

An examination of the benefits of incorporating aspects of play therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy into the classroom for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to enhance their educational experience.



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Alanna Cronin is a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), recently graduated from Marino Institute of Education in 2022 after four years of study. During the B. Ed programme, Alanna developed a keen interest in Inclusive Education after the Inclusive Education module as well as the Special Education Placement in 2nd year. It was while on this placement that Alanna saw many interventions in place in an ASD Class which led her to want to investigate the benefits of using aspects of other interventions in the classroom with this cohort of children to enhance their educational experience. She is passionate about catering for all students in the classroom and ensuring that each child is supported. The research was thought-provoking, challenging and provided Alanna with the skills to ensure every child is supported in her classroom in the future.

KEYWORDS: Child Centered Play Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy in Education, Autism

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to examine how the implementation of elements of play therapy, speech and language therapy (SLT) and physiotherapy into the classroom of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can enhance their educational experience. The objectives of this dissertation are to research ASD, define it and examine research from the foundations of the discovery of the disorder to the present-day research. Research has shown that children with ASD can have deficits in social skills, communications skills, and movement skills. Secondly, to explore play therapy and explore the benefits of using aspects of play therapy with children with ASD. This dissertation will explore how effective the implementation of play therapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD. Following this, this research will explore physiotherapy and explore the benefits of using aspects of physiotherapy with children with ASD. This dissertation will explore how effective the implementation of physiotherapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD. Lastly, this dissertation will explore speech and language therapy and the benefits of using aspects of it in the classroom with children with ASD. This dissertation will then study how effective the implementation of speech and language therapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD.

Overall, this study aims to investigate the effect of different interventions on various needs of students with ASD. This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation, which examined the benefits of implementing these interventions by looking on a global scale of interventions in Australia as well as the United States and then looks to Ireland to recommend how we can best include these interventions into our inclusive practice.

CONTEXT

Researching inclusive education is important because it is crucial in education to understand children with different additional needs and how best to support them. Inclusive education research in the past has viewed these needs as “a problem to be solved rather than an individual to be understood” (Prizant, 2015, p. 17). In recent decades, we move to understand these children and support them as they achieve their own personal best. On teaching practice, I encountered a play therapist working with a child with PTSD. Fascinated by her work and ability to work through personal reactions and challenging behaviours in the child, I wondered how this could benefit children with ASD. Physiotherapy and SLT soon inspired this research project as movement and language skills are important. When research is done, educators are better able to teach as they are empowered with research and evidence.

Researching inclusive education and ASD is so important and research in these fields are ever-changing. New interventions are constantly being introduced. The National Council for Special Education’s (NCSE) policy principle three states that “all students with special educational needs (SEN) have access to available educational supports in line with their needs” (NCSE, 2013, p. 3). The NCSE (2013) list SLT, physiotherapy and play therapy as available interventions from the Health Service Executive (HSE) for children with SEN. The researcher believes the use of these therapies in the classroom with children with ASD will enhance their educational experience which provides an important need for this research. The foundation of this dissertation is based on the fact that there is a lack of literature on this topic in the Irish context but findings internationally are promising and the findings should be implemented in the Irish classroom.

METHODOLOGY

In this research project, qualitative research was used as the methodology. Qualitative research is mainly concerned with subjective ‘meanings’ in contrast to the quantitative research’s pursuit of objective facts. Some aims of qualitative research include, “understanding human experience, treating interviews and focus groups as providing direct access to the content of people’s heads and foregrounding the empathetic skills of the researcher to achieve this” (Silverman, 2020, p.3).

