

Creating Communicative Opportunities for Autistic Children

Our approach to working with children with autism in this article is not about the engagement philosophies but rather is focussed at a social communicative level: not just hearing and seeing but listening and understanding, therefore, communicating respect and dignity to the child. This article provides case examples from a qualitative research project on the literacy practices of children with autism. The role of the qualitative researcher in this project is to seek to advance knowledge to assist practice and policy. This article sets out to engage you, the reader, in considering how you connect and communicate with autistic children in your practice. It is about communication and what communication might look like if we open our understanding to all possibilities. It is also about the balance of agency in the learning environment for children with autism.

Keywords: Autism, communication, language, pedagogy

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A NOTE ON LANGUAGE USED WITHIN THIS ARTICLE

It has been the practice in inclusive education to promote a person first approach in respect to conversing about the person and their diagnosed conditions. This we call person-first language and it is aligned with the disability rights agenda. You will have noted in the abstract the use of person first language such as 'person with autism' but we also use identity first constructions such as 'autistic children'. In doing so we have tried to acknowledge the voices of some people with autism who prefer to be identified within a community of autistic persons (Gernsbacher, 2017). Kenny, Hatterersly, Molins, Buckley, Povey & Pellicano (2016) found that 40% of

people with autism prefer the use of identity first language ‘autistic person’. This may seem like a deficit focused terminology, but it is intended to bring recognition to the expressed preferences of a diverse community (Please also see <https://www.identityfirstautistic.org/>).

Also, in terms of data interpretation, we acknowledge that qualitative research such as this relies upon an “outsider” understanding of “insider” phenomena. The lived experiences of the participants, and their well-developed dyadic relationships, may not always be evident in the research method. We acknowledge this truth and recognise that the data collected, how it was analysed and interpreted is only one part of the co-constructed relationships that were researched.

INTRODUCTION

Often, publications on the theme of autism and communication examine and promote evidence-based best practices in a problem-solving approach to the management and learning styles of children with autism. There is a lot of autism research that explores language and, by extension, communication processes. However, there is a paucity of discussion and exploration of the ‘social transactions’ that must occur for successful communication. That is, we argue, that more cognizance needs to be taken of the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships that occur in the bio-ecological system of children and young people. To exemplify this, this article presents ‘Checkpoints for Reflection’ incorporating research and evidence informed practice case examples drawn from a larger study that investigated perceptions about literacy and children with autism among parents (n=24) and teachers (n=11). The case examples, Bert and Frances, are presented as a sample from naturalistic observations (n=63) in autism and primary classrooms.

COMMUNICATION OR COMMUNICATING

Parents in a recent study (O’Síoráin, 2018) defined literacy as ‘understanding how the world works’, ‘it’s how we interact’, ‘being able to connect, being able to connect with other people, to have the knowledge to be able to interact in conversations, to have an understanding of the world, to be able to sit and read a book and understand the words’ (p. 170). Teachers in the study unanimously defined literacy as ‘reading, writing and oral language’ but when probed further to reflect on this and in how children with autism demonstrate being literate in their classrooms some teachers redefined literacy as ‘communicating’.

‘Communication and language are about making meaning, meaning for ourselves and meaning for and with others’ McGough (2018, p.2). Children develop their formative language and communication skills at home (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). However, when they move from the home environment to educational structures (e.g., early years education, school), much of the nuances of their ingrained and natural approach to language and communication is disrupted and requires reframing in this new context, ‘school implies a new practice with new traditions and activity settings’ (Hedegaard & Munk, 2020, p21. In Hedegaard & Fleer, 2020). Whilst true for all children, this becomes more acute for children with autism. In this new “communication space”, educators are encouraged to reflect upon the developing knowledge and competence of the child. To do so, adult and professional expectancies of language and communication capabilities may need to be challenged. Using illustrative case examples, this article explores issues that are challenging - but also rewarding - for the reflective practitioner. The case examples demonstrate areas where communication by children with autism may not be stereotypical, or of the pre-determined format expected by the educator from previous (or expected) experience. These case examples serve to remind us as educators that communication is a two-way social construction that may often be bottom-up in development and identifies the implications of maximising effective communication regarding policy, practice, experience and outcomes.

HOW DO AUTISTIC CHILDREN COMMUNICATE?

