An Exploration of Teacher Perceptions of the Use of Social Support for Students with ASD

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored teachers' perspectives of social support and its use in primary classrooms for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Data collected from a series of two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two primary teachers were transcribed, coded and analysed. Four main themes emerged characterising teacher perspectives, including; (a) Teacher's Perceptions of Students with ASD and Benefits of Social Support, (b) Importance of Professional Communication and Practice, (c) Fostering Understanding and Acceptance and (d) Practical Strategies Recommended for Use Within the Classroom. Participants indicated strong support, in congruence with the wider research literature, demonstrating a high regard and agreement for the use of social support in the classroom for students with ASD. Further research, promotion and evaluation of the use of social support strategies is recommended so primary teachers can best provide students with ASD the opportunities to foster and develop their social confidence, skills and academic growth.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Support, Teachers, Perspectives, Primary School, Inclusive Education

1.Introduction

The prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in primary classrooms has increased by forty percent in the last five years (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2019). This condition affects approximately 1 in 60 children, impacting an individual's social interactions, communication, emotional expression and recognition (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2019). ASD is a condition which majorly inhibits students' social interactions (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2011). Students with ASD struggle with social interactions and this can lead to internalised mental health issues and reduced self-confidence (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2011).Therefore it is not surprising that a strong field of literature supports the increased use of social support in the classroom as aiding in the educational success of students with ASD (Griswold, Barnhill, Myles, Hagiwara, & Simpson, 2002; VanBergeijk, Klin,& Volkmar, 2008; Estes, Rivera, Bryan, Cali, & Dawson, 2011). It is vital that educators are trained and equipped to foster positive social interactions to provide an inclusive environment for students to learn regardless of their background or condition. When uncovering the research literature, it was noted that much of the past research about teachers' perceptions of social support theory and practice for students with ASD mostly focused on social support for family members, orating an individual'smeasure of support (Bromley, Hare, Davison, & Emerson, 2004; Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003). Educators who teach students with ASD have generally lacked a "voice." Explicitly, this study fills a gap in the research by presenting teachers' perceptions of the use of social support for students with ASD. This study is valuable as it informs this area of primary education by providing qualitative insights, opinions and first-hand experiences.

2. Method

2.1Case Study Methodology

This study investigated two teachers' first-hand experiences surrounding students with ASD. In doing so, in-depth insights have been gained to those methods of social support educators recommended to foster the everyday social interactions of students with ASD. This study is framed and formed around the following research question: *How do teachers perceive the use of social support for students with ASD in the classroom?* Case studies allow a researcher to gain an in-depth, multifaceted and detailed examination of a subject in its real-life setting (Merriam, 1988; Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011).

Therefore, a case study method was selected as an appropriate way to uncover the experiences of two educators who work with students with ASD in a single primary school in NSW, Australia. This study adopted a qualitative and phenomenological approach in order to collate and understand the data collected. Qualitative research typically involves in-depth interviews, opportunities to probe further with answers as they are given and engagement between interviewer and interviewee (Soto-Chodiman, Pooley, Cohen, & Taylor, 2012). Such research is open to the subjectivity of the subjects. This is important as no individual experiences or perceives a situation in the same way (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Explicitly, in relation to this study, it was assumed that no teacher will have the same classroom experience with students with ASD. Each teacher has their own teaching style, every school has its own culture and every student sits at a different place on the spectrum and has unique learning needs (Jordan, Jones, & Morgan 2001). Moreover, this methodology is suited to the nature of this research as it focuses on teacher's perceptions and personal experiences, from which the researcher needs to consider underlying opinions.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All data were de-identified and confidentiality maintained at all times. Additionally, each of the participants involved in this study provided informed consent.

