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Puppets in Education

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Introduction

- Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a group of related brain-based disorders that affect a child's behavior, social and communication skills.
- In 2009, approximately 1,000 Vermont students received special educational services for ASD.
- Puppets in Education (PiE) is a non-profit group that teaches kids how to keep themselves safe and healthy and to appreciate each other's differences.
- PiE's Friend 2 Friend Program (F2F) addresses ASD in fun and interactive puppet and workshop presentations, promoting empathy for individuals on the autism spectrum by modeling, labeling, explaining and normalizing differences, and teaching prosocial communication and friendship skills.
- Last year, UVM COM students collaborated with PiE to determine how the use of puppets could best educate the community regarding ASD.
- This year our goals were to elicit:
 - the perceived effectiveness of current ASD education in the classroom
 - the perceived effectiveness of including children with ASD in the classroom; and
 - the most important aspects of ASD to address in the Puppets in Education (PiE) curriculum

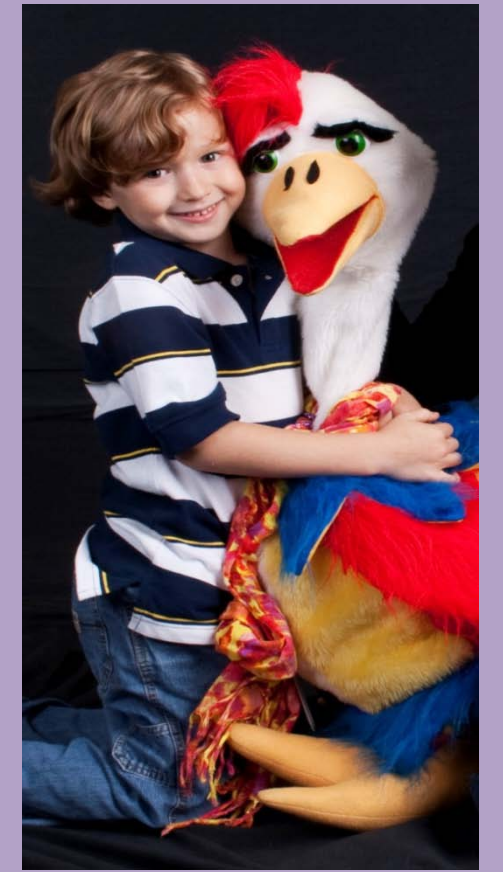
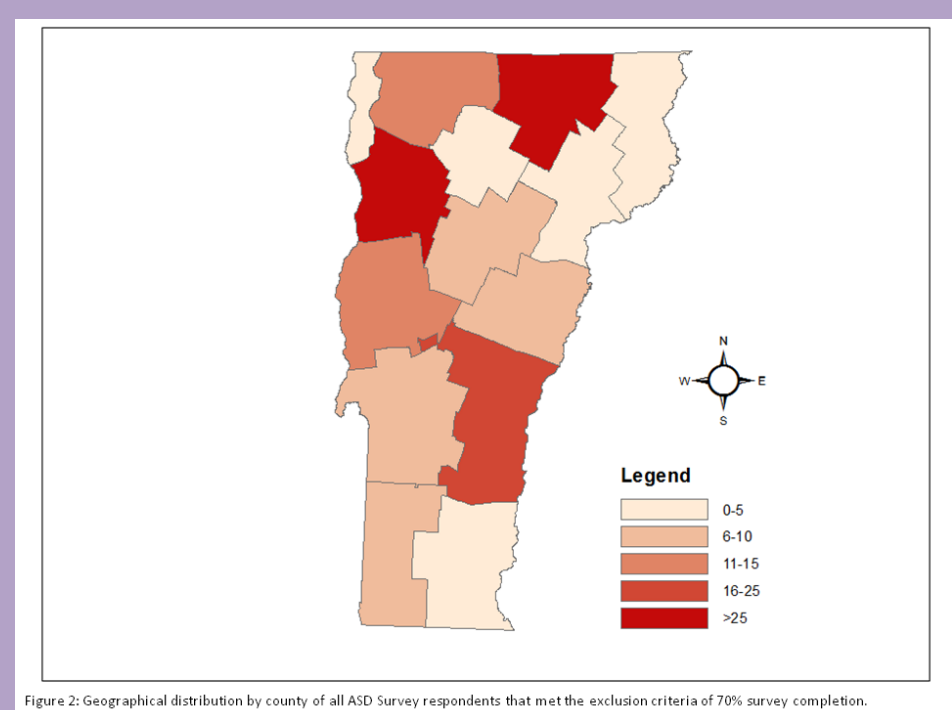
Objectives

To conduct a survey to assess the effectiveness of current curriculum approaches to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) education and to assess the educational impact of including students with Autism in the classroom.

