Facilitating the social engagement of students with Autistic Spectrum Conditions in inclusive environments

Dr Sofia Mavropoulou
Senior Lecturer in Inclusive & Special Education
School of Education
University of New England

Successful Learning Conference 2016
Faculty of Education and Social Work
The University of Sydney

Aims of the presentation

1. **To build a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underpinning the social-emotional difficulties of students with ASC**

2. **To increase the knowledge of evidence-based strategies for developing social competence in students with ASC**

3. **To offer an overview of teaching Personal and Social Competence as part of the Australian Curriculum**
Autism: what is it?

- A condition rather than a disorder (Baron-Cohen, 2009a)
- Disabilities and cognitive strengths
- Autistic traits in the general population
- ASC: an extreme of the normal variation of autistic traits
- A spectrum condition: planning for individual needs
- A “transactional disorder” (Jordan, 2007)

The autistic view: in the classroom

- “Teachers thought I was easily distracted. They were right, but it was not the type of attention problem most children have, which is that they can’t focus and have a short attention-span.
- People like me are distracted from within. We have a very interesting inner thoughtscape and can daydream for ages. My associative thought processes lead me to ideas and possibilities much more interesting than the subjects taught in school.” (Darius)
The autistic view: in the playground

- “School was a torture ground in itself for me because of my lack of social skills and my absolute terror of people (in part because I didn’t just automatically know the social rules, and, when I did learn them, I had to think about them all the time - and who can keep up that sort of coping skill ALL THE TIME) (Karen).

- “I spent my recesses alone. I recall standing by myself on the edges of the blacktop, watching other kids inside play jump rope and basketball while I tasted from the honeysuckle bushes on the sidelines. I did not yet have a friend, though I did not particularly desire one either.” (Sarah)

- “The thing that was the best thing during school hours was when I went away out in a field with my miniature people and cars and played in the sand or in a log by myself.” (Jack).

The Teaching Philosophy

- View autism as another culture
- Work with rather than against autism
- Respond with “No” to remediation - “yes” to compensation
- Capitalize on cognitive strengths
- Consider conceptual and sensory needs
- Create autism-friendly environments
- Set concrete and clear expectations
A holistic approach

Social Networks

- Dyadic interactions
- Peer groups to which a student feels s/he belongs
- Frequency of nominations children receive by classmates as members of informal peer groups
- A moderate correlation has been found between the number of friendships and social network status (Locke et al, 2010).
- Mutual friendships are not always embedded within larger, informal groups.
Social Networks & Friendships Survey

- Are there kids in your class who like to hang out together? Who are they?
- Write down the names of the children you do not like to hang out with in your classroom
- **Buddies**: “Who do you like to hang out with in your classroom?”
- **Top 3**: Write down your top 3 friends
- **Best Friend**: Place a ✪ next to your best friend
- Caveat for its use: confidentiality

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Social Networks: Research evidence

 Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London (2010)
The “iceberg” metaphor

Figure 1. Aggression.

Schopler, 1995; 17.

Learning Style

Students with ASD have …

- Theory of mind as a failed “gatekeeper” (Happé, 2015)
- Cognitive Empathy
- Strong systemizing skills: highly purposeful
- Strong local processing bias (weak central coherence)
- Weak executive functioning

(Baron-Cohen, 2009a)
Cognitive Difficulties

- Receptive language
- Expressive communication
- Attention to irrelevant information
- Distractibility
- Working memory
- Organization
- Sensory over-stimulation
- Confusion in identifying personal space and sharing space

Evidence-Based Strategies

- Teach in natural settings/contexts
- Teach the “hidden social curriculum” – social rules
- Co-create and use Social Stories
- Set and follow work routines (activity schedules, work systems)
- Develop choice-making skills
- Build verbal communication skills for requesting “break” and “help”
- Teach emotion recognition and regulation (the “emotions thermometer”)
- Engage peers as assistants
- Use flexible grouping strategies
Physical Structure: Why?

- Physical boundaries for greater meaning and context …
- Defines the purpose of space
- Reduces distractions within the learning environment
- Increases attention and concentration
- Clarifies expectations and activities
- Enhances flexibility and adaptive behavior
- Promotes safety and security
- Develops self-control

Physical Structure: What for?

- Transition area
- Group activities
- Whole-class activities
- Independent work
- 1:1 teaching area
- Play/leisure/relaxation area

- Materials’ area
- Finished work
Circle time

Circle time: with boundaries
Set up: group activity

Break time: Individual
Activity Schedules: Why?

