



Supporting and Counselling Children with autism within Mainstream Schools: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the means by which specific classroom programmes can offer support and counselling for children with autism and improve their knowledge and overall school experience. These programmes can include, for instance, the use of computer-based technology, the setting up of special activity groups within school and so on. However, the degree to which these programmes can facilitate the education of children with autism and the level of differentiation they can contribute to the school experience, social skills and behavioural progress of these children requires assessment. A hypothesis that has been accepted suggests that carefully planned programmes within schools can favourably influence children with autism, thereby facilitating the development of their societal, behavioural and scholastic skills, all of which are required over the long-term. The objective and intent of this study is to offer schools the perspective that carefully structured programmes can improve the lives of the autistic children in their care by providing the support and counselling they require.

Keywords: *Autism, Counselling, Mainstream schools and Supporting*

1. Introduction

Autism is a complaint related to the development of the nervous system which results in inadequate societal contact and exchange, and limited and recurring conduct which present themselves before a child crosses his/her third year (Frith, 2003). Autism is believed to affect the brain's function of detail processing by changing the method by which nerve cells and their synapses associate and coordinate (Medical Research Council, 2001). However, even till the present day researchers have been unable to precisely comprehend this phenomenon. The indications of autism typically present themselves progressively. However, some children with autism appear to develop normally at first and then exhibit the symptoms at a later stage. Autistic children exhibit considerable discomfort with any contact that necessitates awareness of other individuals and their thoughts and knowledge—demonstrating a social cognitive deficit identified as the 'Theory of the Mind' (Baron-Cohen, 2000). Timely interventions related to behaviour or cognitive ability can assist children with autism to care for themselves, be sociable, and also improve their communication skills—which are this researcher's intentions through this study. The provision of this form of intervention through schools employing the methods of positive coaching, focused classroom programmes, and support and counselling groups can facilitate the normal development of children with autism (Trevarthen, Aitken, Papoudi, & Robarts, 1998).

2. Study Objectives

The objective of this study is to establish that focused programmes can help children with autism in not only obtaining the skills necessary for life and but also in improving their education and learning skills. Subsequent to decisively establishing that such programmes do in fact provide a differentiation in the existence of autistic children, it is the additional objective of the researcher to assess their efficacy as an administrative and interaction device between the children, their teachers, classmates, and their parents. Furthermore, the prospect of developing an all-purpose programme system for

children with autism that can be deployed both in classrooms and in general operation will be examined. However, to achieve these objectives, there is a need to concentrate on the means by which these programmes assist children with autism in making them more lively and receptive to learning in a coaching classroom setting. Moreover, the degree of success of these programs and the specific characteristics of successful programmes also require attention.

3. Research Questions

The questions being examined in the study are:

- Why and how do children with autism profit from the utilisation of common assisting services found in public schools?
- How can the disparity between interventions at home and school be minimised?
- How can counselling assist children with autism, and what mode should this counselling take?
- How can autism-friendly schools be assisted to provide a supportive environment for children with autism?

4. Literature Review

4.1 *Why are autism support services required within the general school context?*

Prior to establishing programmes for support and counselling, it is necessary to determine the reason these facilities are required within mainstream schools. Teachers and peers in schools frequently get the wrong impression about children with autism. Often schools do not wholly comprehend the reason children with autism behave in the manner they do, resulting in biased outcomes. In an interview with Catherine H. Knott (2014), nationally certified school psychologist Dr. Angela Ver Ploeg explained that children with autism frequently encounter difficulties. Children, even as young as eight years old, can experience isolation and be unable to befriend other children. Moreover, Dr. Ver Ploeg narrated an event that took place in a school in a gymnasium class containing 800 students under the charge of a single teacher. An autistic boy had retreated into a corner when a big group of boys began to torment and taunt him concerning this. Subsequently, the boy threw a piece of concrete at them and was dispatched to the teacher's office to be disciplined and cautioned. The bullies, on the other hand, were not even sounded out, confirming that there are certain schools that are clearly ignorant of the state of autistic children and are unacquainted with the best means to manage them. Dr. Ver Ploeg indicated that a straightforward mechanism such as a hall pass could have resolved the issue permitting the boy to avoid what he considered a 'threatening and confusing situation.' This is due to the fact that hall passes can offer an uncomplicated, matter-of-fact resolution and "an outlet for times of social stress."

