



Wu Yee Sun College

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Project Final Report

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the nine major types of special educational needs as defined by the Education Bureau. Due to these children's inborn social deficits, parents frequently invest considerable efforts, such as attending training sessions, to help their children develop social skills and ensure their social health. However, due to the slow pace of social development in ASD children—even with intensive training—children may fall short of parents' expectations, causing parents to feel discouraged. This discouragement is mainly due to the problems of parents having unrealistic timeframes for their children's social improvement and failing to set incremental goals for their learning, causing ongoing improvements to be overlooked.

The current project aims to teach parents with ASD children how to establish realistic timeframes and set incremental goals for their children's social development. This approach intends to improve their expectation management and enhance their abilities to recognise and appreciate their children's learning progress, ultimately reducing feelings of discouragement.

The project beneficiaries will be parents of ASD children in preschool or early elementary grades who have high expectations toward their children's social potential and have invested significant effort in improving their social skills, yet experienced a reality-expectation discrepancy that leads to discouragement and distress. Additionally, the project will involve social skills training for ASD children and collaborations with professional therapists from an external centre, benefiting both parties.

Background

Characteristics of ASD children

One diagnostic criterion for ASD is impaired social communication and interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD children often struggle with social skills such as making eye contact and forming joint attention. They usually have minimal social interactions and are isolated in classroom settings. To address these challenges, additional social training is essential. Moreover, training methods must be specialized, as ASD children exhibit a wide variation in symptom types and severity. Training should be intensive and repetitive, using a spoon-feeding approach to ensure retention and application (Marchi, 2015). Additionally, social actions, such as asking questions in class, must be broken down into smaller, manageable steps. Their learning progress is thus slow and challenging to accelerate.

The problem

Every parent holds hope toward their children. Despite children's inherent challenges, parents believe ASD children can achieve age-appropriate development. Consequently, they invest significant time and money in social training, hoping to address these deficits. However, this belief conflicts with the inherent slow social development in ASD children. Moreover, in Hong Kong's competitive culture, many parents adopt a result-oriented mindset that prioritizes tangible achievements, such as good grades and skill mastery (Shek & Chan, 1999). This often leads to an emphasis on correction over praise, where parents blame their children for failures while overlooking their efforts and incremental progress (Pomerantz, 2008). Therefore, since ultimate outcomes are prioritized, parents may struggle to recognize improvements, as these can be minor and their efforts required for social tasks is often underestimated. This dynamic can create a cycle where ASD children consistently fall short of their parents' expectations, leading to disappointment. Such feelings reinforce the parents'

desire for improvement, given the significant effort they invest, trapping them in a self-perpetuating cycle. Practically, this issue stems from a lack of understanding of ASD children's social deficits, preventing parents from forming realistic expectations toward their improvement and breaking ultimate goals into incremental steps.

In the long run, the inability to recognize children's improvements causes distress for both parents and children, worsening their relationship. When children's social performances consistently fall short of parents' expectations, combined with ongoing negative feedback from schools, parents experience significant stress. As a result, parents' mental well-being is negatively affected, limiting their capacity for positive parenting. In addition, stress often leads them to push their children harder, with the goal of achieving substantial improvements in social skills. This may manifest into more negative practices, such as increased psychological control, which can have devastating effects on children's development, including lower self-esteem and poorer socioemotional adjustment (Wang et al., 2007). Children who receive constant negative feedback without praise may even internalize the feedback and form negative self-concepts (Koenig et al., 2000). These harmful effects can be lifelong, underscoring the urgent need for change.

Existing solutions

The most common approach is to increase parents' general knowledge through educational talks. These sessions, hosted by professionals, provide accurate information about ASD and parenting guidelines to enhance parents' understanding of their children's conditions. However, these are often one-off events, and the information is often too generalized, designed to address the broadest needs across the ASD spectrum. The lack of specificity and follow-up opportunities leaves parents, who may already lack knowledge,

unable to select information suited to their children's unique situations or effectively implement what they have learned. Consequently, their individualized needs remain unmet, leaving the issue of forming realistic timeframes and specific incremental goals unresolved.

In another approach, parents who enrol their children in social workshops receive feedback from therapists every few months to help them catch up on their children's learning. While it is beneficial to include parental feedback, parents remain passive, as the learning plans are often determined solely by therapists. When parents can only provide updates regarding their children every few months, they may not be aware of what their children have learned or achieved in training. Coupled with the challenges of ASD children's poor generalization skills, which hinder their ability to apply what have learnt to the home setting, it becomes difficult for parents to see continuous and subtle improvement, leading parents to form the misconception that their children are not improving. This dynamic makes it challenging for parents to monitor their children's learning progress and manage their expectations effectively.