2.3 Participants and Setting

Access to a convenience sample of two participants was possible via a snowball method of recruitment (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Both participants are currently practising primary teachers, each with unique experiences and perspectives:

- *Annabelle* is a proficient level teacher who has been working with students with special needs for the past nine years. She has experience in special education and mainstream schools and has a passion for inclusive, accessible and equitable education for all students. She commenced her career as a Teacher Education Assistant in a small special needs school in metropolitan NSW while she completed further degree studies via correspondence. This hands-on experience in the classroom provided her with confidence and knowledge of how to establish routines and set up a classroom. Upon graduating, Annabelle commenced teaching in a support unit at a mainstream school which she worked at for four years before receiving an Assistant Principal position at the beginning of this year at a large NSW government school.

- *Kate* is an experienced, proficient teacher who has been employed as a teacher for twenty-six years by the NSW Department of Education. She holds a Diploma in Teaching and a Bachelor of Education. For the majority of her teaching career, Kate has been a mainstream classroom teacher. However, she has recently pursued her passion for inclusive education and has commenced teaching in the Support Unit. Over the years, she has taught all primary years and supported many students with ASD. The study was conducted at Sunny Side Public School, a primary or elementary school located in a low socio-economic area of Western Sydney, NSW, Australia, with approximately 1000 students enrolled. The school has a high population of culturally and linguistically diverse students and is part of the public or government education sector in NSW. This setting provided a perfect opportunity to undertake a case study as it is a mainstream school which strives to be inclusive and supportive of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Moreover, this school has four support classes and strives to integrate the students in these classes with the wider school community in an inclusive and all-encompassing manner. Both of the teachers who participated in this study currently teach a support unit class. These classes are diverse as one of them is made up of students who are high functioning and the other supports students who are mostly non-verbal.

2.4 Data Collection

The participants took part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to gain insight into their perspectives of the use of social support for students with ASD in the classroom. Both educators participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview to indicate and elaborate on their experiences with students and share the influences that social support levels have had on the students they have taught. Particularly, to share their experiences and pedagogical approaches to social support that they use to foster and enhance the social confidence of students with ASD. This study used semi-structured interviews ranging between 45 minutes to one hour, to gain an understanding and deep insight into the experiences that the teachers have had with the practice of social support. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method for obtaining data to allow the researchers to gain in-depth information about people's perceptions of issues and experiences (Johnson & Turner, 2003). This method also creates a safe and comfortable conversational environment and allows the researcher to establish a balance of structure and flexibility to ensure that specific information is gained but also responsive and open to the responses of the participants (Bassey, 1999).

The main themes collated from the first round of interviews were then condensed into an Issues Paper. Before taking part in a second semi-structured interview, in which they could reiterate and expand on the views and experiences, each of the participants was provided with a copy of this paper.

2.5 Data Analysis

All interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and the a six-phased approach of thematic analysis undertaken as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data, including reviewing the audio recordings made from each interview to generate initial ideas and take notes on latent and semantic themes. The data were then fractured to label initial codes. This was achieved by systematically working through the data and collating data relevant to each code. Next, the codes were sorted and categorised to see if they could be formed or grouped into any overarching themes. A thematic map was used to create major themes and sub-themes. The subsequent phase in the data analysis process involved reviewing the themes. At this stage, themes that did not have enough data to support them, or where the data was too diverse were disregarded. Simultaneously, some themes were broken apart and others were merged together to form more substantial ones. Finally, the essence of each theme was defined as well as how the data fitted into the overarching story and inter-theme relationships. During this phase, concise names were also assigned to each theme, as outlined in the next section.

3. Findings

From the analysis of the data, four key themes emerged including;(a) Teacher's Perceptions of Students with ASD and Benefits of Social Support, (b) Importance of Professional Communication and Practice, (c) Fostering Understanding and Acceptance and (d) Practical Strategies Recommended for Use Within the Classroom.

3.1 Teachers Perceptions

When describing the field, the participants strongly believed that a range of social support strategies must be implemented in schools to assist these students. Participants spoke about the diverse range of abilities and behaviours present in students on the spectrum and these students' susceptibility to bullying. They strongly recommended that students with ASD access social support strategies in the classroom. When asked about how they generally felt about ASD and how this condition may influence a student's social interactions, both participants highlighted reasons why students with ASD need social support. For example, Kate suggested that "No student is the same," implying that individual differences in students are encountered by teachers.