Interaction is fundamental to communication and adults working with autistic children and young people may find that the autistic person may not be motivated to interact or communicate with them (Davies, 2012). This challenges relationships and requires us to explore our understanding of the phenomenon of interaction within the context of the social reality in which autistic children and young people exist. In supporting children and young people with autism we have to keep at the forefront of our approach the fact that multiple realities exist for these children. In essence we have to look beyond *what* is going on and be more reflective and reflexive to *how* interactions can be meaningful and engaging to the person with autism (O’Sioráin, 2018).

Even in our new Covid 19 world, if you take a moment to stop and stand and stare as you walk through the yard before school begins, you will hear the chatter, laughter and the noise of play. You’ll see children self-constructing games and interacting both verbally and non-verbally, exchanging ideas, exploring possibilities, solving culturally relevant social problems and adapting social rules. Regardless of

culture, children can be seen playing with language and communication in a free and unrestricted manner adapting signs and codes to relate and engage with one another.

In the normal rules of interaction and communication children use play and playfulness to explore signs and codes in the process of realising who they are and to whom they are connected (Cregan, 1998). Playing with others encourages children in sharing signs and codes so that they can take risks and use what they know and have experience to gain a sense of belonging and a drive to learn more. However, when we (teachers, parents, educators) examine evidence from our classroom practice and our attitudes to this social semiotic playful language we must question whether we support and create opportunities for communication and social interaction or is there an erosion of these opportunities by adult imposed activities and expectations?

TWO CASE EXAMPLES: BERT AND FRANCES

Bert (age 6+) is a young boy enrolled in a special autism primary class attached to his local primary school. He transitioned to this class in the year of the study from the early intervention classroom along with three other peers. He is the middle child of three children. His parents are legally separated, and he lives with his mum. He is reported by his parents as being a very chatty, engaging young boy who is passionate about MineCraft®.

Frances (age 7) is a young girl enrolled in an autism classroom attached to her local primary school. She has co-morbid medical difficulties alongside her autism. She has significant co-ordination and language difficulties and is supported full time by a Special Needs Assistant (SNA). This SNA has been at Frances' side from initial enrolment in the school at age 5. Frances' parents do not attend the school but communicate via a communication notebook.

CHECKPOINT FOR REFLECTION:

Consider this scenario recorded in fieldnotes

Bert

One morning on alighting the school bus and on arrival to the autism classroom, Bert (age 6+) is observed as excited and moves from staff member to staff member saying, 'I got it in Dublin, I got it in Dublin!' He is directed to

his schedule and is prompted to take his first task card and is transitioned to his desk. He puts the task card in place and says to the assisting adult 'I got it in Dublin!'

No adult acknowledges him or seeks to find out what he got in Dublin? When he approaches his autistic peers they respond, some verbally and some non-verbally by looking at him and looking at what he is holding in his hand. Bert tells them, while holding out his slinky toy, 'but you can't have it, it's mine!' He pulls the toy back into his chest, holding it tightly with both hands.

REFLECTING ON BERT (1)

Communication is not easy between typically developing children let alone constructing it with and for someone who has a different approach to interpreting and responding. McGough (2018, p.2) argues 'communicative relationships are the context for entry into language'. She posits that it is essential for teachers of children with additional language needs to be alert to all communicative efforts and to value 'all of their potentialities' (McGough, 2018, p. 2). We need to ask why? Why did no adult respond to Bert's statement? When questioned, the teacher, in this instance, said that it was '*planned-ignoring*' as it was a '*recurrent, repetitive and stereotypical behaviour*' with a high frequency on alighting the school bus and on entering the classroom. Bert is considered by the practitioners within his classroom as 'non-verbal' because of his language practices. This is an interesting perspective on communication and warrants our consideration. What is important in considering this is the evidence, from the observation sets, that the teacher in her practice is observed engaging dialogically with Bert as a 'verbal' child. So, understanding how and why we use language to interpret literate behaviours such as non-verbal behaviours and minimally verbal behaviours needs our consideration. We need to look at what *we* are doing and why *we* are doing it, it is better to reflect on our own practice and to question 'Am I doing the 'right' thing or doing things right?

- Is this response and action of 'planned-ignoring' valuing the integrity of Bert's communications or is it a good strategy from evidenced-based best practice that will support Bert in establishing a more structured manner of communicating between social dyads and his community?
- How do we define language and communication? How do we value the participation and voice of our learners in their attempts to establish a sense of belonging to the community of the classroom?

WHY DO WE NEED TO ‘STOP AND STAND AND STARE’?