Qualitative research focuses on collecting and analysing non-numerical data such as text, video or audios to understand opinions and experiences. Qualitative research is commonly used in research in education, and employs complex reasoning that has many aspects to it. The findings of qualitative research reflects the reality of the thinking of humans. When researchers collect data, data is then examined and the researchers must decide if data gathered has answered the questions they were posing, whether further research is necessary or whether they need to repose the question and look further. This approach is different from quantitative research due to the fact that the main tool used to gather required information is researchers themselves rather than questionnaires or numerical surveys used by quantitative researchers. Qualitative methodology takes the form of an investigation where the researcher works to gather data relevant to come to a conclusion on the topic (Hogan et al., 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Child centred play therapy (CCPT) is an effective intervention to support the educational experience of children with ASD. Research says that there is a strong correlation between play and social and emotional development in children with ASD (Wolfberg, 2015). Children with ASD frequently have difficulties with initiating play, turn taking, building friendships, and enjoying social interactions with peers. CCPT interventions develop four crucial areas: joint attention, imitation response, theory of mind, and symbolic and functional play skills (Salter et al, 2016). Joint attention skills are important for children with ASD. It requires the ability to gain, maintain and shift attention with others. It is done by using eye contact, gestures, and vocalisations. Joint attention skills are closely linked with social skills and maintaining a level of social competency. By engaging in elements of CCPT in the classroom, the repertoire of social behaviours and skills of children with ASD can be used to enhance their experiences in school (Salter et al, 2016).

This can be seen from the imitation response skills that CCPT helps to develop and encourage. Imitation response skills can help children with ASD in schools make friends with their peers as they imitate social skills and copy behaviour to help them integrate so that their “act is an acceptable reproduction of the model act” (Miller, & Dollard, 1941, p. 9) such as social cues and skills they will have learned from imitation response skills (Salter et al, 2016). Imitation skills can be developed through the teacher modelling behaviours that occur naturally through social interaction. The child could initiate roleplay where the teacher would act as different personas in complex social interaction (Salter et al, 2016). “Because these interactions are child-led, children tend to be receptive to this form of social learning” (Salter et al, 2016, p. 79).

Theory of mind is one of the most central social deficits associated with children with ASD. Theory of mind refers to the ability to recognise that people have thoughts and feelings of their own which is the development of perspective and empathy. Many children with ASD find this difficult (Baron-Cohen, 2001). CCPT in the classroom can help to grow the child’s theory of mind and develop their sense of empathy and perspective. From researching this topic, it has been shown that a staple element needed to enhance the educational experience of the child is a trusted adult that will support the child. It would be beneficial to integrate this into the classroom with the class teacher to support them throughout the process.

CCPT aids the development from functional play to symbolic play. Functional play can be defined as playing with toys or objects in accordance with their intended function, for example, rolling a ball or feeding a doll (Pierce, 2009). Functional play is the first way that a child will learn to make sense of the world and it is important for social interactions. This is because children interact with each other through play. Symbolic play or pretend play comes later. Symbolic play occurs when the child will use objects to represent other objects, for example, using a banana as a phone or using a box as a house. Research shows there is general agreement that play deficits are present in children with ASD between functional play and symbolic play (Pierce, 2009). Through the use of CCPT, this developmental step is supported.

In various studies done worldwide, both formal and informal measures indicated positive improvement for all children following CCPT interventions. In these studies, there are reports of children’s anxieties decreasing as the sessions go on. Salter et al. (2016) reports that by the fourth session, the child reported that he enjoyed school much more. By the seventh session the child had made his own breakfast and by the eighth session the teacher was seeing behavioural improvements in school. The same improvements were reported in other children in their specific areas of need. The same was shown in another study by Parker and O’ Brien (2011).

They completed twelve counselling sessions with a 7-year-old boy with ASD. The child's journey through progress was recorded and by the end of twelve sessions the child's incidents in school had gone from forty incidents a week in week-one to under five incidents a week by week-twelve.

When researching the speech and language therapy or intervention element to this thesis question, communication was shown to be a gateway into the world around us and for children who have a deficit in this area, it is important to develop their communication skills. The findings from the studies that had taken place were promising and it was made clear that incorporating an intervention in the classroom to help children with ASD with communication skills was important to enhance their educational experience. Low and Lee (2011) looked at speech and language therapists records and one case study was looked at in detail. The areas that needed improvement were communication and preverbal skills, language comprehension and speech and language production. These elements made up the teaching plan for the 4-year-old girl with ASD. Over twenty sessions, the child went from scoring 10/100 in areas of verbal language to scoring 90/100 in those same areas after twenty sessions.

