frustration or disappointment when facing with stress or situations that do not meet their expectations.

Learning difficulties are another challenge that children with autism spectrum disorder face at school. They may have difficulty maintaining attention and focus for long periods of time, which can hinder their ability to learn and remember information [3]. Children can also face difficulties with organizational, planning and time management skills, which can affect their ability to complete assignments and participate in classroom activities. However, children with autism spectrum disorder still can have specific strengths and weaknesses, such as being particularly interested in a certain subject or struggling with certain types of tasks, such as reading, writing, or doing math.

2.3 The role of social workers in supporting children with autism

School social workers play an important role in supporting the academic and socio-emotional needs of children with autism spectrum disorder at school. School social workers are equipped with special knowledge and skills to help identify the needs of children with autism spectrum disorder and develop targeted intervention measures to meet those needs [9]. They can provide prevention and intervention plans specifically for children who lack social skills, protection, and equality in education.

School social workers can provide many interventions and support for children with autism, including individual and group counseling, social skills training, and collaboration with parents and teachers to develop and implement individualized education plans (IEP) [3]. School social workers can also support children with autism in developing coping strategies, stress management, and social integration with peers.

Collaboration and partnerships are essential roles in the practice of social work in schools, and school social workers must work with many experts and stakeholders to provide comprehensive support for children with autism. They can work with teachers, school psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and other professions to ensure that children with autism spectrum disorder receive the necessary adjustment and specific support to succeed in learning and social interaction [3]. Social workers can also work with other organizations and agencies available in the community to provide additional services and support resources for families with children with autism spectrum disorder.

The article focuses on the specific support activities of social workers in providing support for students with autism spectrum disorder in the school environment, examining the services that social workers provide, including counseling and guidance for families and schools on academic support programs, social interaction activities, life skills training, social integration support, and help in finding specialized support services.



2.3.1 Counseling and guidance for families and schools

Social workers play an important role in advising and guiding families and schools on how to support children with autism spectrum disorder. One of their main responsibilities is to provide information on evidence-based interventions, behavior management strategies, and the use of supportive technology, e.g provide noise-cancelling headphones for children with hearing problems. Symptoms of autism spectrum disorder can vary greatly and can pose significant challenges for children and their families. School social workers who have extensive knowledge of many types of interventions and effective therapies for children with autism spectrum disorder can help families and schools choose the most appropriate options for their child's individual needs [9]. School social workers also design and implement appropriate academic support programs, organize social interaction activities and life skills training programs, and help create a supportive environment for children with autism in school and in the larger community. Additionally, social workers support families in accessing specialized support services such as vocational therapy, speech therapy, mental health care services, and help families and schools leverage complex support systems.

2.3.2 Provide learning support programs for children with ASD

In addition to counseling and guidance, social workers also design and implement educational support programs for children with autism to help them develop the necessary skills for an effective learning in school. These programs include training in social skills, communication support, and sensory integration activities that are essential to help children with autism learn how to start and maintain conversations, recognize social cues (gestures, speech, facial expressions, emotions...), manage emotions, express their needs and desires, process sensory information effectively, and regulate their emotions in a positive direction. While supporting the child, school social workers also collaborate with families and teachers to create an individualized learning plan that addresses the strengths and challenges of each child, helping them achieve success in the school environment and in life [4].

2.3.3 Provide social interaction activities and life skills for children with ASD

School social workers organize social interaction activities and life skills training programs for children with autism to develop social skills, build friendships, and learn daily life skills such as self-care, time management, and personal organization. Intervention measures are evidence-based and include storytelling, video learning, role-playing, group games, drama, music therapy, art crafts to help children with autism develop social skills and interact positively with peers of the same age. [4]

2.3.4 Support children with ASD in integrating with friends and the social environment.

School social workers collaborate with the school and families to create a supportive environment for children with autism. They provide support and guidance on how to promote social integration, reduce school bullying issues, and build positive relationships with their classmates [4]. They work closely with families and schools to create an inclusive and supportive environment where children with autism spectrum disorder can build positive relationships with peer groups.