Based on our research data, knowledge of relevant research from a multidisciplinary field and applied practice, there is an approach to working with children and young people with autism that becomes ‘stereotypical and repetitive’ based on assumptions underpinning autism teaching and interventions (O’Síoráin, 2018). The case examples presented in the ‘Checkpoints for Reflection’ demonstrate areas where communication by children with autism may not be stereotypical or of the pre-determined format expected by the educator from previous (or expected) experience/practice/professional learning and from a deficit model approach. We hope to demonstrate that all interactions with a child or young person with autism are functional in terms of communication and often rich in detail that may be obscured by a homogenous approach to the child as a person.

REFLECTING ON BERT (2)

Autism when approached by a deficit concept may determine that Bert’s approach to communicating with the adults in the environment lacks social-emotional reciprocity, has rigid greeting rituals and ritualised patterns of verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019), that he is highly fixated on his ‘Slinky’ with abnormal intensity. Bert is observed carrying his ‘Slinky’ toy everywhere around the school, using it to repeat phrases such as ‘I got it in Dublin, I got it in Dublin!’, ‘Look, I got it in Dublin, no don’t touch it’s mine.’

In this example, consider, did Bert initiate a conversation? Did he reiterate it? And then emphasise it? Why was he met with the same adult response? Staff in this instance considered his statement ‘*I got it in Dublin*’ as ‘echoic’ behaviour.

What do you know about echoic behaviours in children with autism? A key question: Is Bert echoing?

Echoic behaviours are a common feature in autistic children and young people, and it is well argued in the research literature that this may present an entry point to developing interactions and supporting communication. Valentino, Shillingburg, Conine and Powell (2012) posit that vocalisation is very important to the autistic language learner as it mediates confusion and opportunities to revisit a situation or concept for clarity. Echoing requires auditory discrimination and sensory memory. Wetherby and Prizant (2005) concur that this behaviour may evidence cognitive processing abilities (making complex associations). To echo something is to repeat a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph that has been previously heard.


In fact, Bert self-constructed his words and so this could be considered Palilalia. Palilalia is the repetition of self-constructed words or phrases (Skinner, 1957). More intense observation of Bert's language and communications is needed before we can determine if this is a vocal tic. What we do know, however, is that Bert was seeking an audience and whilst repeating his phrase again and again, he was directing the words to his audience and seeking to be heard. Bert's behaviours could be interpreted as communicative intent.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONISM AND COMMUNICATION

Halliday (1978) posits that language is a product of the social process and through engagement with others in the environment the child begins to explore and interpret signs and symbols for meaning making. Early interaction by means of non-verbal behaviours (for example, head turning in response to a stimulus, eye contact and facial expression) is a fundamental indicator of early communication. Working alongside autistic children and young people requires us to recalibrate our expectations of what communication looks like especially if the child is not attracted to our normal methods or expectations. Head-turning is a form of observation and even if for a moment the child connects with a communication event then they have experienced a social exchange of signs and codes. Movement is also considered a central feature of relationships and is acknowledged in early infancy research and may constitute agency and identity (Twomey & Carroll, 2018). Observation of communication and interaction practices in the cultural setting for all young children enables them to mimic, internalise and generate a concept of the functions of language (Conn, 2014). Indeed, imitation is considered vital for children with autism to feel understood and acknowledged by others. Nadel and Peze (1993) observed that imitation was crucial in the child's social cognitive development and that it established a sense of shared experience.

We know that children with autism and other developmental differences may not develop this ability at 'typical' milestones and hence signs and code exchanges may have less meaning and lead to a delay in communication skills rather than a deficit in speech production. We also know that being autistic may mean that the child can present with a different way of thinking and learning and may interpret signs and codes in a completely different way (Powell & Jordan, 2012). Developing this view, De Jaegher (2013) suggests that children with autism and their distinctiveness of movement, perception, and unique sensory, motor and nonverbal communication repertoire, may influence how they understand or respond to the world around them. Therefore, signs and code exchanges may

provide direction or instruction, but they can be limited for the child with autism and present as a finality. When there is a limited ability to realise that there is another message or an implication beyond the sign or code then the autistic child or young person may have no other options.

For example, this symbol ‘no climbing’  only communicates what the child is prohibited from doing and doesn’t inform the child what is permitted or expected. Communication stops and confusion, anxiety or frustration can develop.

