Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have received increasing attention within educational systems in the past decade. Many school systems are in a difficult position as they attempt to balance parental demands for more intensive and specialized services for children with autism with the limited knowledge or experience of school staff about children with autism (Williams, Johnson, & Sukhodolsky, 2005).

School psychologists are in a particularly valuable position to have a direct impact on this tentative balance. However, research indicates that there has been little investigation regarding school psychologists’ knowledge of autism and specific training needs (Askenhorn, Corsello, & Schmidt, 2006; Allen, Robins, & Decker, 2008).

This information will help guide recommendations for pre-service as well as internship training of school psychologists as well as increase understanding of the strategies, supports, and resources needed to better improve the services provided by school psychologists for students with autism and their families.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to investigate school psychologists’ knowledge and skills in identifying, evaluating, and providing interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How knowledgeable are school psychologists about autism?
2. What experiences and training opportunities have school psychologists engaged in for children with autism?
3. What are the training needs of school psychologists in order to better serve children with autism?

METHODS

School psychologists who were members of NASP as well as school psychologists who were members of their respective state-affiliated school psychology organization were recruited by e-mail or through randomly selected mailings to complete an electronic-based or paper-based survey. A total of 1000 surveys were mailed to randomly selected members of NASP. Fifty-seven of these surveys were returned as undeliverable, 238 were returned completed. However, 17 of the surveys were ineligible due to employment in settings other than school systems. Thus, the response rate for survey completion was 27%.

The president or research chair for 50 state-affiliated school psychology organizations were also contacted via email to obtain consent to sample their membership using an electronic survey methodology. A total of 193 members from these state organizations completed the survey; however, 29 members were ineligible due to employment in settings other than school systems.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 402 participants from 50 states completed the survey. Using geographic region standards from the U.S. Census Bureau, 35.6% of the respondents were from the South, 29.1% were from the Midwest, 23.6% were from the Northeast, and 11.7% were from the West.

Eighty-two percent of the respondents were female, the average age of the participants was 41.3 (SD = 13.1), and the average number of years employed as a school psychologists was 11.6 (SD = 9.71). Forty-eight percent of the respondents held a specialist-level degree, 32% held a master’s-level degree, and 19% held a doctoral degree.

Survey of School Psychologists’ Autism Knowledge, Training, and Experiences

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EXPERIENCES, TRAINING, AND BELIEFS

The Experiences, Training, and Belief component of the survey was a series of statements that participants rated on a Likert scale, where 1 is ‘Not at all true’ and 5 is ‘Very true’. Also, participants had the option to rate the items as “Do not know,” which was equal to 0. Descriptive analyses were conducted on the statements (Table 1).

Training Needs

The Training Needs component of the survey was a series of 13 statements that participants rated as “Yes” or “No” for perceived training needs.

DISCUSSION

Results demonstrated that most school psychologists self-report knowledge in the expected direction for agreement, despite the modest amount of training school psychologists noted receiving during their graduate education or pre-service training for working with the autism population.

However, the differences between emotional and behavioral disorders and autism, developmental delays and autism, and special education eligibility versus DSM-V diagnoses are gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed through more training, as evidenced by the disagreement amongst practitioners in this area.

The results from the survey also acknowledged the need for additional training opportunities in providing interventions, strategies, and supports for students with autism in the following areas: developing family-centered educational plans; training peer mentors; and translating assessment information into teaching goals and activities.

With added training, school psychologists are in an ideal position to guide the execution of these areas because of their skills in consultation and intervention implementation.

Although efforts were made to obtain a representative sample of school psychologists for the study, the marginal number of participants from the Western states are a limitation to the study and may have impacted the results obtained.

Future research is warranted to determine if these trends can be generalized to larger geographic areas, particularly between other individual states or compared to all states within the United States.

REFERENCES