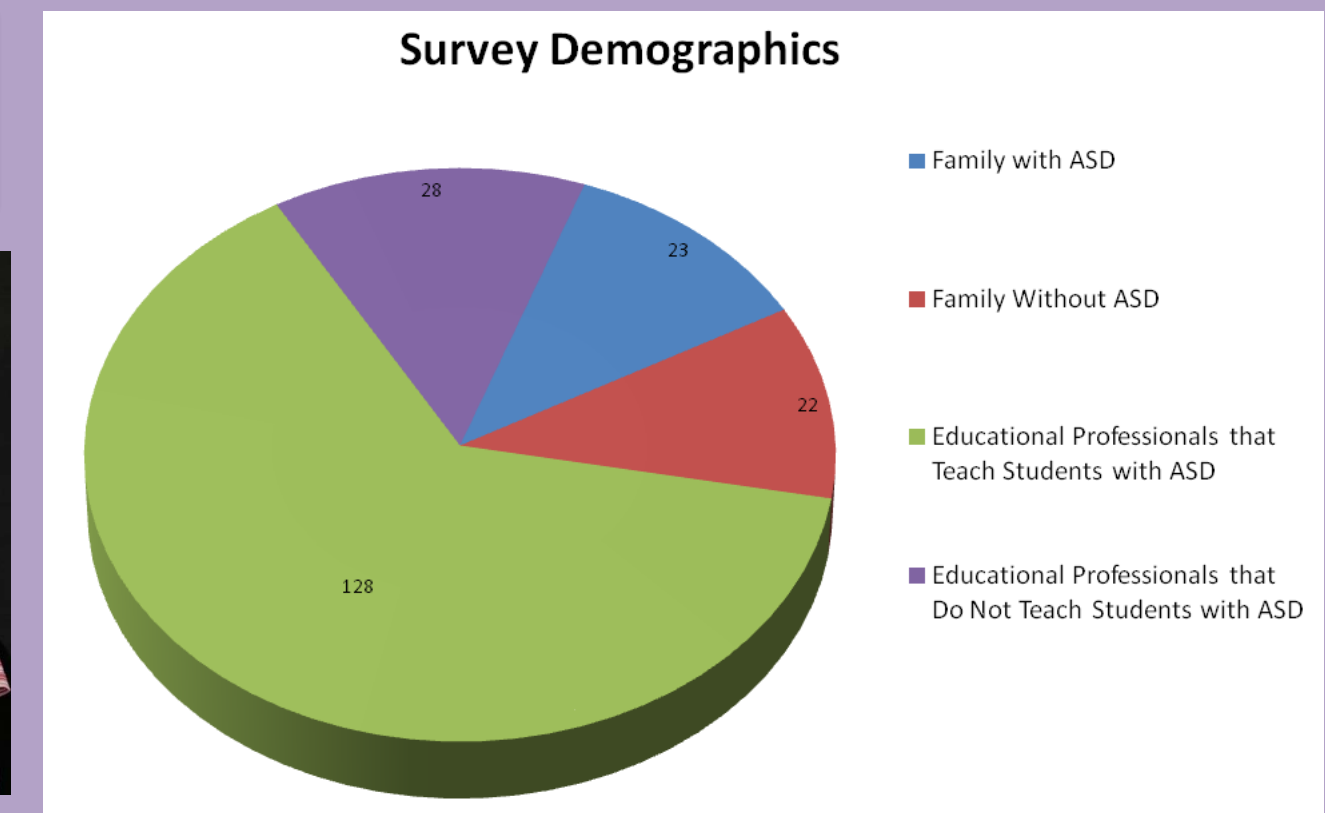
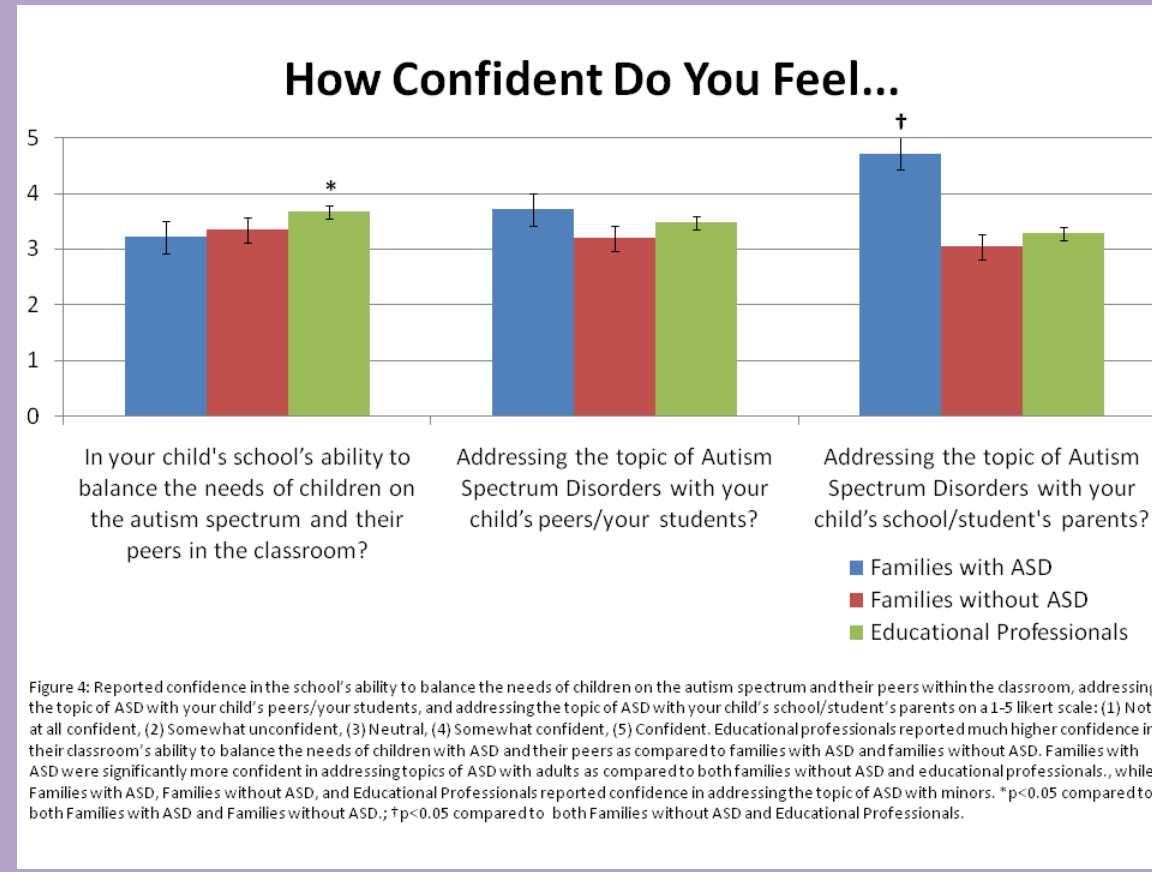
"There needs to be more education and acceptance taught to all the children. It needs to be a constant and regular part of their social learning....how to coexist and integrate/play/accept all children with or without differences/disabilities."



