



Autism Research: A Call for Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a PhD participatory action research project. A school-based approach that encourages positive social behaviour of children with autism is the key component of the research, where parents and educators join forces to problem-solve behaviour issues in the home. The behaviour intervention approach that is used offers a practical and naturalistic way of teaching students appropriate behaviour. Most importantly the approach has been developed by an educator who has autism so it is particularly insightful.

INTRODUCTION

During their careers most teachers work with students who have autism. This is certainly the case at Barwon Valley School in Geelong, Victoria, Australia. Barwon Valley School is a special school designed to educate students who have moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. At least half of the students at the school have autism which has led to the adoption of a thorough and most effective approach to encouraging positive social behaviour. This participatory action research project involved six mothers of children with autism and several teachers. It investigated the effectiveness of a new form of assistance for parents whilst implementing the behaviour approach.

SETTING THE SCENE: A PRACTICAL AND SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL-BASED APPROACH

The need for this research was identified by staff at the school who were concerned about the lack of resources available for parents of children with autism. Staff saw an outstanding need for teachers at the school to share their knowledge of autism and the behaviour approach that works so well in the classroom. This approach was developed in consultation with a behaviour consultant and educator, Jim Crawford, who has years of experience working with children and adolescents who have autism. Jim has also been diagnosed himself with high functioning autism and has offered crucial insights into autism that have made the approach such a success.

The principles that inform the approach are simple in nature but require consideration of additional details to be delivered effectively. The basic premise is that behaviour can be changed by redirecting students to appropriate tasks. Positive reinforcement in the form of praise is a key element of the approach. This reinforcement must be delivered often and straight after appropriate behaviour is displayed to be powerful. Body language such as posture, facial gestures and tone of voice must be used to communicate calmly and clearly to students whilst portraying confidence that instructions will be followed.

Since the development of this approach in 2004 the school has experienced much improvement in results of the standardised parent opinion survey that the Department of Education requires the school to obtain. In 2004 43% of parents noted satisfaction with student behaviour compared to 92% in 2005. The parent survey results for the school also continued to be well above like schools in 2006 and 2007 in the area of behaviour management. Other schools and organisations have shown interest in the approach and Barwon Valley School has worked intensively with other schools in the Geelong area through the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. [More detailed information about the approach is available at www.autismapproach.org]

RESEARCH GOING A STEP FURTHER: COLLABORATION AND NEW INSIGHTS

The importance of this research lies in both the format of the research process, which enables collaboration between parents and educators in valid research, and the approach to managing the behaviour of children with autism that is being communicated to parents. The use of teachers of children with autism to assist parents is not used widely as a formal intervention approach to autism, if at all. The involvement of Jim Crawford in the group, a teacher, expert in behaviour management and person who is autistic, is also a key element of the research. The involvement of a behaviour consultant who is autistic capitalises on what Billington (2006) states about the need for the voice of people with autism to be used to inform the field more accurately.

This research project is challenging the outdated practices of old where academics were considered the only experts on autism. Instead the profound knowledge about the disorder held only by people with autism and the practical, experience-based knowledge of parents and teachers is well regarded. One of the most crucial aspects of the study is the use of a collaborative model of support for parents where educators and people with autism share their knowledge of the disorder with those who really need it, parents.

RESULTS

Much of the data stem from written and verbal parent reflections which outlined issues they wanted resolved, strategies they tried, support they required and found helpful, and general comments or questions about the research.

Teacher reflections

Teachers involved in the group communicated that they had learnt more about autism and behaviour. They also gained much more understanding of family situations and greater empathy for students and their families which they saw as being important.

All four teachers involved in the study commented that they valued hearing more about the experiences of the mothers in the group, so they could understand what the home lives of their students may be like. The group discussion-based, problem-solving approach that formed the basis of the meetings, lead to higher levels of thinking about the problems encountered than would typically be encountered through just presenting an overview of the approach to parents.

Outcomes of teacher involvement

The group of teachers who participated in the group consistently brought a variety of teaching experience with them which greatly assisted the group dynamics and content discussed in the meetings. The class teachers were able to seek out appropriate resources for parents from occupational therapists or speech therapists. They could also seek further assessments from the therapists that were working with children in the classroom or consider school-based issues that appeared to be raising student anxiety levels and were transferring to the home environment, such as social issues at lunch time. Some of the classroom teachers were able to add insights through offering strategies that they found successful with particular students at school and could also be implemented at home.

Teachers in the group who taught older students were able to pass on important information for parents to consider about how certain behaviours would be deemed inappropriate if their child was still exhibiting them as an adolescent. Staff also highlighted the importance of teaching skills that allow increased independence. They were able to add insight into stages of development that effect behaviour and could share stories of success with managing certain behaviours that they had gathered through years of teaching experience. From their professional experience, teachers were able to plead the case for behaviour modification at an early age and the possible benefits or consequences of not making changes.

General patterns and observations from the data and the research process

One major change that the mothers implemented in the delivery of behaviour management was to make adjustments to their posture, facial expressions and tone of voice. Parent observations of classroom practice were also noted as being most helpful with understanding the delivery and effectiveness of body language. The following comment made by a mother in the group sums up the importance of parents being able to view this approach in practice:

Class visits have also been fantastic. Hearing about the behaviour management and seeing it in action are two different things.

Other benefits of visiting the classroom were increased admiration for staff and noting the effect of particular strategies. Comments were made such as:

It was fantastic to watch how a class was run, it was so calm. I noticed how much praise was used and have begun working on that at home, praising every time my son obeys an instruction, and he loves it.

