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'I want to stay over': An Enquiry into a Short Break/Extended Stay Pilot Project for Children and Young people with Autism

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Background

Our conference paper reports on a small residential pilot project which aimed to enhance provision for children with ASD (autistic Spectrum Disorders) at a medium-sized special school in the North-West of England. The pilot project ran January 2008 - December 2008. All the children/young people involved in this project attended after-school/evening care (an extended day of 4 - 8 pm) at accommodation provided by the school. A number of the children/young people involved went on to have a series of (carefully planned) overnight stays. Analysis of this project was initially conducted for a Local Authority (LA) in the North-West of England.

Research Questions

Our enquiry into this pilot project aimed to:

- Enhance understanding of the impact of an outcome-focused approach to extended day and overnight stays on young people with ASD.
- Explore to what extent such provision might enhance the personal, social and educational development of those children/young people involved, particularly in light of the fact that ASD often profoundly affects these
- Identify key findings from our enquiry which resonate with theory policy and practice in this area. Specifically, our enquiry aimed to address debates regarding inclusion in light of the particular needs often identified with children who have ASD and concerns about the extent to which these were currently met by provision.

In orientation, our resulting study of the pilot project could be classified as qualitative and exploratory.

Methods

A variety of methods were used in order to gather research data. These included: semi-structured interviews with children/young people involved in this project. Focus groups were carried out with parents/carers and also with education staff (Support Tutors) involved in the project. These took place: pre project, with the aim of exploring expectations, hopes and fears of the adults involved prior to the project; and post-project, to explore the retrospective evaluation of parents/carers and education staff. Other data-gathering tools were also deployed, including:

- The use of picture diaries, designed to stimulate verbal dialogue with a child/young person's Support Tutor
- On- to one conversations with the child/young person's Support Tutor
- Group discussions prompted by questions from the Lead Support Tutor
- Naturalist conversations (staff recorded any significant conversations that occurred naturally with each other when young people were in and around the residential provision).

Through attention to literature in this area we concisely, critically explore the particular ethical and methodological challenges which surround research with children/young people who have Autism and other conditions which often affect verbal communications, social interaction and understanding.

Frame

As a general position our original enquiry, and the paper we propose to present, are based within the field of inclusion/inclusive education. Our paper, however, critically explores what inclusion might mean in practice, for children with ASD. Reference will be made to the increasingly influential 'distinct needs' position and to other recent literature/research in this area, particularly ongoing debates about whether special education is, or by definition can be, inclusive. Brief reference is made to grounded theory and to phenomenology in terms of classifying/framing our methodology for enquiry. The particular ethical challenges involved in conducting research with children who have ASD is discussed in light of literature and selected good practice is identified.

Research findings

Analysis of research discloses that clear progress was made toward educational and personal targets for those children/young people involved. In many cases the progress made was remarkable, particularly given the time-scale involved. Due to the limited size of the cohort and other factors, however, caution needs to be used in generalising this claim to residential provision generally. We also suggest that residential provision for children with ASDs holds potential difficulties or dangers: examples of these will be outlined. Our research, provisionally, discloses however, that carefully-planned, closely monitored and carefully executed residential provision for young people with ASD holds significant positive benefits for: the child involved; their family/carers; and for that child's inclusion into the wider community. On this basis selected implications pertinent to theory, policy and practice are identified. Our enquiry, for example, potentially supports the distinct needs position in the sense that it supports the view that specialist provision might be the best (paradoxically most inclusive) route for many children with ASD. The best route that is, in terms of:

- Achieving social inclusion in the wider community and in their life outside of school
- In building some key foundations for transition to independent adulthood