Annabelle supported this notion of diversity, stating that some students are:

Really outgoing, demand attention and communication and that can be overwhelming for some people. Students in that situation need support on how to read social cues, to sometimes try and pull back and share conversation skills. Learning how to have reciprocal conversations.

Kate typically described students on the contrasting end of the spectrum as "wanting to be by themselves", "just happy to watch what is going on around them" or even "withdrawn and anxious." Annabelle suggested that in her experience, ASD students may not have "adequate speech" and may need "speech support to enable them to communicate with people."

It appears the participants' experiences of students with ASD are diverse because each child can vary on their placement on the spectrum. The nature of one individual's ASD symptoms may vary greatly from another's and therefore, teachers foster students ASD ranging on a spectrum from mild to severe. The findings align with the DSM-5 diagnosis of ASD spectrum, a scale to identify the level of support each individual requires. Every individual is affected differently by this condition and therefore presents differently and their social support needs are diverse (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

3.2 Professional Communication and Practice

The second major theme to emerge emphasised the importance raised by participants for teachers to be communicating regularly with the various stakeholders such as parents and other teachers and engaging in continuing professional learning and reflections. Explicitly, it was suggested by both of the participants that it "takes a village, not an island" (Kate) to cater to the individual needs of each child. It was proposed that through collaboration and communication between stakeholders, engagement in professional development and reflections and regularly meeting and collaborating with colleagues, educators are able to gather the resources and support they need to effectively cater to the individual social needs of each student with ASD. A related example was the importance stressed by the participants of teachers generally communicating with parents to ensure that both stakeholders share their knowledge to support the student's growth: *If we have a very good relationship with the parents then we can help the parents understand their child, it also helps us understand that child's wellbeing and their social interaction then benefit from that communication.*

Another vital aspect of providing students with ASD social support that was depicted throughout the interviews was the importance of professional development. Kate concluded how professional development is "eye-opening" as it provides you with "fresh perspectives" that help you to help the children with their social interactions and improve their anxiety." Further, Annabelle stated how:

Professional development allows teachers to understand students and their needs as well as different strategies. Sometimes we can get stuck with a strategy or sometimes you get stuck and don't know what to do. Professional development doesn't have to be your structured PD but is can also be a conversation between teachers and so having more strategies has a positive reaction on students' social development as it allows teachers to use as many tools and strategies as they can to help them succeed and have more positive experiences.

This notion aligns with the literature that states, professional development provides teachers with research-based theory, skills, strategies to support the social needs and interactions of students with ASD (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, & Polychronopoulou, 2012). Such knowledge empowers teachers to feel more confident when implementing and supporting students with ASD. However, teachers' access to professional development is highly dependent on the school, time constraints and the educational budget (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). Therefore, the ethos of the school and their perspective of inclusive education strongly dictate the professional learning that educators are able to undertake.

3.3 Fostering Understanding and Acceptance

The third theme that emerged through the analysis of the data highlights that the social interactions of students with ASD can be supported by improving other people's understanding of ASD. The participants spoke about the way in which educational programs and the school ethos can assist parents, teachers and students to gain understanding and empathy. Such awareness allows students with ASD to interact with individuals who understand their condition and their behaviours. For instance, it was outlined by Kate that it is important for the teacher to encourage conversations about ASD in the classroom, "I talk to the other children about the student's autism and that really helps." She indicated, "I think that the more information and the more knowledge that we share with them, the acceptance is there." In summary, she also stated:

I think educating the kids about difference is really important and effective. When students have that understanding, they are more likely to be kind and approach students with ASD and this makes social interactions easier for students with ASD.

The statements made by the participants about peer acceptance are supported by the literature. Specifically, the literature suggests that when peers are educated about ASD, it positively affects student's interactions, and they develop greater empathy and compassion (Eldar, 2010).