The responsibility of schools is to offer correct instruction for pupils. An effective school recognizes that it is obliged to offer the finest education to all its students, taking into account those with disabilities, and will do more than is required to be of service to them. Autistic students will find school more appealing, and be inspired to participate well, if school is entertaining and exciting. Furthermore, they will also be able to develop associations with the other pupils if they have common interests and therefore perform better both scholastically and in a social context. For example, a class teacher, when carrying out team assignments, could separate his/her class into teams that possess similar passions. In this manner, children with autism can connect with peers recognizing that they have mutual interests, which leads frequently to causing them to relax and encouraging them to interact socially. Moreover, activity groups outside the classroom can help children with autism, as providing individual consideration and special encouragement can cause a significant differentiation. These groups can provide an opportunity for autistic children to communicate in a more unreserved manner and experience lower strain in contrast to a classroom environment, particularly because stress and anxiety are general attributes of children with autism (Jordan, 2001). However, though children with autism need special support in schools, a perspective exists that it is beneficial for them to remain in mainstream schools as it will permit them to become accustomed to various kinds of people and

personalities as they would encounter in society at large and hence coach them for life in the adult world when they mature.

The TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) programme was developed by Eric Schopler in the late 1970s (Schopler, 1976). This programme focuses on comprehending autism, which results in the development of individual- and family-centred proposals for each pupil. Additionally, the classroom setting is structured to help students with autism understand and participate better in the classroom. Moreover, visual aids are used to make day-to-day actions foreseeable and comprehensible. This programme additionally substantiates the concept stated by Dr. Ver Ploeg. In other words, students with autism can have the opportunity to adapt to and grow well in mainstream schools in a manner similar to their peers with a little reorganizing, configuring and alteration. Conversely, there is opposition to the concept that children with autism benefit from attending public schools.

In the present day, several children have been diagnosed with various ailments/disorders such as Down's syndrome, dyslexia, behavioural disorder, etc. It is therefore difficult for a teacher to be trained in all these disorders and to be aware of how to manage the varying needs of each. The consequence of this is that teachers sometimes overlook the other pupils to focus on these children or conversely, treat these children with bias due to their own deficit in information. An article published in the Oxford Mail on May 17, 2007 described the story of the mother of a five-year-old autistic boy who claimed that public schools dealt with differently abled children such as her son as poorly as "animals in zoos". The article reported that the child had been frequently rejected from a West Oxfordshire school, not because he was a "yob" but because teachers were not provided with sufficient training to cope with children who had emotional and behavioural problems. The child had been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder and dyspraxia at the age of four. Several similar cases exist, resulting in a school of thought that resists the notion of having assisting services within public schools. Instead, they recommend that children with autism attend a special or private school where they can obtain the finest care and consideration without disturbing anyone else. Furthermore, there is no individual approach that is effective for teaching autistic students. Approaches to dealing with children with autism require modifications over a period of time making it a prerequisite for teachers to attempt other methods. This justifies a perspective which suggests that it is more effective for a child with autism to attend an exclusive school that focuses on autistic children and is knowledgeable about handling them and can thus receive in a straightforward fashion all the care and provision that they require for a complete all-round education.

Nevertheless, it is not unfeasible for mainstream schools to design individual curricula and counselling for autistic children—'where there's a will, there's a way'. Minor modifications and alterations in classrooms can contribute to significant progress. For instance, as explained by Dr. Ver Ploeg, the use of straightforward items such as hall passes can help reduce the anxiety and stress experienced by students with autism. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Schopler (1997), the non-complicated activity of refurbishing and rearranging a classroom can favourably assist the child without impacting his/her classmates.

