

Strong professional development networks benefit autistic students

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Because each person on the autism spectrum is very different, there is a saying that when you have met one person on the autism spectrum, you have met one person on the autism spectrum. Due to these many

differences, providing learning in school settings can be challenging for teachers of autistic students, as well as for the professional development providers—such as district or regional autism experts who train and coach teachers.

Researchers from Drexel University's A.J. Drexel Autism Institute recently published a study on the social networks of professional development providers who coach teachers to implement evidence-based teaching practices (EBPs) in their classrooms for their autistic students. When professional development providers have strong networks of professional support, they can potentially gain access to helpful resources—EBP knowledge, coaching support and financial resources—to provide higher quality, successful individualized coaching for teachers.

Teachers need to learn how to select and implement the EBPs that meet the individualized needs of their students on the spectrum; however, most teachers are not trained in how to implement autism-specific EBPs which is critical for students' success.

"We found that the networks of professional development providers do help them be successful coaches for teachers of autistic students," said Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Autism Institute and lead author of the report. "Specifically, professional development providers who have more people in their networks who were autism EBP experts, as well as more people in their networks who supported them with how to individualize their professional development efforts to specific teachers or districts, had a higher performance as [teacher](#) coaches."

Professional development providers face barriers accessing the needed supports to conduct high quality professional development and lack experience with individualizing their methods for training and coaching

teachers. Identifying the kinds of [network](#) connections that make professional development providers for teachers of autistic students successful can help change the ecosystem of support around [autistic children](#) to enable them to have better learning outcomes.

Because regional special education and school districts often search for ways to help teachers of autistic students, this study identifies specific kinds of network supports that regional and district leaders can invest in to increase the quality of training that teachers receive. McGhee Hassrick gives the example of district leaders often hiring professional development providers because of their years of experience. But their findings suggest that EBP knowledge is as an essential characteristic of effective professional development providers—more than years of experience.

Regional or district level interventions to improve instruction for autistic students are relatively new. The state of California uses the California Autism Professional Training and Information Network (CAPTAIN), a statewide interagency collaboration with the goal of scaling up use of EBPs for autistic individuals through targeted implementation supports and coaching. CAPTAIN professional development providers are required to provide EBP training and coaching to teachers and other educators each year. McGhee Hassrick and her co-authors conducted [social network analysis](#) with CAPTAIN professional development providers who worked with teachers who had autistic students in their classroom. They filled out the network survey, identifying coaching and financial supporters of their teaching training work. The research team then tried to determine if professional development providers with larger networks had better self-rated performance as teacher trainers.

"This study suggests that the quantity and quality of professional development providers' social networks can influence the quality of coaching support for teachers of children on the [autism spectrum](#)," said

McGhee Hassrick. "Building larger support networks that include experts who know how to coach teachers may have potential as an intervention to improve EBP use and scale up in educational settings."

Researchers found the size of the coaching networks influenced performance outcomes over and above greater system-level characteristics, indicating the importance of networks for professional development providers. While this is the first analysis testing the impact of the networks of higher-level professional development providers on their performance as coaches for classroom teachers of autistic students, this aligns with the existing literature on the impact that networks have on teachers, principals and district leaders.

Additionally, it appears that coaching support is more important than financial support for professional development providers' performance. McGhee Hassrick added that although these data were collected from within one state public education system, the implications for professional development providers can be applied more broadly. For example, publicly provided educational services nationally and internationally often rely on regionalized expertise for program development and improvements. Educational professionals in professional [development](#) provider roles will likely benefit from support networks, regardless of location and organizational structures.

The study was published in *Social Sciences*.

More information: Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick et al, Producing Child-Centered Interventions: Social Network Factors Related to the Quality of Professional Development for Teachers of Autistic Students, *Social Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/socsci10120453](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10120453)

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