Although there is an urgency to change parental habits to reduce their negative views on children's development, existing services often fail to address the specific needs of parents. These services do not adequately help parents understand their children's situations or teach them how to form realistic timelines and incremental goals tailored to their children's unique circumstances, making it difficult for them to recognize and appreciate their children's growth.

The Project

Based on the highlighted parental needs, an online parental training program that adds onto existing social training classes for children with ASD is proposed, creating an integral

program. This training transforms one-off parental educational talks into continuous, self-directed online classes, conducted concurrently with their children's regular training classes, thus specialised.

The role of partnership organization

The online parental training will be conducted alongside an in-person social training class for ASD children, necessitating a partnership with an organization that provides such services. The chosen organization must specialize in social interventions for ASD children and offer parental support (e.g., Heep Hong Society) to enhance their acceptance of integrating parent training into children's programs. The selected centre should also provide social skills training workshops that are long-term (continuing for at least three months), intensive (with at least two sessions per week), one-to-one, focused on social functioning, structured, and have clear, narrow learning objectives. For instance, workshops designed to improve emotional understanding, rule-following, and conversational skills fulfil the above criteria.

Since the centre already provides parental training, existing teaching resources and materials can be modified and organised into online learning modules tailored to meet parents' specialized needs. In addition to delivering social training for ASD children, therapists will also oversee the online parental training. Their responsibilities will include updating parents on their teaching progress, designing learning schedules, allocating resources each week, and monitoring parental learning progress.

Execution

Parents will take an active role, becoming both students and trainers in the program.

Before the Program Starts

There will be an initial meeting between parents and therapists to discuss children's situations and understand parental perspectives. This will involve assessing misconceptions or gaps in parents' understandings of ASD and their children's conditions. Additionally, therapists will collaborate with parents to jointly set learning plans and schedules for children's trainings.

After the Start of the Program

Parents As Students

Parents will complete a learning module each week that equips them with knowledge about ASD, including both general information and specific insights tailored to their children's situations. For example, if their children exhibit self-stimulating behaviors, the module will cover the reasons behind those behaviors. This aims to enhance their understandings and foster realistic perceptions. This also teaches skills for parents to establish viable timelines and incremental goals, ultimately improving their expectation management and helping them visualize children's progresses.

Parents As Trainers

Parents will be responsible for providing after-class training for their children, aligning the content with that week's class material. This aims to enhance generalization and reinforce consistent rules. Guidelines for home training will be provided to help parents effectively coach their children. Parents will complete designated tasks at home and record

their children's performance weekly. This process encourages parents to actively observe their children's progress and recognize their achievements, helping to visualize continuous improvement.

The online parental training will utilize a specially designed platform that includes the following features:

Learning Corner

This is where parents receive specialized classes tailored to their specific parenting needs. Each module includes a passage or video, along with an end-of-module test for knowledge consolidation (e.g., a video demonstrating how to break a specific social action into smaller steps, accompanied by a chunking exercise). After completing the module, parents can check their answers and receive a review note summarizing the content.

Home Training Guide

Each week, therapists will update the platform with class contents, informing parents about what their children have achieved. Alongside this, guidelines for home training and suggested activities will be provided. For example, if their children learned to identify emotions from animated pictures in class, parents will be asked to organise activities like matching emotion cards at home. After completing the activities, parents will need to report back to therapists by filling out a performance checklist.

Progress Chart

The negotiated learning plans and timelines will be visualized in a linear format, featuring a starting point, an endpoint representing the final learning goal, and a road connecting the two. Along this road, there will be several intermediate stations representing

incremental goals, with varying distances corresponding to the expected times needed for achievement, along with the timeframe indicated. An animated child representing their child will walk along the road, illustrating their learning progress. This visual representation helps parents recognize continuous progress and reinforces the idea that their children are consistently working toward their expectations.

Chat Box

This function facilitates convenient updates between parents and therapists. Therapists can use it to inform parents about their children's progress, while parents can inquire or seek assistance regarding challenging tasks. It also supports progress checks, allowing discussions about whether adjustments regarding learning goals or timelines are necessary. For example, if a therapist believes a child has mastered certain tasks in class but the parents disagree based on their home observations, they can discuss and adjust the established timeline accordingly.

Expected Outcomes

For parents

The weekly online lessons are expected to enhance their understanding of their children's situations and help them appreciate their progress. Parents will gain insights into the inherent limitations and challenges their children face, fostering better perspective-taking and improving expectation management, which can reduce the stress placed on children. By learning to establish realistic timelines and incremental goals, parents can begin to recognize and appreciate their children's social development, shifting their focus away from ultimate outcomes. As parents take an active role in their children's training and regularly check on their achievements, they will be encouraged to observe subtle improvements regularly,

visualizing their children's continuous learning progress and further acknowledging these advancements. Ultimately, as parents see improvements, they will recognize that their efforts are paying off and feel less discouraged. This is expected to reduce parenting stress and encourage healthier parent-child interactions.

