

A Survey on the Employment Status of Young People with ASD in China

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, while Chinese front-line researchers and practitioners have made significant progress in their understanding and support of intervention and education for children with autism between 0 and 16 years of age, the vocational education support they need as adults and the employment difficulties they face are still lack of attention and support from policies and society. This article aims to investigate the employment status of autistic teenagers aged 16 and over in China by exploring the views of 317 parents with autistic children from 30 provinces across the country on issues related to vocational support and employment outcomes. Through the survey of employment status and satisfaction, this article will discuss the difficulties faced by autistic young people and the employment support they need and make recommendations that may contribute to the future improvement of employment support for policy makers and education providers.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Chinese young people with ASD, Employment, Vocational Training

1. INTRODUCTION

As the country with the largest population in the world, China's increasing number of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has brought huge challenges to families and society. According to the birth rate in China, as of 2016, the number of people with autism is increasing by about 200,000 per year [1]. In 2020, a cross-sectional epidemiological study of ASD at that time estimated that 1 in every 143 children from age 6 to 12 has ASD [2]. The huge number of autistic people's needs and cost for intervention, education and social support have brought heavy pressure to families, schools, communities, and society. In China, current educational resources and social attention are mainly focused on children with autism under 16 years old, while self-independence skills, vocational education and employment support for the ASD children over 16 years old is still lacking attention [3]. A survey shows that the employment rate of adults with ASD in China is less than 10% [4] and their working hours and pay are lower than other disabled groups [5].

The research of this paper was authorized by the China Association of Persons with Psychiatric Disability and their Relatives (CAPPDR) to use the latest nationwide questionnaire survey on the employment condition of individuals with ASD in 2021. With the

collection data from parents and their autistic children who filled the questionnaires about basic demographic data and children's employment-related questions, the author explores the employment status of people with autism over 16 years old and attitudes of autistic children and their parents towards vocational education as well as possible correlation between attitude and occupational outcome. Since the current employment situation of autistic teenagers is still unclear and acute, the purpose of this study is to understand the current situation and needs of young people with ASD on employment, therefore provide current policy makers some recommendations to support them.

2. EMPLOYMENT CONDITION AMONG CHINESE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ASD

2.1. Importance and current employment status

The employment of young people with autism is of great significance to individuals, families and society. For individuals, employment is one of the desired achievements of everyone including ASD patients [6, 7], since it can help adults maintain physical and mental health, improve the quality of life, have economic independence, and enhance social status [8]. For parents, a child's job opportunity is necessary for achieving

economic and life independence, ensuring the child's long-term safety, health self-fulfillment, and quality of life [9]. Furthermore, the employment of autistic patients is the embodiment of social justice. They get equal employment opportunities, supportive recourse, and potential employment results are the requirements of a fair and inclusive social environment [10, 11].

However, due to China's large population and uneven regional development, the national census of vocational education and employment is very difficult. At present, the nationwide census data is mainly released in *Blue papers on needs of parents with autistic children in China* [4] and *Report on the development of autism education and rehabilitation industry in China* [1].

According to the report, in China, the number of educational and rehabilitation institutions for autistic patients has increased to 1,811, the service capacity has increased to 300,000, and the number of employees has increased to more than 50,000. The institutions have gradually developed from being concentrated in large cities and developed areas to various places [1]. However, facing the needs of more than 10 million people with autism, the service capacity of the organization is far from enough. In fact, the employment support services needed by older people with autism account for only a very small part of the above-mentioned institutions [1,4]. After the promulgation of "Measures of Beijing Municipality on Supportive Employment Services for the Disabled person" in 2017, as of December 2019, 23 institutions and 144 employment counselors with certificates registered by the Disabled Persons' Federation in Beijing are running [11]. However, the number of people with autism among the people with disabilities who have access to employment opportunities is extremely small. Furthermore, a very small number of people with autism who have obtained employment opportunities are also suffer from low salary [12,13], single type of work, inconsistent matching of functions, and insufficient stability [12], as the general autistic employees. Even research on patients with high functioning and Asperger's syndrome shows that the employment rate of these high functioning individuals is slightly higher than that of low and medium ones, most high-functioning individuals are not fully employed [14, 15].