3.4 Social Support Strategies Used Within the Classroom

The final theme that was discovered when analysing the data highlighted that a range of social support strategies are used by teachers within classrooms to support the interactions and academic learning of students with ASD. For instance, both participants highlighted the need for establishing a classroom with an emphasis on routines, repetition and consistency. Kate stated:

Repetition and the structure of doing the same thing keeps school constant and familiar. If you go off on a different tangent, they get confused and lost.

Annabelle also supported this notion as she noted when structure is removed, students with ASD tend to become more confused and anxious. She purported that: *Structure and routine are so important. It removes the unknown and the high anxiety about what is it we are doing. Especially with students with ASD they get so confused and them not knowing and not having direction that makes their anxiety higher and they don't or can't do what you would like them to do.*

The importance of routines for social interactions is also expressed through the literature. McIntosh, Herman, Sanford, McGraw, & Florence (2004) recommended a calm learning environment, consistency and allowing students to know what is expected of them. Such predictability allows students to feel comfortable and they are therefore more open to social opportunities (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2011).

However, the literature does also stress the importance of gradually altering routines at times to help develop a student's ability to be flexible and understand change (Welton, Vakil, & Carasea, 2004)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The participants described ASD as existing along a spectrum, therefore highlighting that the social support needs of each individual student are individual and different.

Due to this difference, the participants stressed that there is a strong need for educators to implement a range of social support strategies to support the social interactions of students with ASD.These overwhelming findings of the perceived need for positive social support are also in correlation with that of the broader literature which highlights the way in which ASD impedes student's social confidence and skills (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The literature also indicates that students with this condition demonstrate significant levels of anxiety and stress in the classroom. Much of which is caused by exclusion in social contexts and bullying (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2011). However, the literature suggests that educators do not feel like they have the experience, training or confidence to effectively support students with ASD (Rodriquez, Saldana, & Moreno, 2011; Leatherman, 2007; Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995). Therefore, it is recommended that educators engage in professional development to learn about this condition and adopt a wide range of social support strategies to support the unique needs of students with ASD.

The participants expressed the need for all stakeholders involved in the education of a student with ASD to communicate with one another. When teachers communicate with parents, they learn about the unique needs of each child and ensure that students are provided with consistency across both the school and home environments. The literature supports this notion and highlights the social benefits for students with ASD when all stakeholders communicate, share common goals and knowledge (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Irvine & Lynch, 2009).

However, according to the literature, communication is not being effectively carried out in Australian primary schools (Peterson & Hittie, 2010; Vismara & Rogers, 2008; Whitebread & Bruder, 2007). Meade (2011) suggests that there are many barriers between schools and families including; time, language barriers and cultural differences (Bang, 2009). Tucker and Schwartz (2013) also suggested that some parents have negative perceptions of school professionals with some parents suggesting it is the 'job of the teacher' to support the education of their child. Thus, it is recommended that educators think critically about how they can become involved with the stakeholders of each student. This may involve regular meetings with parents, students, teachers and counsellors. Such proactive involvement would increase understandings on both sides and allow the expectations and social goals of students to remain consistent across both the school and home environment.

As this study is limited to the views of only two teachers participating in the case study analysis, the findings are not generalisable. Specifically, the participant selection of this study was purposive. Therefore, each of the participants was willing to volunteer and made it clear to the student researcher that each was passionate about inclusive education and integration. Thus, the findings are limited and excluded a broader range of opinions and perspectives such as those of counsellors or students. Additionally, both of the teachers that are being interviewed are also from the same school. The study did not include a wide range of participants representing various socio-economic backgrounds or school sectors. Further research and promotion of the use of social support strategies is recommended so they can be used within primary classrooms to provide students with ASD opportunities to grow and develop their social confidence and skills. The use of positive social support in the classroom is essential in ensuring that the educational environment of students with ASD is most conducive for their learning and social adjustment. Due to the increased rate of students with ASD, it is essential that the perspectives of educators are investigated and shared further. Such sharing will inform others' perceptions of ASD and empower educators to foster positive social interactions to improve students social and physical wellbeing. Unveiling the positive experiences of educators on a broader scale will help build and foster growth in understanding of how teachers can effectively support the social interactions of students with ASD to improve educational outcomes.

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