4.2 Bridging the gap between home and school/local education authorities (LEAs)

Schools definitely play a crucial part in assisting children with autism. However, this assistance is limited to a particular level. The family and background of the children also have a considerable influence. Hence, the need to minimise the disparity between the influences of school and home arises which leads to the question of 'how' this must be done. In general, the parents of children with autism are familiar with and aware of how their child should be dealt with. They recognize which stimuli draw responses, what causes strain or irritation, what is understood or not, the effect of particular items, etc. with regard to their child. This knowledge is critical for teachers in schools as well, as it

helps them to understand the best manner in which to instruct or communicate with the child. Furthermore, the availability of this knowledge with teachers makes life simpler for the child and hence also for the teacher. Therefore, the working and communicating together of teachers and parents is not only critical but essential to ensure that the best possible care and instruction is provided for the child both in school and at home. There are numerous mechanisms to minimise the differences between school and home. These require, most significantly, the complete readiness of both parents and teachers to offer their effort and consideration, and to interact and get together frequently to encourage the child and help him/her to achieve his/her true capability.

To begin with, periodic (weekly or monthly) meetings can be conducted between parents and teachers where both can deliberate on the headway made by the child and review next steps with regard to facilitating his/her growth and knowledge. This can be accomplished by inspecting the syllabus the child has to study and modifying it to meet the child's requirements. For example, if the child has issues with thinking analytically but comprehends things if presented using pictures, a typical feature of autistic individuals (Mesibov, Browder, & Kirkland, 2002), the syllabus can then be modified to present analytic thinking using visual aids thus increasing the child's comprehension of the concept. A scheme termed the IEP (Individual Education Plan) has been derived by several authorities on autism keeping in mind the fact that children with autism are diverse. An IEP is a programme which is custom designed for individual students who have autism taking into consideration their distinctive requirements and capabilities. It combines both educational items from the normal syllabus and items related to purposes and aspirations that are specific to the child. Preparing an IEP with the assistance and contribution of both schools and parents would be more fruitful as their combined experiences with the child can help devise a more effective plan. The methods used by parents to connect with and handle an autistic child at home can be beneficial for teachers. On the other hand, teachers who interact with autistic children on a daily basis can discover their likes and dislikes and the method of instruction or learning they prefer.

An autistic student benefits from the consistency resulting from an interchange of information and capability and collaboration to increase the compatibility of his/her schedules at home and school. The 1996 manual "Individual Education Planning for Students with Special Needs: A Resource Guide to Support Teachers" published by the British Columbia Ministry of Education indicated that an effective IEP must include: data about the individual student such as information related to assessments, strong points and development requirements, goals and objectives—long- and short-term, evolutionary goals (e.g., job-related capabilities), supplies and approaches to be utilized in achieving the goals and objectives, means of assessing and evaluating the development of the student. Also incorporated in the IEP are task allocations with regard to performing particular features of the IEP including the degree of assistance and the person(s) identified to perform these tasks. Lastly, a procedure to assess and appraise the IEP is also factored in. Parents and schools can collaborate to ensure that the plan is successful and if any modifications are required. Furthermore, assessment of the IEP from both perspectives (parents and schools) can help to enhance it.

5. Implications for Practice

5.1 Moving towards a new vision: Autism-friendly schools and supporting environments

The chief reason to conduct a study, apart from scientific curiosity, is to determine outcomes that lead to ideas and proposals for development or the invention of something innovative or vital. As explained at the beginning, the purpose of this study is to offer an opinion on the mechanisms that work in public schools from the perspective of supporting and counselling children with autism. The emphasis will now move to how public schools can progress to becoming more welcoming to children with autism and generating a favourable setting for them. As established, an IEP must first be created for each student with autism to ascertain their issues and requirements. As a next step, schemes can be created

and offered to enhance their knowledge and abilities and also to prepare them for existence in the future. From the perspective of students, it is required that they participate in the normal and mandatory sessions that their peers attend (suitably altered to meet their requirements). Additionally, they should participate in extra classes or group activities with other children with autism along with a special needs assistant who will work on their societal, interactive and other capabilities.

