Teacher's Perspectives on Supporting Social Communication Competency for Autistic Students through Evidence-Based Practices

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Abstract

In education research, there is a firm belief that reflecting on inclusive pedagogy is imperative for teachers, as effective inclusion means considering the child's needs on all levels and adopting appropriate practices to meet these needs in schools [1]. The appropriate practices recommended for teachers of autistic children should have a research base, with evidence of their effectiveness to show what works effectively for autistic children. Such practices are termed evidence-based practices (EBPs). The researcher is concerned with exploring EBPs, employed by teachers, to facilitate social communication competency (SCC), as social communication is acknowledged, nationally and internationally, as a significant priority learning need for autistic children. The 2016 study on 'Education Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum [Difference] In Ireland' states, that 'excellent practices, if appropriately documented, would provide a guide for new teachers and a support for those in the school new to working with students with Autism Spectrum Difference (ASD)' [2] This research emerges from such a rationale. The PhD study embraced a mixed methods approach to data collection and adopted Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as its theoretical framework for analysis. This paper specifically reports on findings from a national survey, conducted in Ireland, to make the sometimes invisible, visible. It unveils the perspectives of teachers in relation to EBPs, which they employ to teach social communication to autistic children in schools. Emerging from the voices of such key stakeholders, a number of recommendations are suggested for policy and practice, nationally and internationally.

Keywords: *Autism, evidence-based practices, special education*

1. Introduction

In the field of education research and more specifically, special education, the importance of adopting EBPs is the cornerstone of education for autistic children [3]. Since the turn of the century, there has been an upsurge in the volume of literature describing EBPs, interventions and strategies for teachers to draw upon when supporting autistic children [4]. In contrast, the 2016 Review of ASD Provision, commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), has identified that in Ireland there are 'significant gaps in our knowledge of interventions for supporting children and young people with ASD, at different ages and in different educational settings' [5]. Despite global efforts and the existence of high-quality experimental research, recommendations from empirical studies are not transmitting into effective practice [6]. Many reasons have been cited for the divide, such as, situational differences between clinic settings where research is often conducted, to real world classrooms [7]; over reliance of practitioners on particular methodologies [8]; and the need for specific teacher training [9]. It could be argued that translating such evidence-based practice, documented in international literature, to classroom-based activity requires the involvement of teachers to provide context driven solutions to their implementation challenges or shortfalls [10][11]. The paper outlines the key perspectives of teachers on the reasons for these shortfalls.

2. Objectives and theoretical framework

The research sought to document the EBPs, teachers find effective, to teach SCC to autistic children in early years Irish primary classrooms. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was a useful lens to understand that outside factors influence and impact on the cognitive transformation of individuals and how they interpret perceive and experience the world within which they live. Regarding inclusive

education, Vygotsky insists that effective instruction should adopt appropriate and suitable methods to educate, strengthen psychological functions, communication skills and social relationships [12]. Informed by evidence of what works best for teaching SCC to autistic children in school, obtained through a systematic literature review, the research aimed to capture the experiences and perspectives of teachers. The objective is to contextualise this information to make it available for key stakeholders and practitioners with an interest in SCC of autistic children.

3. Methodology

This paper focuses on data that emerged from a national survey of teachers in Ireland. Survey research designs was deemed appropriate as the researcher sought to capture data from a larger number of people [13] and the data collection method is praised as a means of identifying fundamental beliefs and perspectives of people regarding policies, community interests, programmes, and trends in different sectors of society [14]. A cross-sectional research questionnaire under the survey design, facilitated capturing a wide audience of teachers, that were identified based on a predetermined sampling matrix. The researcher adopted purposeful sampling to seek the perspectives of teachers working with autistic children on SCC. Although this in effect limited the number of respondents that could complete the questionnaire, accessing the sample, over a national context allowed for response rate considerations, as the questionnaire reached out to a wider audience. The questionnaire included eight EBPs highlighted as effective by the literature review conducted. These included: modelling, naturalistic strategies, peer-mediated instruction, pivotal response training, social narratives, video modelling, social skills training and prompting. The researcher documented literature explaining each EBP and SCC in the questionnaire also. By doing so, the researcher ensured the teachers had the relevant knowledge for each question throughout the survey so they would be informed to answer all components, thus reducing measurement error [15]. In advance of distribution, the research instrument was subjected to rigorous pilot testing to ensure credibility and its reliability. The data collection took place against a backdrop of limited societal interaction when the world was dealing with the global Covid 19 pandemic in May 2020. Through a national database, the questionnaire was electronically distributed to 3,145 school principals across the country, with an information note attached, pertaining to the requirements of consent and eligibility of respondents to complete the questionnaire. The emerging data was prepared for analysis using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences™ Version 25 (SPSS) statistical analysis software. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to foster robust and rigorous analysis. One of the key findings from the process are noted below.

4. Findings

The questionnaire responses were subjected to multiple cycles of analysis to investigate different variables that would provide pertinent information for the research. In quantitative research, a theory is used to explain the relationship between variables in a study, whereby the researcher identifies key constructs in the theory and tests these through a hypothesis 'which represents the most rigorous form of quantitative research' [16]. This paper presents the findings on testing the relationship between two of the variables, adoption of EBPs and the use of assessment. Applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to the research imposed extenuating criteria for consideration, one of which included, the importance of using assessment. Results indicated that despite the high proportion of teachers overall that adopt EBPs, 75% of the respondents reported that they do not use assessment to measure the effectiveness of EBPs when teaching SCC to autistic children. Within the mode of mediation or teaching, assessment and instruction are interlinked in the same activity which uncovers a child's challenges and provides opportunity to surmount the challenges with the teacher [17], termed zone of proximal development (ZPD) by Vygotsky. However, in contrast to prioritising the individual experiences of the autistic child, the results highlight that only 0.52% of teachers assessed the use of EBPs by consulting with the child. This was interesting to note as we know that learning in the ZPD is driven by the learning activities and sociocultural experiences of each individual autistic child [18], and EBPs are seen as cornerstones of teaching in relation to this. Furthermore, evidence details that collaboration among those supporting the child should also take place to understand and evaluate the best practices to use. However, in contrast, only 5.76% of teachers surveyed collaborated with other teachers and parents to measure the effectiveness of EBPs adopted.

Understanding the uniqueness of the autistic child is fundamental to their learning [19] but identifying their needs in SCC and measuring the effectiveness of the strategies used to support them are both identified in the questionnaire analysis as challenges for teachers. These findings uncover significant gaps in how teachers approach and effectively use evidence-based practices to support autistic children learn SCC.

5. Conclusion

The cross-sectional questionnaire, completed by a purposeful sample of teachers across Ireland yielded rich data. A detailed systematic literature review provided an evidence-based foundation that informed the questionnaire for teachers to use to reflect on their practice. Analysis of the results provide key information on teachers' perspectives of adopting EBPs to support SCC for autistic students and this paper presented one of the findings related specifically to the use of assessment in the process. Through sociocultural theoretical framework guidelines, a hypothesis was investigated to identify how the use of EBPs and assessment are related according to the teachers, as part of a larger PhD study. The findings which have emerged are relevant to key stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of continuous professional development for teachers adopting EBPs to support autistic children, in the ever changing and diverse education system, in Ireland today.

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