"I think children are very accepting of differences when educated to do so. I feel it is important so students develop empathy, become reflective concerning their own behaviors, and learn about becoming a responsible citizen."



"I have many students on the autism spectrum on my caseload and I feel under qualified to work with them. I really want to take a course on this subject to better serve these students."



Results

- Divisions were noted across all sampled populations on the topic of inclusion. Educational professionals discussed difficulties of knowing when and how to implement inclusive practices.
- While more educators than families felt the current approach to inclusion (regarding children with differences/disabilities) was effective, all sample populations expressed a desire for more information and education on how to implement it effectively.
- While curricula for inclusion within the schools exist, parents of children with ASD feel that they are the main source of information on the disorder.
- There is a further need for ASD and social skills education.
- Issues with confidentiality were cited as a potential barrier to further education.
- Educators felt more confident about their school's ability to balance the needs of children with ASD and their peers than families.
- Families with ASD felt more confident than families without ASD addressing the topic of autism spectrum disorders with their child's school.
- Families with ASD felt more confident addressing the topic of autism spectrum disorders than educators did addressing the topic with parents of typically developing peers.
- Educators who teach children with ASD felt more confident addressing ASD with parents.
- Families who felt that their school effectively included children with differences/disabilities were more likely to be confident in their school's ability to balance the needs of children with and without ASD.
- As each child with ASD is different, having flexibility in structured support systems improves classroom behaviors for children with ASD.
- Families and professionals can share in the challenges and successes in educating children with ASD.