As for the perspectives of parents with autistic children, the data collected by the Family Needs Report from 3581 valid questionnaires from 30 provinces across the country showed that 55.5% of parents lack confidence in the employment results of their children with autism; 69.3% of parents believe that the employment training for older autistic people has not been given due job training Pay attention; 73.3% of parents believe that their children will be discriminated against in employment; although the intensity of parents' employment needs for autistic children is as high as 80.2%, 93% of parents believe that

their children cannot currently receive vocational training and employment support [4]. Parents' pessimism on the employment of children with autism reflects the current week of vocational rehabilitation and employment support for autistic adults in China [4].

Several studies have shown that the tolerance of repetitive tasks and the high attention to details of people with autism are favorable conditions for certain jobs [12, 16, 17, 18]. At present, many institutions across the country are actively exploring employment methods suitable for adults with autism, such as semi-automated manufacturing and repetitive manual work [12], catering services [3], and baking [19].

2.2. Difficulties of employment for autistic adults

Although "Regulations on Employment of Disabled Persons" [20] and "Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities convention" [21] stipulate that the state should formulate specific policies and set up support institutions for various services to provide protected positions. However, equal employment conditions for persons with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment opportunities, the employment of autistic adults is still subject to various obstacles from their own mental disorder, family, employers, and society.

Autism spectrum disorder as a common generalized developmental disorder, brings many difficulties to the independent life and futural employment of patients. According to definition of autism from DSM-5, the core defects of patients are manifested in the following two aspects: social interaction/communication and restrictive, repetitive behavior patterns [22]. The challenges faced by adults with autism in the workplace often include rigid behavior and language patterns, strict adherence to routines and diversity of environmental sensitivity [16, 18, 23]. Specifically, the obstacles of autistic patients in understanding social cues and facial expressions, expressing conventional feelings, and adapting to new environments and activities [3] often make it more difficult for them to live and work independently than other types of groups with disability [3]; [6]. In addition, the lack of autonomous speech and proper communication etiquette [24], inefficient communication and interaction with colleagues [25, 26], and inappropriate social behaviors [27] have all been found to be factors in employment barriers. More serious challenging behaviors, such as compulsive behavior, hyperactivity, self-harm behavior, and poor emotional control [27], are more likely to lead to the rapid termination of the employment relationship [28].

The material and mental stress of the family is also a barrier to employment for adults with autism. Low-income families often face the inability to continuously

pay for expensive rehabilitation and intervention costs [4, 29]. In addition, most autistic children need at least one of family member to take care of the daily life of autistic patients, which leads to a further decrease in income; the difficulty of finding a reliable vocational training institution, the concerns about children's futural livelihood issues and the pressure of being repeatedly rejected by the school have also brought mental torment to families with autistic children [4].

According to multiple surveys, many employers have prejudices and stereotypes about people with autism, such as people with disabilities can affect work morale [30], are difficult to communicate and understand tasks [30], have low average education, low work efficiency, high absenteeism, and high safety risks that make employers unwilling to provide employment opportunities [19]. A survey shows that among employers that provide employment opportunities for the disabled, the acceptance of the physically handicapped is the highest, followed by the intellectual disability, and the mental disability is the lowest [19]. In addition, employers' unwillingness to provide additional adjustments and support for employees with disabilities to adapt work environment can lead to the eventual dismissal of autistic patients [31]. Although relevant laws for persons with disabilities require employers to arrange employment for persons with disabilities in accordance with the prescribed proportions, many companies would rather pay fines for violations than hire disabled employees [12].

As for society here is still a big gap between domestic support for autistic adults in nursing institutions, employment training and placement, and sheltered welfare factories [11]. The number of intervention and employment support institutions needed by older children with autism is not only small, but also unevenly distributed in regions and developmental levels; many institutions lack teachers and have weaker qualifications [1, 4].

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Participants

317 participants came from 30 provinces (n=316), municipalities and autonomous regions across the country, and one was from Australia. Among them, there are 85 in Guangdong Province, 24 in Shanghai, and 20 in Sichuan Province. These three provinces have the most participants. Participants are all parents or grandparents with children who have been diagnosed (n=300) or suspected of being autistic (n=17). Most of the participants were parents (n=313) of children with autism, and a very small number of participants were grandparents (n=4) of children. The ASD children of the participants ranged in age from 16 to 39 years old (n=317, M=20.6, SD=3.713). Since the survey can be participated

in through the WeChat applet, the threshold for participation is low, so parents only need to have a smartphone and WeChat account to participate in the survey. The survey collected data through a questionnaire published by CAPPDR's WeChat official account, so all participants are WeChat users who followed the official account or users who read the information published by the official account through other means. As China's largest non-profit social organization focusing on mentally disabled people, CAPPDR is a specialized association of China Disabled Persons' Federation. Therefore, the data published by the agency is authoritative and reliable.