CHECKPOINT FOR REFLECTION

Consider this scenario recorded in fieldnotes

Frances

Frances (age 7) is observed as an alert, young girl, aware of her environment and peers, and she actively seeks engagement of those around her. She has been diagnosed with autism and cerebral palsy. Her cerebral palsy is evidenced as a movement disorder with spasticity, chorea and oral motor dysfunction. It is difficult to measure Frances’ expressive language as she has no vocabulary and no organised system of communication. She is evidenced approaching others in her classroom and vocalising and gesturing with irregular movements and intense eye contact. She responds to her SNA regarding all tasks, which demonstrates clearly that she has good oral receptive language skills. It was evidenced during the classroom observations that Frances enjoyed and responded well to nursery rhymes and songs and made efforts to join in and contribute. Frances can respond and complete a one-part instruction, but it is difficult to determine if she can complete a two- part instruction, as these were not requested of her during the period of observation. Frances enjoys jigsaw puzzles and music. There is no observational evidence of Frances engaged in a reading or writing task. Tasks set for Frances are at a very low manipulative level. She has a daily movement activity, which is centred on supporting the development of muscle tone and posture.

COMMUNICATING DIFFERENTLY

Communicating differently can pose challenges to our social interactions but we know from a vast body of research on how autistic learners learn that they usually prefer visual learning strategies, the use of arts-based activities and movement (Powell & Jordan 2012). Why is this important? Communication involves the

person creating meaning with another person, a ‘communication partner’. Frances has many partners in her classroom, she has developed a method of delivering what she has to say through vocal sounds, eye contact and her best effort to control her bodily movements. Whether her communication partners understand her or not she is actively intent on communicating. Frances shows us that communication involves many more concepts other than turn-taking. It is about the co-construction of meaning, negotiating and becoming aware of the self in a community. Frances is playful in her ‘non-verbal’ expressions and this is a central element of Malaguzzi’s (1996) ‘Hundred Languages of Children’ where communicative intent takes forms beyond language to gestures, movement, art and other diverse modes. Exploring a variety of modes of communication could give Frances better agency within her own environments.

Augmentative and alternative communication systems (ACCs) can enable communication and enhance social interaction via aided and unaided systems other than voice or written modes (Tincani and Zawacki, 2012; Rhea, 2008). Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy and Frost, 2001) is one such system that is relatively inexpensive and can be used across contexts by the autistic child or young person to aid social interaction and communication. Advancements in technology systems such as, Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAS), provide plenty of possible options in low-tech and high-tech variables to ensure that a young autistic child/person can become part of a social interaction. Switch technology has vastly improved and as Frances is determined to keep active, she could find using this mode of communication both effective and affective (Odom et al., 2015).

From this case example consider such as: How might an ACCs device/product support Frances in communicating with others? What is the message of Skinner’s Verbal Operants (1957)? How would the four phases of the PECS system (picture exchange, increased distance, picture discrimination and sentence construction) support her in the changing social contexts of her life?

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Learners with autism may exhibit deficits in communication as opposed to speech difficulties. Delays in non-verbal functions can impact on later language development and the development of conventional communications. As teachers we need to keep a focus on and prioritise enhancing language and communication development. We know that increased opportunities to communicate supports autistic children in meaning making, locating themselves and others, creating

communities of friendships and predicting better outcomes for life-long learning. Findings from O'Síoráin (2018, p.254) indicate that *we* (teachers) are 'operating from an outmoded understanding of literacy and what it means to be literate' for children with autism. The findings also demonstrated that children with autism live and learn in two different communicative worlds; home (immediate and extended family and friends) and school (including afterschool services). Parents recognise the value in all communicative contributions from their child to 'connect' with them and their social world. This has implications and is evidence that schools and classrooms for children with autism need to consider the 'social processes of learning, and the possibilities of continuous creative problem-solving for success' in literacy practice (O'Síoráin, 2018, p.282). Feiler, Andrews, Greenhough, Hughes, Johnson, Scanlan & Ching Yee (2007) contend that the lack of connection between home and school practices creates a gap in transferring skills and hence an interruption to the inter-relatedness and inter-dependencies of learning language and communication.

The most important finding from this research project calls for extensive professional learning in communicative intent of children and young people with autism. Teacher education must include the development of language and communication through:

- Thought processes (what cognitive structures are in play for the autistic child in this communicative space?)
- Play and manipulation of objects, peer interactions and exchanges
- Mechanical practices such as echoic behaviours
 - how such behaviours communicate thought processes
 - how they offer opportunity to establish lines of communication and pathways to learning

To provide enhanced opportunities for professional learning we need significant research in the area of communication and literacy for children with autism and complex language needs. This in-turn requires a serious commitment from the Department of Education (Teacher Education section) for dedicated research funding for quality research projects to be conducted and reported upon nationally and internationally.

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