"[PiE is an] innovative/effective approach to delivering content; entertaining and inspiring to both children and adults"

Discussion

Universally, parents and educators felt that more education was necessary to effectively work with students with ASD.

- There are curriculums currently available that teachers can adopt. Including works by Michelle Garcia Winner.

The issue of confidentiality in the classroom becomes an issue when working with a child with ASD.

- Teachers and Parents need to work together to not inadvertently "out" a student with disability when presenting social skills programs.

Families are the main source of information on Autism Spectrum Disorder in their schools.

- Effective communication between families and their teachers can help bridge the gap, and families should be involved in educating their teachers about the needs of their specific child.

There is no "One-Size Fits All" approach to working with a student on the spectrum.

- Each student is different, programs need to be flexible and individualized to fit the specific needs of each child on the spectrum.

Methods

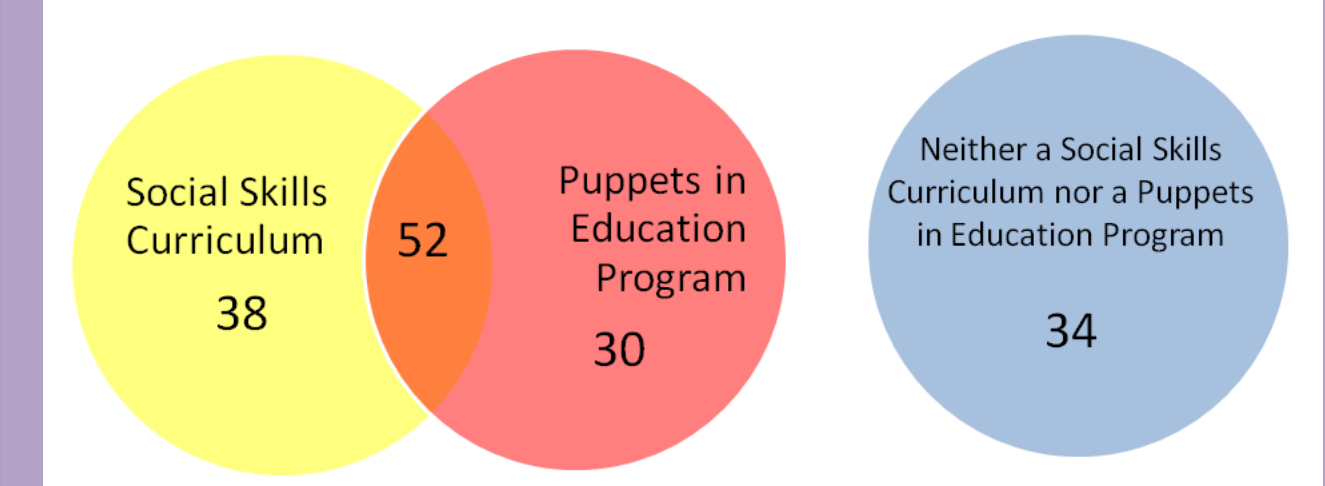
A survey was emailed out to a total of 1,420 VT educators and 5,671 community members on 10/10/10, creating a total survey population of 7,091 individuals from all counties across the state of Vermont.

Population surveyed :

- Families with a child with ASD (ages 2 to adult)
- Families without a child with ASD
- Educational professionals

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using Chi² distribution and multinomial logistical regression where appropriate. Qualitative data (responses to open-ended survey questions) were evaluated using a simplified qualitative data analysis technique and included the reporting of trends.



Topic:	Percent of Respondents
How to communicate and interact with students on the autism spectrum	75.6%
How children on the autism spectrum may behave differently	65.7%
How to include a child on the autism spectrum in activities (ex. play, sports, academics, after school)	58.2%
How to make friends with a child on the autism spectrum	52.2%
Social and communication skills training	52.2%

Table 1: Top Five Autism Educational Priorities in the classroom as reported by Educational Professionals, Families with a Child with ASD, and Families with a Child without ASD. Respondents were given the opportunity to individually select up to five of ten potential topics.

Further Study Recommendations

- Survey the children who participate in PiE's Friend 2 Friend programs to document their understanding of ASD and their behavioral response to peers on the autism spectrum.
- Find a way to target more parents of children with and without autism to gather further information from their perspectives.
- Write survey questions that fit more clearly into a formal matrix for qualitative data analysis.