The same strong results were seen in a study by Thiemann-Bourque and colleagues (2018) when they researched incorporating speech-generating devices into the classroom with children with ASD. The results from this study were promising as the researchers reported that the children with ASD and their peers were better able to initiate, respond and stay engaged in play with one another and ultimately allowed the child with ASD to enjoy school and communicate with each other and with the adults. Every child deserves a chance to be understood, listened to and have their voices heard. By bringing in different tools and interventions in communication, each child is given that chance. The findings of these studies appear limited but they also exhibit clearly that each child with ASD is unique, one intervention that works for one child may not work for another but if it works for one child then it is worth it.

Aspects of physiotherapy and movement skills are proven to develop target areas in children with ASD. It is commonplace for movement breaks to be used with children with ASD and it is showing the children's focus improves after a movement break to refresh them. Research shows that bringing movement into more aspects of the school day is beneficial. Cynthia and colleagues (2019) state that children with ASD in schools are less likely to be active and participate in fewer activities compared to their age related peers. The authors go on to say that due to this, children with ASD are more likely to develop health complications such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Kurtz (2018) reported that the biggest barriers for children with ASD to exercise were lack of motivation, lack of peers to engage with and lack of community programs which would imply that school is a perfect place to include exercise in the day.

Physiotherapists are trained and skilled in enhancing motor development, prescribing physical activity and improving physical skills and fitness. Petrus and colleagues (2008) found that when elements of physiotherapy and exercise were brought into the classroom, children's challenging behaviour decreased. Functional behaviours such as hand movements for eating, drinking, holding among other behaviours all improved through fine motor skill exercises. Exercises such as jumping, single leg hopping, throwing, jogging, mobility and joint exercises could be incorporated into the school day to improve fundamental movement skills (Costello, & Warne, 2020). Exercise improves gross and fine motor skills as well as fundamental movement skills.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore the benefits of implementing aspects of play therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy in the classroom with children with ASD. The emphasis is put on implementing the use of aspects of these therapies in the classroom with children with ASD, as the research shows that improvements have been made in areas that were previously exhibiting deficits. These need to be implemented in a casual way that doesn't require the services of a play therapist, speech and language therapist or physiotherapist, so that the class teacher, SNA or SET teacher can facilitate these aspects during the school day, as this is an ideal environment to integrate these tactics. Salter and colleagues (2016) stated the importance of a "secure relationship to support the child" (p. 1) which would make the class teacher the ideal adult to work with the children.

In order to facilitate this, teachers must be trained up in the areas and given detailed training on the activities, the progression plans, strategies to implement and how to facilitate play, speech and language therapy and exercise to facilitate those outcomes. It is important that these aspects of these therapies be introduced to educators as professional development. 'Cosán' framework for teacher's learning states that educational research plays a significant role in directing teachers to the pedagogy that will be most impactful in practice through evidence (TCI, 2016). This would ensure that children would experience benefits provided from interventions as evidenced in the case studies. By the interventions being integrated into the classroom in this manner, it would ensure that students benefit in a timely manner.

These interventions mentioned above as well as other elements taken from the research need to be included in Special Education modules in teacher training colleges to support student teachers and students in our classrooms. These practical interventions will help teachers when they graduate and form an inclusive classroom. Information about these topics and the research behind them would be very beneficial for student teachers as they complete a special education placement, potentially in a class with children with ASD. Information would also be very beneficial to these students as they go out on school placement and then eventually into their NQT year.

Research needs to be carried out on this topic from an Irish education point of view. All case studies and literature on this topic was conducted worldwide and so far, there is little evidence of this topic being explored in Ireland. In an Irish context, valuable research on the topic would include research into if these interventions are currently being implemented in any schools in Ireland and if not, why not and how can we begin to research this and introduce them to the Irish classroom.

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To Teens, we were girls together.

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