3.2. Procedure

The research was approved by the China Association of Persons with Psychiatric Disability and their Relatives (CAPPDR) and allowed to use the data collected by their platform for analysis and publication. In order to collect data, a non-anonymous online questionnaire was produced by WJX, a universal questionnaire designer, and published on the official WeChat account of CAPPDR. The name of the questionnaire survey is "Survey on Vocational Training and Employment Status of Autistic Adolescents in China (Parent Version)". The description of the questionnaire is that the CAPPDR plans to conduct a nationwide survey of the current situation of vocational education and employment needs for autistic youth, so as to provide a basis for the country to formulate relevant support policies. Participants attach great importance to employment issues for their children with autism, so they are willing to fill in all the questions. Participants are required to fill in the information truthfully after reading the description of the questionnaire and are told that the information in this survey will be strictly confidential and is only used for subject report.

3.3. Data description and analysis

The research did not use all the items counted by the questionnaire, but only used basic demographic data and questionnaire items related to vocational education from 317 participants. The qualitative textual data selected by this study include: 1. gender, geographic location, functional level, and employment status of the child with autism; 2. Questions about employment support that available to autistic young people and their family.

The author used IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 to process data and analyze Pearson correlation between several items. To explore parents' satisfaction with vocational education and employment results, participants (n=38) who have children with autism who have received or are undergoing vocational education were selected. In order to explore the correlation between participants' satisfaction with ASD children's vocational education and their children's employment results, the data is

scored using a five-point Likert scale; the options are very satisfied, satisfied, generally satisfied, dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied are composed of five categories, and are given 1 point, 2 points, 3 points, 4 points, and 5 points respectively. Participants (n=50) with ASD children who are currently employed or employed were selected from 318 participants. The study explored the correlation between the confidence level to employment and satisfaction level to the employment results of the ASD children (valid n=49) of these selected participants. The score of satisfaction level keeps using the same five-point Likert, while the confidence level is scored using the three-point Likert scale which contains options from strong confident, mild confident, and weak confident with given 1 point, 2 points, and 3 points respectively.

4. RESULTS

From the basic statistics, majority of people with autism who participated in this survey are male (n=229; 72.8%). This is in line with the gender distribution

characteristics of the incidence of autism in China, that is, there are far more male patients than female patients, and the male to female ratio can reach 4.7:1 [32]. Most of the parents who participated in the survey were from urban areas (n=297; 93%), and only a few participants were from rural areas (n=20; 6.3%). The most moderately functional autistic adults (n=158; 49.8%) participated in the survey and the least low-functioning adults (n=59; 18.6%), but the overall gap between the extend from high to low was not large. Among the 317 participants with ASD children over 16 years old, the employment rate was only 15.7% (12.9%+2.8%), which was much lower than the unemployed ASD population (84.2%). In addition, 79.8% of the participants (n=253) said they knew the existence of employment support, but only 15.8% of children with autism (n=50) had received employment support. 59% of participants claimed to have received policy subsidies. Finally, 43.5% (18.6%+24.9%) of participants reported that they had received or are undergoing vocational education.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for satisfaction with vocational education and employment results

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
satisfaction level to the vocational training	2.59*	0.910	138
Satisfaction level to the child's employment status	3.45*	1.074	138

*1 refers to highest satisfaction level, while 5 means lowest satisfaction level

Table 2. Correlation between satisfaction with vocational education and employment results

Correlations			
		satisfaction level to the vocational training	Satisfaction level to the child's employment status
satisfaction level to the vocational training	Pearson Correlation	1	0.490**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	138	138
Satisfaction level to the child's employment status	Pearson Correlation	0.490**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	138	138

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Participants' average satisfaction with the vocational education their children received was moderately high (M=2.59, SD=0.91), but their satisfaction with employment results was moderately low (M=3.45, SD=1.074). According to the Pearson correlation test, the

correlation between the participants' average satisfaction with their children's vocational training and the final employment results is 0.49, which is significant (P<0.001).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for ASD children’s confidence level to the employment and satisfaction level to the employment outcomes

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
child’s confidential level to the employment	1.69*	0.619	49
child’s satisfaction level with employment result	2.33***	0.851	49

*1 refers to highest satisfaction level, while 5 means lowest satisfaction level
 *** 1 refers to strongest confidence level, while 3 refers to lowest confidence level

