Evaluating the Ability of Learners with Autism to Work in Small Groups

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Melmark

Learners with autism do well with one on one instruction, and this is widely known. However, the provision of one-on-one instruction on a long-term basis is not efficient or realistic. Funding streams, particularly in adulthood, do not support this level of staffing. Furthermore, the ability to follow instructions delivered to a group is essential to successful integration in school, vocational and community settings.

In our clinical work at Melmark, we have found that this issue is a challenging one for educational teams. Often, there are diverse opinions about a student's readiness for group instruction. Educational team members and parents often have strong opinions about readiness for group instruction or about the need for continued individualized instruction.

Concerns about behavioral regression and about a slowed rate of acquisition often result in long-term provision of individual instruction. This is understandable, as established skills need to be maintained. Furthermore, learners with developmental delays and slowed skill acquisition need more intensive instruction to learn. Worry over loss of skills and a slowed rate of skill development often results in long-term reliance on a 1:1 instructional ratio.

Prolonging this ratio beyond the instructional need, however, may be counter-productive. Some learners may become dependent on this level of support, and it may impede their ability to transition to settings with less rich instructional ratios. One of our primary obligations is to ensure that we prepare learners for next (and ultimate) settings. Future settings do not generally provide such rich instructional ratios. A student who requires such support as an adolescent or adult learner may have fewer settings available to them.

From a clinical and research perspective, it is important to identify any learner's capacity for group instruction. There are few guidelines about how to assess such capacity. While there is agreement on the importance of reduced staffing and independent responding, there is a need for explicit tools for assessing a learner's ability to demonstrate and learn skills in a group setting.

Prior Research

Fading intensive staffing is essential to

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generalization of skills (Koegel, Egel, & Dunlap), eliminate the potential for observa-
tional learning (Keel & Gast, 1992), and require far more instructional time to do group formats (Favell, Favell, & McGin-
scy, 1978).

Research in this area indicates that small group formats are as effective as (Kamps & Walker, 1990) and more efficient than (Biberdorf & Pear, 1977) one-to-one in-
struction, with comparable rates of challenging behavior across instructional arrangements (Kamps & Walker, 1990). Data from a study by Kamps et al (1992) indicates that individuals with a history of one-to-one instruction can successfully be transitioned to small-group formats across several curricular areas with few problems. McDonnell et al (2006) demonstrated equivalent learning in embedded and group instructional formats for middle schoolers with developmental disabilities. There are many questions about learning in groups that remain unanswered. Some novel work by Taylor and colleagues seeks to isolate the components of the listening re-
sponse that may facilitate learning observationally in group instructional contexts. Tay-
lor, DeQuinioz, and Stine (2012) evaluated the components of responses that may fa-
cilitate observational learning in group con-
texts. They found that teaching a monitoring response increased observational learning. Challenging assumptions about the benefit of 1:1 instruction, Melton, Hansen, Mayer, and Kenyon (2013) presented data that demonstrated the superiority of group instruction for the acquisition of new skills. In their examination of seven learn-
ers with autism, they found that 4 of 7 ac-
quired skills more rapidly when taught in a group context. The other three participants had equivalent rates of acquisition across conditions. These data are interesting, and await replication.

While the majority of past research has focused on students’ ability to acquire new skills in small-group arrangements, a stu-
dent’s ability to maintain independent re-
sponding on mastered targets when transition-
ted to a dyad instructional arrangement from individualized instruction may be a good indicator of whether or not fading staff ratios is practical at that time.

Melmark’s Focus

The research team at Melmark is committed to figuring out an efficient way to address this clinical need and has designed an instructional protocol to assess a learner’s performance in individual and group instruction. Initially, research focused on examining the learner’s differential performance in individual and dyad learning situations with mastered skills. Ultimately, this work will be extended to examine differential acquisition of new material in group and individual learning contexts. Perhaps the most exciting element of the protocol is that it enables educational teams to make decisions about learner readiness for group instruction on the basis of objective and individual data. The focus of the assessment will be to identify the learners’ skills in core areas relevant to success in group learning environments. Variables assessed include not only the ability to learn new material, but also:

- Levels of engagement
- Rates of challenging behavior
- Maintenance of mastered targets in individualized and group instructional arrangements

Successful candidates for group instruction should exhibit:

- Stable patterns of independent responding
- Maintenance of learned skills
- High levels of engagement
- Low rates of challenging behavior
- Low rates of stereotypy across conditions

The initial assessment compares differential performance of mastered skills in individual and dyed instruction. This is an important first step, as learners need to be able to demonstrate and perform tasks when they are not provided with individual attention. Furthermore, it will provide information on whether behaviors that can interfere with tasks are more prevalent in learners with autism in individual or group environments. Finally, it will provide data on whether performance suffers in group contexts. The latter assessment compares differential acquisition of new instructional targets in individual and dyad instruction. These data are important to ascertain whether learners with autism truly need individual instruction to learn new skills. It is hoped that such an instrument could be used to support the learner’s readiness to be weaned from individual instruction and to participate in group learning. As the ability to participate in group instruction is essential for academic and vocational environ-
ments, assessing this skill is part of our clinical obligation to prepare learners with autism for their next environments.

For more information on the assessment tool described, please contact Helena Maguire at helena.maguire@melmarkinc.org or Mary Jane Weiss at mweiss@melmarkinc.org.

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