Help students to …
- focus their attention on their daily responsibilities
- predict what will happen next
- understand routines
- follow a timetable
- make transitions
- prepare for changes
- control their anxiety
- communicate with their teacher
- make choices and decisions

Activity Schedules

- Level of visual representation
- Sequence of activities
- Use of schedule
- Location
- Transition objects
Schedules

Schedule: transition
Schedule: transition

Work system: What is it?

- Independent, pair, and group work

- *What is the work I have to do?*
- *How many tasks do I have to do?*
- *How do I know I am finished?*
- *What happens next?*
Work systems: Why?

Help students to …

- Become **independent** in using materials
- **Concentrate** and sit quietly
- Work with others
- Take responsibility for their work
- Become **independent** in carrying out activities
- Feel **positive** about themselves

Work system: Whole class
Work system: individual

Visual instructions: Why?

Help students to …

- Understand important concepts
- Follow directions for completing tasks
- Understand the meaning of activities

Help teachers apply differentiated instruction
Visual instructions: What?

- **Visual Organization**: contains the bits and pieces of the task
- **Clarity**: highlights information significant to the task
- **Instructions**: give the sequence of the task
- **Forms**: jig, visual or written instructions

Why?

- Clarify the **meaning** of the activity
- Foster **flexibility** in task completion

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Visual instructions: sign-in board
Visual instructions

Let's Make A Fish

- Cut the fish on the black line
- Color the head, fin and tail... choose any color
- Glue on the eye
- Glue on the scales
- Finished

Pick a fun activity in your notebook until everyone is finished.

Visual instructions: Having a conversation

Ask your friend:
What do you like to eat for snack?
Let your friend put his choice in the box.

I like cartoons. Do you like cartoons? What is your favorite cartoon? Put it in the box.

My favorite cartoon is not here
Visual instructions: making comments

Tell 3 things

Visual instructions: Scavenger Hunt

Scavenger Hunt

Look at the people in your group and answer these questions:

1. Who is wearing shorts?
2. Who has blond hair?
3. How many people are ladies?
4. Who is wearing glasses?
5. Who is wearing sandals?
Visual Support: Preparation Story

My Class is Going to the Farm

The farmer has many brushes. He will let me brush the animals. I will not be afraid. The animals are very nice.
Behavior routines
Turn-taking

![Image of turn-taking activity]

Turn-taking

![Image of turn-taking activity]
Putting away toys
Visual instructions: Standing

Visual instructions: making a request

May I please have
A crayon
A marker
A glue bottle
A glue stick
A pencil
Some scissors
Some glitter
Some tape
Some paint
Visual instructions: Book reading

Social Scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I can do when partner reading:</th>
<th>What I can say when partner reading:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get your friend's attention.</td>
<td>“Hey _____”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Ask your friend a question.</td>
<td>“What do you think this is going to be about?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Wait for your friend to answer.</td>
<td>Nod to show you are listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Tell your friend what you think.</td>
<td>“I think this is going to be about _____”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Ask your friend who should read first.</td>
<td>“Do you want to read first?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ After you read ask your friend a question.</td>
<td>“What did you like best about the book?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hart & Whalon (2011)
Student Scenario

- John is a Year 6 student with an Autism Spectrum Condition. He is very interested in airplanes and likes to talk to his peers about his favorite subject in class and during recess. Because of his inappropriate and disruptive behaviors, his peers have started feeling frustrated and are avoiding him.
- He is achieving high grades in Maths and just recently won the 2nd prize in a national math competition.
- However, he has great difficulty with composing a story about his own experiences or a summary of a story that he has read. His teacher has observed that he is feeling very anxious and also blames himself, because he is a perfectionist while at the same time being very conscious of his writing problems. He has started scratching himself every time he is given a writing task to complete and also talks about airplanes while others are quietly writing their stories.
- He ends up not being able to finish the writing task in class but taking it as homework, which he can complete with his mum’s support.

The Australian Curriculum (AC)

- the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008)
- Purpose of education:
  
  “to enable students to act with “moral and ethical integrity” and to be in a position to best “manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical well-being”.
- Dimension of the AC: General capabilities (ACARA 2010, 2012)
- Personal and Social Capability (PSC)
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- The general capabilities are incorporated into learning area content in ways that are appropriate to each learning area
Personal and Social Capability

1. Understanding themselves and others
2. Managing their relationships, learning, lives and work more effectively
3. Recognizing and regulating emotions
4. Developing empathy for others and for relationships
5. Establishing and maintaining positive relationships
6. Building effective team work skills
7. Making responsible decisions
8. Solving problems constructively
9. Developing leadership skills

Foundation to Year 10
References


Thank you very much for your attention