From observing the interactions between parents and staff that were made possible through this action research design, it was clear that utilising the staff and parents who are connected through a school is a practical way of meeting some of the needs of parents of children with autism. The mothers appeared to be comfortable and relaxed interacting with staff and other parents during meetings. The mothers were able to learn about and reflect on their child's behaviour, whilst making connections with other areas of their child's development and general well-being. Two mothers reported great gains for their child in speech, independence, lower anxiety and increased social interaction. Four out of six mothers reflected at the end of the research process that their child had showed increased calmness and less anxiety.

An obvious and predominant strength of the research was the actual behaviour approach that was used. The mothers in the group offered comments of support for the program on many levels:

The school approach has been the most helpful; nothing else that I have tried has worked.

Another mother made a similar comment about the rarity and effectiveness of the behaviour approach:

I did get so much from this program, more than anything I have ever read or attended or tried and it has been years of searching.

It became evident during the research process that the involvement of speech and occupational therapists in the group was also required. Several therapists from the school were contacted and they expressed an interest in helping the mothers in the group to problem-solve particular behaviours. As the value of therapist involvement in the group did not become evident until the research had begun, the therapists were not able to attend the action research meetings which would have been ideal. Instead the therapists made themselves available for a separate focused group meeting with all of the mothers where they could raise behaviour related therapy concerns.

The value of 'Insider' observations

The involvement of Jim, an educator who could offer in-depth, rare, and valuable insights into behaviour patterns was a critical element of the success of the collaboration in this research. Jim offered information based on his own experience of managing the behaviour of people with autism and most importantly his own reflections from his experiences of childhood as a person

with autism. The collaboration that occurred between parents and teachers would not have been as profitable without Jim's additional contribution as he offered another level of insight into discussions of children's behaviour that other participants did not have.

Both mothers and teachers involved in the research saw the value of Jim's unique contributions to group discussions. Comments of gratitude were made by parents for his involvement:

A huge thanks to Jim for the time he took to talk to me, and educate me.

I find it invaluable to talk to someone who knows that autistic mind as well as Jim (because he has one himself).

Jim's insights have given me a far better understanding of my son for which I am extremely grateful.

Jim Crawford's unique insight and knowledge give it credibility that possibly isn't attainable by others.

Jim was not able to attend all of the meetings and his absence proved that the group was able to continue to offer valuable assistance and answer the questions raised quite adequately. Therefore it can be noted that much benefit could be gained from groups where parents and teachers work together following this problem-solving, reflecting format; however, the involvement of a person like Jim, who can offer personal insights on autism, is optimal.

A WAY FORWARD

As already indicated, this research is focused on providing a new form of behaviour intervention for parents and that can be readily accessed. A really positive contribution of this study has been providing parents of children with autism an opportunity to share positive experiences that they encounter with their child in a group format and encourage other parents with stories of success. Much literature and professional advice still focuses on the deficits of children with autism and the negative experiences of parents (Happé, 1999; Lecavalier, Leone & Wiltz, 2006).

Parents ought to be assisted to develop problem-solving skills so they can assess inappropriate behaviour and equip themselves with strategies to shape the behaviour and encourage appropriate behaviour. Parents should be able to access additional information about autism in a manner where their 'expert' knowledge of their child is appreciated and built upon by professionals who have additional insights to share. Parents should be given the responsibility of determining the behaviour or developmental issues that they wish to focus on for their child. The advice shared by professionals should be practical, detailed and use plain language. Parents should be able to apply strategies and advice at their discretion in the home environment, rather than have a therapist or psychologist in their home implementing a formal intervention like Applied Behaviour Analysis, as is sometimes the case.

A positive step forward for families of children with autism would be if academics acknowledged and capitalised on the fact that many specially trained and experienced educators hold practical, easily understood insights into useful approaches with children with autism. It is essential that there is acknowledgement that, with the right structure, a model of collaboration between parents and teachers can make a huge difference in the lives of children with autism.

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Britt Edwards completed a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at the University of Melbourne. She began her teaching career in a state primary school then moved to a special school setting. Whilst teaching in a large special school in Geelong she completed a Masters of Education (Majoring in Special Education) at the University of Ballarat. Britt is currently undertaking a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of Ballarat. She is conducting participatory action research that is aimed at

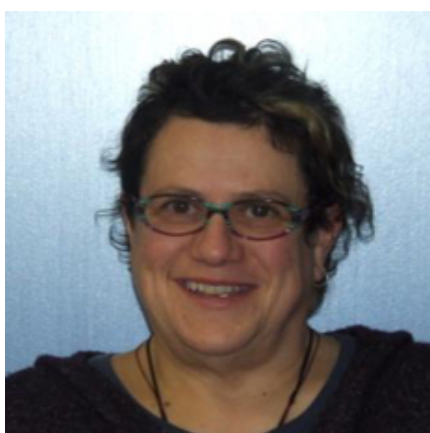
work together to help parents of children with autism to implement behaviour management practices at home. brittedi@hotmail.com

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Geneé Marks has a background in primary and secondary teaching, as well as in special education. She also has experience in post-compulsory education; in the community sector in technical and further education, and in vocational-based education, especially for people with disabilities. She has a considerable passion for working with people with disabilities in contexts that recognise the need for empowerment and inclusion. Geneé also has a strong research background across a variety of areas of diversity and equity, with projects that

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