According to the TEACCH programme, the basis for systematized classroom teaching of children with autism is founded on four elements: “physical organization, visual schedules, work systems and task organization” (Schopler, Mesibov, & Hearsey, 1995). Physical organization indicates the concept of physically rearranging the classroom to prepare the autistic child for what is to take place and thus enhance his/her ability to operate independently. For instance, displaying material on boards and walls in the classroom can aid in guiding the child’s actions. Steele, Joseph and Tager-Flusberg (2003) found that children with autism face difficulties with sequential memory and time management and hence require schedules to help them concentrate and be aware of future events—which lessens the disquiet and strain they typically experience. These schedules are as can be expected visual. A ‘special place’ can be provided on a wall or board for each child with autism to put up his/her own personal schedule which can be in the form of pictorial cards organized in succession based on the sequence of events.

Work systems are a mode of visual explanation indicating which activities should be performed, how they should be performed, and how to identify when they are accomplished. Children with autism, as explained earlier, are not very gregarious and operate best on their own. Hence, when independent assignments are distributed, these children frequently work separately in a corner of the classroom or a little apart from their peers. Lastly, task organization is related to work systems. In other words, this defines the work to be independently accomplished by each child, the activity the work entails, the quantum of work to be accomplished, and the expected results. This can be arranged in a sequence of trays, numbered starting from one to indicate what occurs first. The carrying out of these four basic steps can enable a child with autism to adjust to a general classroom setting.

In a classroom setting, however, it must be noted that disproportionate focus of the teacher on an autistic child could result in the overlooking of the rest of the class which can be detrimental. In order to overcome this issue, a special teacher’s assistant, preferably with knowledge of autism and autistic children, can be made available in the classroom to focus on the child with autism thus ensuring that the teacher’s attention is distributed appropriately in the class while retaining a high level of focus on the child with autism. The objective is to reduce the student’s dependence and also to offer the required tools that will help him/her communicate successfully with others and their setting (Schopler, 1997). With regard to the extra classes, all children with autism of the same age group from various classrooms are required to attend these classes where a specialist on autism should offer pursuits, supplementary reinforcement and individual counselling. These will ultimately result in teaching these children several capabilities that their non-autistic peers might have obtained effortlessly, such as how to communicate with people, the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, how to deal with disquiet, etc.

All actions should be correctly assessed and structured to offer the child the tools most suited for him/her to comprehend ideas and start to comprehend the material being imparted. These recommendations in theory result in favourable outcomes in children with autism and will assist them significantly in studying how to control their schedules, capabilities and conduct. Nevertheless, the question is to what degree will children with autism be assisted by these modifications and schemes? The response is an enormous degree. This is due to the fact that significant progress is seen when caregivers in school (teachers and special assistants) and home (parents) collaborate to tailor an

individual plan relevant to the particular requirements of a child and then modify his/her settings to facilitate his/her accomplishment and execution of daily activities.

5.2 Passion and commitment for full inclusion of children with autism: addressing the school ethos

Following the assessment of what produces the best outcomes for the given situation, the use of these outcomes should be attempted extensively. In the current context, the combination of the TEACCH programme, special extra classes oriented towards skill building, creation of unique IEPs for each child with autism, and equal involvement of both parents and teachers in the process of the child's education and development contribute to producing a school that is autism-friendly. Nevertheless, in what manner does a school wholly embrace the objective of effecting complete inclusiveness with respect to the autistic? Among the factors that have considerably influenced the complete inclusion of children with special needs/disabilities are favourable school cultures and the receptiveness of the staff (Skidmore & Avramidis, 2004).

