

Buddy Programme

Literature Review

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A social skills intervention for autistic pupils in mainstream UK secondary schools.

A note on language: Our work comes from a position of valuing difference rather than positioning people with different cognitive styles as deficient. Whilst we acknowledge the ongoing debate around the use of language to describe autism, recent research by Kenny and colleagues (2015) reported that the use of the term 'autistic' was most widely endorsed by autistic adults in their survey of the UK autism community (Kenny et al., 2015). The concepts of Neurologically (Neuro-) Typical (NT) and autistic are therefore used when referring to people without and with autistic traits respectively. However, in using the term autistic we are not suggesting that there is necessarily one 'autistic identity', in the same way that it would be inappropriate to suggest that there is one 'NT identity'.

Introduction

The legislative commitment towards inclusion in education that the UK made in 1994 when signing the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994) continues to be reflected in current government policy. The recent Children and Families Act (Department for Education, 2014) supports the ongoing focus towards pupils with additional needs, including autism, being educated in mainstream schools. The latest figures from the Department for Education indicate that 73% of school aged pupils with a special educational need identified as autism are educated in mainstream settings (Department for Education, 2015). While the overall numbers of pupils for whom schools may receive additional financial support, in the form of a statement of special education needs (SEN) or (as of September 2014) an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), has started to plateau, autistic pupils receive the highest proportion of this type of support (Department for Education, 2015). How this support is delivered varies for each pupil, however, there is growing evidence, from both from the research literature and autistic individuals and parents of autistic pupils, that support for pupils with social skills and the 'hidden' curriculum, should be an area of focus (Baric, Hellberg, Kjellberg and Hemmingsson, 2015; Batten et al., 2006; Brewin et al., 2008; Dillon, Underwood, Freemantle, 2014; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2001; Humphrey, 2008; Miller, Vernon, Wu & Russo, 2014; Parsons, 2014; Pituch et al, 2011; Rowley et al., 2012; Sagers, 2015; Simpson, Boer-Ott, and Smith-Myles, 2003).

The hidden curriculum refers to the assumed knowledge we are expected to have, yet are not taught (Myles and Simpson, 1998). It includes implicit and unstated rules, customs, fashions and trends that often change and evolve, which contribute to wider social understanding and underpin social skills (Myles, Trautman and Schelvan, 2013). Autistic individuals may have a greater difficulty in accessing the hidden curriculum in school. Primary, clinically defined, differences associated with autism are difficulties in social communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, autism is proposed to result in an impairment or delay in the development of theory of mind (ToM), the ability to understand and predict the feelings of others based upon an understanding that others have different

thoughts and feelings to one's own (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985). Autistic individuals are also characterised as having differences in executive functioning (EF) skills (Ozonoff, Pennington and Rogers, 1991) and a processing style that focuses on the local over the global, referred to as the central coherence theory (Happé and Frith, 2006). The interplay of these three theories has been further proposed to explain the differences in cognition associated with autism, and therefore with difficulties in social interaction (Baron-Cohen and Swettenham, 1997; Pellicano, 2010; Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007). This different way of thinking may result in the development of an idiosyncratic, as opposed to common, social understanding from which to interpret the behaviour of others, making shared social experiences difficult (Gray, 1998). The acquisition of social interactional skills is therefore challenging for autistic pupils and explicit teaching of these skills is often required (Klinger, Klinger and Pohlig, 2007), though not always provided in mainstream school settings (Batten et al., 2006; Reid and Batten, 2006; Rowlet et al., 2012).

Importance of social skills in adolescence

The challenges around making friends and developing social skills faced by autistic pupils as a result of differences in cognitive style can be more pronounced in inclusive settings in which pupils share the context and activities with their neuro-typical peers (Camargo, Rispoli, Ganz, Hong, Davis & Mason, 2014). These difficulties may further be exacerbated in adolescence as pupils face a more complex social landscape (Bottema-Beutel, Mullins, Harvey, Gustafson and Carter, 2015; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008) in which friendships tend to become more 'talk' based than 'play' based (Brown and Larson, 2009; Buhrmester, 1990). This shift in focus potentially puts autistic pupils at a significant disadvantage at a time in which peer relationships are becoming increasingly salient (Brown and Larson 2009).

Impairments in social skills and social relationships have been found to lead to a variety of negative outcomes during adolescence, such as depression and poor self-esteem (Tantam, 2000), poor academic attainment (Welsh et al, 2001) and social anxiety (Bellini, 2006). Difficulties with social skills can also heavily impact the ability of autistic pupils to make and maintain friendships (Daniel and Billingsley, 2010). Autistic pupils have been found to have fewer friends and more limited social networks (Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud and Rotherham-Fuller, 2011), spend more time engaging in solitary behaviours (Humphrey and Symes, 2011), experience higher levels of loneliness (Bauminger, Shulman and Agam, 2003; Lasgaard, Nielsen, Eriksen and Goossens, 2010; Penney, 2013) and experience more teasing and bullying (Humphrey and Symes, 2011; Kloosterman, Kelley, Craig, Parker and Javier, 2013; Little, 2002; Nowell, Brewston and Goin-Kochel, 2014; Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam and Williams, 2008; Zeedyk, Rodriguez, Tipton, Baker and Blacher, 2014) than neuro-typical peers.