Being socially excluded and bullied is one of the challenges that children with autism spectrum disorder face at school settings. School social workers work with teachers and other staff to understand the specific needs of each child and develop individualized plans to address their unique challenges. They also provide individual and group counseling for children with autism, teaching them important social skills such as communication, problem-solving, and emotion regulation, as well as building confidence and self-esteem, which can have a significant impact on their social development. Social workers also provide support to parents and families, helping them understand their child's specific needs and providing other resources to support their child's social development [4].

2.3.5 Help finding support services from other professionals

Social workers support families in finding specialized support services, such as vocational therapy, speech therapy, and mental health services, depending on the individual needs of each child. They provide families with information about available resources and help them navigate complex care systems available in the community, as well as coordinate plans to ensure that they are appropriate and convenient for all parties involved [4].

3. RESEARCH GAP

According to the search results, the prevalence rate of autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam is estimated to be around 1.6%, with approximately 200,000 children affected [5]. Children with autism spectrum disorder face various challenges, particularly in the field of education. However, specific studies on the social work practices, as a profession, and the specific role of social workers in schools for children with autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam have not been found. Access to social services may also be limited



in many countries, especially developing countries like Vietnam, due to a lack of resources and funding, which can create a lot of pressure for teachers, school staff, and both students and parents in addressing the challenges related to children with autism spectrum disorder. Another challenge is the limited availability of resources for school social workers, including funding and support from school administrators, which may hinder their ability to provide necessary support and services for children with autism [6].

School social workers play an important role in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam. One of the major challenges is the issue of professional training in knowledge and practical skills for social work in the context of schools, as well as the limited resources available to school social workers [6]. Many school social workers in Vietnam have limited knowledge about autism spectrum disorder and may not have the necessary skills and resources to effectively support children. In addition, there is still a lack of trained experts in interventions for children with autism, such as language and speech therapy, sensory therapy, functional therapy, and psychology, which can make it difficult to provide full support for all children with autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam.

4. CONCLUSION

Social work in schools can play an important role in helping children with Autism Spectrum Disorder cope with the challenges of the school environment and social integration. The special needs of autistic children require a focus on innovation in educational organization, policies, and interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers and other experts in the school setting [2]. Social workers can create conditions for developing social skills through direct guidance, spending time and providing special support for children, promoting communication between families, schools, and available social services in the community. They can also help improve the overall school environment, create interactive games and activities to encourage participation of children with autism, to prevent and address bullying in school settings [4].

In Vietnam, school social work resources and services are still limited, so a practical model based on appropriate research in the context of an economically developing country with limited knowledge and skills of teachers, school staff, and professional therapists in addressing the difficulties of children with autism at school is needed. This model should be appropriate to the society's perception of this syndrome, as there are still many misunderstandings and prejudices against children and families with autism. By addressing the special needs of children with autism, social work in schools can improve educational outcomes and overall quality of life for these children.

There are many supportive activities that school social workers can perform to support children with autism spectrum disorder in vietnamese schools, including: *learning about autism spectrum disorder* to better understand the challenges that these children are facing and *to consult and guide families and schools*. *Supporting teachers*: school social workers can support teachers in obtaining information about children with autism spectrum disorder so that teachers can design appropriate teaching plans for each child's abilities and strengths. *Guiding students*: school social workers can guide students to understand autism spectrum disorder, help them understand and empathize with classmates who have this condition. *Organizing entertainment and social connection activities*: school social workers can organize entertainment activities such as games, role-playing, drama, movies, field trips, music, art, and crafts to help children with autism spectrum disorder relax and reduce stress. *Supporting children's learning*: School social workers can support children with autism spectrum disorder in their learning by designing appropriate learning activities and supporting skills such as reading, writing, and math. *Creating a positive learning environment*: School social workers can help create a positive learning environment for children with autism spectrum disorder, ensuring that they feel comfortable and safe in school. In addition, school social workers can support children with autism spectrum disorder and their families in finding the best sources of support and solutions to address issues related to the children's development.

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