Gillberg & Coleman (2000) suggested that schools should strive to make the typical school day for a child with autism as organized as possible and modify school schedules and settings to suit the child's specific needs. There is widespread implementation of the TEACCH programme in specialist schools across the UK (Cumine, Leach, & Stevenson, 2000; Potter & Whittaker, 2001). Furthermore, this programme has been successfully used by 77% of the LEAs (Local Education Authorities) who endeavour to support the special requirements of autistic children (Loynes, 2001) thus demonstrating that the measures adopted by schools are being shown to be effective. All that remains now is for these programmes to be applied in public (non-specialist) schools. One way to initiate this is to arrange meetings and conferences where teachers from the special needs units of mainstream schools could associate with teachers or experts from specialist schools and be tutored about the various programmes, activities and processes to be used when working with children with autism. Following these, the mainstream school can determine the means to amend the various autistic-friendly schemes to fit into the culture and environment of the school, an activity requiring dedication and zeal. Nevertheless, all these are feasible with a well-considered and well-organized plan. As stated by the renowned American educator and author Drucker (1909-2005), "Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes... but no plans."

Furthermore, the role played by the school management (principal and staff) in collaboratively defeating the barriers encountered in the inclusion of children of special needs/disabilities and their capacity to encourage the development of these children by coaching and equipping school staff (Hattie, 2005) can result in the successful and complete inclusion of children with autism. Management and specialised skills are the basic aspects in the creation of a school culture to incorporate children with autism. Complete inclusiveness can be accomplished if the school principal takes overall control and responsibility of working towards the objective of total inclusion of autistic children by developing special educational programmes and offering the required coaching for staff to help them work with these children. Staff training should be oriented towards establishing that teachers will be able to employ diverse approaches to instruction in classes depending upon the requirements, confidence and capabilities of an individual. In other words, as stated by Tomlinson (2003) differentiated instruction "is responsive teaching rather than one-size-fits-all teaching."

When the culture of a school is modified for the complete inclusion of children with autism, not only is the school affected but also the children, their families and society at large (Schwartz, Odom & Sandall, 1999). As previously highlighted, parents are the chief providers of education and care for their children and already possess knowledge of their children's requirements and are therefore able to offer insights on their children's reactions or responses to specific situations. For this reason, schools must necessarily include parents in the process of developing and provisioning the complete inclusiveness of children with autism. On the whole, to completely include children with autism,

schools must possess accurate information, capabilities, tolerance, supplies, interaction with the children's families and most significantly a noble and favourable outlook towards these children. Research has shown that teachers who have been executing inclusive programmes and who possess a practical experience of inclusion enjoy more favourable viewpoints (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be understood if some parents choose the option of placing their autistic child in public schools in preference to placing them in special or private schools. There are many reasons that can be attributed to this decision: the inability to pay the high fees required at special schools, the non-availability of a special school in the vicinity or merely because they feel that placing the child in an ordinary social setting will foster socialisation and the establishment of rapport between the child, his/her peers and teachers. Furthermore, placing the child in mainstream schools will aid him/her in acclimatising and adjusting to a conventional setting that will aid in grooming them for the future in contrast to being always surrounded by special teachers and students who have the same needs as they do in a setting that has been modified and reworked to 'fit' them. Furthermore, it will provide the students with the opportunity to attend a school in their own neighbourhood and therefore assist them in participating more actively within their society.

As deliberated in this paper, the task of accomplishing the complete inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools is both complicated and multi-faceted requiring considerable effort from the staff of the school, parents of autistic children and the autistic children themselves. Several hindrances have to be taken into account and schemes designed to overcome them. The TEACCH programme is suitable for autistic individuals of different age groups and levels of development. The concept of structured teaching encourages individuals and helps them become more self-sufficient and industrious (Schopler, 1997). Moreover, the IEP also improves the coaching of a child with autism and facilitates progress and advancement through careful observation. Supplementary classes should be set up to teach children with autism skills that are otherwise difficult for them to acquire yet are required for their future, for example, societal and behavioural capabilities. Lastly, it is imperative that teachers collaborate with parents to completely comprehend the child and create appropriate approaches and objectives that will assist him/her not only from the perspective of education but also preparation for the future. A favourable outlook, a decent school culture and attitude, and robust positive guidance from the principal will inspire, embolden and stimulate the staff to adapt to the class setting and coach them to understand how to act in response to the individual requirements of every child.

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