For ASD Children

Children are expected to show improvements in social skills through intensive, specialized training at the centre, combined with home training that enhances the training effects. This dual approach is anticipated to yield better learning outcomes than training solely at the centre.

For the Centre

Incorporating parental training alongside children's classes will lead to more comprehensive training outcomes. This creates a synergistic effect that improves service quality, fosters trust among parents, attracts more families to participate, and enhances the centre's prestige in the field. It also aligns with the centre's mission of providing the best services for ASD children.

Prototyping

It is uncommon for parents to engage in self-directed online learning workshops, raising concerns about potential drops in their motivation. However, it is believed that the desire to support their children will serve as a primary motivator for participation. To further

enhance parents' learning motivation, one possible strategy is to create interlocking tasks between parents and children. This approach involves informing parents that they must complete weekly online tasks to access their children's pre-class homework for the next session. To evaluate its effectiveness, a study can be conducted, involving a group of parents completing online tasks with interlocking tasks over a month, and the other group without interlocking tasks. Completion rates will be compared between the groups. If the completion rate is unsatisfactory and/or interlocking has no significant effect, interviews with participants will be conducted to explore alternative strategies for enhancing motivation. It is expected that when parents' responsibilities are linked to their children's learning, they will be more motivated to engage actively.

The workshop is designed to be self-directed, meaning there will be no real-time coaching or monitoring of parents' performance or understanding. The guidelines will be written by experienced professionals to ensure they are clear and user-friendly. However, there is a potential risk that remote coaching could lead to improper execution by parents, which may undermine the effectiveness of home training. To address this, parents and their children can be invited to the centre to follow the online guidelines and train their children in front of a therapist. This allows the therapist to observe their execution and identify common mistakes. By evaluating parents' performance and gathering feedback on any unclear points, the therapist can modify the guidelines accordingly. With trials involving a sufficient number of dyads (e.g., 30 pairs), the guidelines can be refined to ensure they are easy to follow at home, minimizing the chances of errors.

Conclusion

With the online workshop designed to help parents establish realistic timelines and incremental goals for their children's social development, the progress of children is unveiled. This approach fosters hope and reduces negative emotions in parents, allowing them to perceive their children more positively. It should be noted that while the project equips parents with skills and knowledge that alleviate stress and discouragement, their underlying beliefs and expectations may remain unchanged. If parents have overwhelming desires to see their children succeed socially, they might still feel dissatisfied despite recognizing progress. Additionally, the benefits may be short-lived if parents fail to appreciate their children's advancements after the program, especially when enrolling in other social training programs without parental involvement. Nevertheless, this project represents a crucial first step in changing parents' results-oriented practices and encouraging them to appreciate their child's unique growth, initiating their journey toward acceptance and positive parenting.

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Appendix

The development of this project employed the SCAMPER technique. First, it combined two approaches—children's training and parental workshops—into an integrated program that trains both parties. The benefits of this combination include increased specialization in parental training, as the content will be tailored to each child's specific needs and the parents' unique circumstances. Because both components are conducted simultaneously, parents can immediately apply the knowledge and skills they acquire, such as setting incremental goals for their children's training. Additionally, the project modified parents' roles from passive participants (e.g., merely attending talks or feedback sessions) to active contributors (i.e., becoming trainers and influencing training details). This inclusion balances the top-down approach with bottom-up feedback, aligning with parents' desires. Finally, the project adapts to parents' situations by accommodating their time constraints through an online platform, thereby enhancing convenience and increasing participation motivation.

It is my first time using the design thinking framework to develop a project idea, which is a breakthrough in my thinking logic. As a psychology student, I have typically adopted the traditional evidence-based thinking framework, so it was quite challenging for me to think bottom-up at first.

I also held a misconception about the concept of innovation. I originally thought that an innovative idea had to be something completely novel, but I then realized that innovation is a process rather than a result, it is built on previous work, which also includes some elements of innovation. The concept of prototyping, which includes risk analysis, reflects that innovation must also consider practical issues. It is not just about blue-sky thinking, but about using a new perspective to view an existing issue. In society, there are many fixed solutions

to problems. However, nothing is perfect. These fixed solutions are usually the most practical ones or those that have "solved" the problem to the largest extent. If we cannot identify their limitations and think outside the box, there will be no improvement.

My project focuses on special educational needs (SEN), as does my future-serving group. Given the complexity of SEN, we often feel helpless in serving these children. I hope that by applying the design thinking techniques I have learned, I can develop new approaches to support this unique group of children and positively influence their developmental journeys. I will always remind myself that failure is not terrible; being content with the status quo and afraid of breakthrough is.