Peer interactions form the primary nexus of social life in secondary school (Rubin, Bukowski and Laursen, 2009). Friendships and social relationships have been found to promote positive academic outcomes and aid in the prevention of negative psychological outcomes during adolescence (Bagwell, Bender, Adreassi, Kinoshita, Montarello and Muller, 2005; Malecki and Demaray, 2007; Wang, Selman, Dishion and Stormshak, 2010). For autistic pupils social relationships can provide emotional support and protection from peer rejection and loneliness and help to mitigate peer conflicts and stresses (Bauminger, Soloman, Aviezer, Hueng, Brown and Rogers, 2008; Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor and Booth-LaForce, 2006; Humphrey and Symes, 2010). Furthermore, contrary to stereotypical folk belief, autistic pupils value meaningful friendships and are keen to be included in social activities (Beresford, Tozer, Rabiee and Sloper, 2007; Daniel and Billingsley, 2010; Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Dillon, Underwood and Freemantle, 2014). However, as Waugh and Peskin (2015) note, for autistic pupils a negative cycle can develop as a result of the juxtaposition of the desire for social interaction with difficulties with social skills which perseverates failed advances to initiate and develop friendships. This can in turn lead to mental health problems and continued difficulties with social interaction throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Koegel, Ashbaugh, Koegel, Detar, and Regester, 2013; Sterling, Dawson, Estes, and Greenson, 2008).

Support in developing social skills and understanding the hidden curriculum is therefore particularly important in adolescence, an age range that has been understudied (Wong et al., 2015; Reichow and Volkmar, 2009), in mainstream settings. Autistic pupils are not only more vulnerable to difficulties with social inclusion and peer victimisation as they get older (Hebron and Humphrey, 2014; Hebron, Humphrey and Oldfield, 2015;

Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlin and Locke, 2010) but those pupils who spend the majority of their time in mainstream settings are also more likely to experience bullying and negative peer experiences (Daniel and Billingsley, 2010; Zablotzky, Bradshaw, Anderson and Law, 2014).

Social skills interventions

To support autistic pupils to develop their social skills a wide range of social-focused interventions have been reported in the research literature (for recent reviews see Camargo, Rispoli, Ganz, Hong, Davis, and Mason, 2014; Watkins et al., 2014; Whalon, Conroy, Martinez and Werch, 2015). Wong et al. (2015) in their recent review of evidence based practices (EBPs) for autistic individuals recommended that comprehensive systematic reviews such as theirs can provide a foundation upon which evidence supported interventions can be designed. Of the EBPs identified for having an outcome focussed on social skills, direct social skills training (SST), peer mediated interventions (PMI) and cognitive behavioural interventions (CBI) show promise in terms of their efficacy (Wong et al., 2015). However, a recurring criticism often levied at some social skills interventions has been that they fail to be applicable in a naturalistic setting with not enough focus on the generalisation of skills learnt during interventions that can facilitate more satisfying, higher quality relationships (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015; Whalon et al., 2015). In their comprehensive review of school based social skills interventions Bellini and colleagues (Bellini, Peters, Benner and Hopf, 2007) reported that only 15 out of 55 studies reported any generalisation data. In response to this group based programs have been suggested as a potentially effective medium with which to deliver social-focused interventions (Miller, Vernon, Wu and Russo, 2014) as they can be delivered in more naturalistic settings. Of those group based programs peer mediated interventions (PMIs) have been posited as potentially providing the greatest likelihood that social skills will be generalised as they are well suited to delivery in the natural context of daily school activities (Watkins et al., 2014). Whilst PMIs have long been identified by researchers as an effective intervention approach (Chan, Lang, Rispoli, O'Reilly, Sigafoos and Cole, 2009; Reichow and Volkmar, 2010; Watkins et al., 2015) little research has examined how autistic youth perceive such a type of intervention (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015). There is a growing acknowledgement of the need to listen to the voice of key stakeholders when designing interventions (Elsabbagh et al., 2014) and this is particularly true of autistic pupils in mainstream schools (Dillon, Underwood and Freemantle, 2014; Humphrey, 2008; Parsons, 2014).