Table 4. Correlations between ASD children’s confidence level to the employment and satisfaction level to the employment outcomes

Correlations			
		child’s confidential level to the employment	child’s satisfaction level with employment
child’s confidential level to the employment	Pearson Correlation	1	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.001
	N	49	49
child’s satisfaction level with employment result	Pearson Correlation	.470**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	
	N	49	49

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Parents report that their children with ASD have a strong average confidence in employment (M=1.68 SD=0.619), while their satisfaction with employment results is moderate (M=2.33 SD=0.851). According to the Pearson correlation test, the correlation between child’s confidential level to their employment and their satisfaction level with employment result is 0.47, which is significant (P=0.001).

5. DISCUSSION

The data collected this time for adults with autism over 16 years old show that China’s current employment situation is relatively severe, and the employment rate of the selected sample is only 15.7%. Although data from some countries around the world, for example, the employment rate of autistic adults in the United States is about 14% [33], Australia is 27.3% [34], and the United Kingdom is 32% [35], demonstrate the employment rate of autistic groups is generally low. There is still an obvious discrepancy in employment rate compared with some developed countries. In this research, selected samples come from more than 30 provinces across the country and are representative. However, most of the participants came from developed cities, such as

Guangzhou (n=85) and Shanghai (n=24). A few provinces have only one participant, such as Jiangxi, Anhui, and Hebei. Combining the data that 93% of the participants are from urban areas, it can be seen that most of the participants are still from areas with more developed economies. Although smartphones and the Internet have spread to rural areas, information on organizations and institutions related to the rights of persons with disabilities may still be out of reach for families with autism in remote areas. Therefore, the actual employment rate may be much lower than currently detectable data. The questionnaire asked participants whether they were aware of employment support. The contradiction between the high awareness rate (79.8%) and the low acquisition rate (15.8%) indicates that most participants may only know vague or one-sided information, but do not know the reliable approach to access it.

According to the result, more than half of the autistic children of the participants received vocational education. However, parents’ average satisfaction with vocational education is only average. When it comes to employment results, parents’ average satisfaction level is even lower. According to the Pearson correlation test, among all

participants whose children have received vocational education, parents' satisfaction with vocational education is positively correlated with their satisfaction with employment results ($p=.49$). Although there are many factors that affect employment outcomes, vocational training is crucial to the ability development and social integration of adults with autism. Different from rehabilitation interventions that focus on social skills and solve cognitive difficulties, vocational training should focus on the unique advantages and interest-oriented of adults with autism to explore the most suitable occupations and jobs for them [4, 11, 17]. This is also the expectations and requirements of parents for vocational education [9]. At present, the number of vocational training institutions and vocational training courses offered for older autistic groups in China is small and mainly concentrated in some cities, such as Guangzhou city. The supply of better-qualified institutions exceeds demand, while institutions that provides fewer services cannot meet the needs of adults with autism [1].

The thoughts of autistic adults themselves should not be underestimated. The research results demonstrate that the degree of self-confidence of autistic adults in employment is positively correlated with their satisfaction with employment results. Adults with autism also desire independence and self-determination, and employment is seen as a typical desire [9]. Therefore, training and guidance including daily life skills, social skills and financial management and decision-making skills are very important for young people with autism. Providers of compulsory education and special education should take into account the independent ideas and needs of young people with autism as the main body, and not only design curriculum content according to the ideas and needs of parents.

Only a very small number of participants reported that their children received employment support. A series of laws and regulations have been promulgated to support the employment of the disabled in China [1, 4]. However, there is extremely few employments support focus on the characteristics and needs of the autistic group. Experts and scholars in the field of autism need to combine the characteristics of our country's job market and the needs of young people with autism to jointly explore and design employment support programs that meet their abilities and potential strength.

6. CONCLUSION

Employment is of great significance to the autistic people themselves and their families. A job is a symbol of the social integration and independently living ability of young people with autism, and it is also an important method to solve the concerns of parents with autistic children about their children's living and elderly care issues. However, the employment of young people with autism faces multiple difficulties from themselves, their

families and society. Due to our country's vast territory and large population, the employment situation may be far worse than we can investigate. In addition, vocational training and employment support-related policies for autistic people waiting to be employed are still weak. The establishment of a wider coverage and easy-to-access information sharing platform and policies to support vocational education institutions and employment support require more convenience and funding from the state and governments.

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