Interventions for autistic pupils have often struggled to move from research settings and into school environments (Kasari & Smith, 2013; Locke, Olsen, Wideman, Downey, Kasari and Mandell, 2015). The difficulties with implementing such interventions is symptomatic of wider challenges in bridging the research to practice gap (Kasari and Smith, 2013; Snell, 2003; Wood, McLeod, Klebanoff and Brookman-Frazee, 2015). In order to overcome barriers to implementation interventions must ensure a good fit with school environments (Kasari and Smith, 2013) and ensure their feasibility for delivery by school staff (Whalon et al., 2015), collaborating with schools to a much greater extent (Parsons, Charman, Faulkner, Ragan, Wallace, and Wittemeyer, 2013). However, the need for ease of administration must not compromise methodological rigour in terms of the reliability and validity of an intervention as this would impact upon the replicability and generalisability of the program to other students who may benefit. The purpose of the current study is to seek to examine the efficacy of a social skills intervention program specifically designed to be easily implemented by school staff within a mainstream secondary school setting, whilst providing a valid and reliable set of data with regards to the potential benefits for autistic pupils.

The present study

Considering the current recommendations regarding the most efficacious forms of social skills intervention, the views of autistic individuals and seeking to address criticism levied at previous social skills interventions we sought to develop a social skills intervention that combined SSI, CBI and PMI with peer and whole school awareness of autism and parental involvement (See Appendix A for a full description of the program). There was flexibility in terms of the precise curriculum for the skills to be studied so that the intervention could be personalised to an extent so as to meet the specific needs of the pupils, in response to recommendations suggested by Whalon et al. (2015). However, in order to ensure that the programme was also easy to deliver for staff to a group of pupils (in order to fit in with the timetable constraints of a mainstream secondary school) there was a set outline of core topics to be covered. These topics focussed on pre-determined skills

based on common areas of difficulty for autistic adolescents when interacting with their NT peers (Laugeson, Frankel, Gantman, Dillon and Mogil, 2011; Laugeson, Ellingsen, Sanderson, Tucci and Bates, 2014) and topics covered in commercially available social communication development programs (Kelly, 2012; Kelly and Sains, 2013). Overlap with these commercial products was aimed at mitigating against any additional financial outlay that a school may have to make, this potentially being a barrier to take up of the intervention as these programs are already widely used. The CBI component, that responded to calls for psychosocial intervention research to acknowledge theoretical perspectives (Chown, 2015), focussed on understanding the emotions of themselves and others, addressing potential differences in theory of mind. Lower levels of understanding regarding emotions, particularly their own negative emotions have been reported to contribute to negative social relationships for autistic pupils with their NT peers (Dillon, Underwood and Freemantle, 2014; Lecavalier, 2006). Social media was also addressed in the sessions. This additional component was seen as crucial given the growing salience of social media for adolescents, with 71% of young people aged 12 – 15 having a social media profile (Ofcom, 2014). Autistic individuals have also shown a preference for these forms of social interaction (Gillespie-Lynch, Kapp, Shane-Simpson, Smith and Hutman, 2014; Stendal and Balandin, 2015), however, they also face a higher risk of cyberbullying (Kowalski and Fedina, 2011) and may be more vulnerable than NT peers in online settings potentially due to similar difficulties faced in the off line social environment (Lough, Flynn and Riby, 2014). Each of the topics covered in the curriculum included a homework element. The homework element aimed at promoting generalisation (Frankel, Myatt, Sugar, Whitham, Gorospe and Laugeson, 2010) and sought to promote the inclusion of parents. The involvement of parents has been found to further promote generalisation of social skills understanding (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil and Dillon, 2012; Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil and Dillon, 2009).

The PMI element of the intervention was not as explicit as in some PMI focussed interventions (Reichow and Volkmar, 2010). This decision was taken in light of the views of autistic pupils and former pupils on their experience of social skills interventions (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015). Bottema-Beutel and colleagues (2015) reported that autistic pupils preferred for natural interactions involving a shared activity with peers to form part of interventions as opposed to direct instruction from a peer. The peer interaction component of the intervention took the form of a group activity in which the pupils involved in the interaction and an equal number of peers were tasked with developing a film that introduced and described the school for new pupils. These sessions provided an informal opportunity for social skills to be practised in a structured semi-formal environment. NT peers that took part in the group were not explicitly told of the role the group was playing in the wider social skills intervention. No direct training (additional to that provided to the whole school) was given to the NT participants in autism, nor was the diagnosis of the other participants disclosed unless they chose to do so.

Concurrent with the SSI was a wider autism awareness program running in the school. This was aimed at increasing whole school awareness and understanding of autism. Humphrey and Symes (2011) highlight the role that a lack of awareness and understanding of autism has on negative social outcomes among autistic students in mainstream settings. This lack of understanding of autism persists through adolescence (Campbell and Berger, 2011). Similarly both parents of autistic pupils, and autistic pupils themselves have highlighted that increased peer understanding could improve peer relationships (Hebron and Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey, 2008; Jones and Frederickson, 2010; Kucharczyk et al., 2015; Reid, 2011). This concurrent awareness program is also crucial as the notion of inclusion must work both ways. Social skills interventions can be criticised as focussing on enforcing neurotypical norms upon autistic pupils (McLaren, 2014). The aim of the current intervention is to develop the common ground cited by Gray (2009) as being crucial for social understanding.

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