

Can I play with you? Different types of adult support in the play of children with autism

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Background

Early years settings are often the places where children have the opportunity to learn through play while they are being supported by their teachers to explore their environment (Macintyre, 2001) and interact with their peers (Avgitidou, 1997). This is of particular importance for children with autism who experience difficulties with playing, sharing and engaging with their teachers and their peers in playful activities (Boucher, 1999). Even though play is very important in childhood and teachers seem to understand its importance in children's development, the level of their involvement and their roles in children's play still remains contentious (Michalopoulou, 2008) as some often seem to be afraid to intervene in children's activities in case of spoiling it (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009) and others take passive and rather supervisory roles (Wood & Attfield, 1996).

Research Questions

The current study aimed to understand, through a holistic approach, the roles that preschool teachers were adopting to support the play of two children with autism in the naturalistic environments of two inclusive preschool settings, and to how those roles were influencing the children's play. A social constructivist framework was adopted and the importance of a play ethos was emphasised as this appeared to be influenced by a supportive curriculum framework which tended to create more opportunities for the adults to become playful, enable and support the play of the children with autism.

Methods

An ethnographic case study approach was employed to gain valuable insights and an in-depth understanding of the play interactions between children and between children and adults. This study took place in two inclusive preschools in the South of England. In the first, Forest nursery, the majority of the children were from countries other than England bringing rich cultural and linguistic diversity. The nursery's pedagogical philosophy was based on the High/Scope Curriculum, which borrows Piagetian principles and has as its basic tenet is active learning (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002); the teachers were regularly involved in playful group activities with children. The second pre-school, Butterfly nursery was more mono-cultural and had no specific play framework.

Frame

The methods used to inform a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the support teachers provided and the different roles undertaken by the adults comprised fieldwork and video observation to capture the dynamics and differences between different levels and types of adult support and semi structured interviews with staff to further understand the teaching methods used as they were integrated in the play context of the settings. Together these methods enabled a deep understanding of the varied roles of preschool teachers in the play of children with autism. Data were collected on each child in six one-week blocks lasting from Autumn term 2008 for six months. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data was supported by Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Atlas ti).

Research findings

The empirical evidence gathered culminated in detailed vignettes of the teacher's involvement in the children's play experiences in the naturalistic environments of their inclusive settings. These showed how the teachers' contributions varied considerably between the two settings and were closely interrelated with the overall ethos and curriculum framework adopted by each setting. In the Butterfly

nursery, the teachers preferred to take less active roles in children's play based on the belief that their presence and involvement would interrupt the child's play flow. In contrast, the data from Forest nursery showed that an adult can swap between different roles of mediator, active player and/or commentator, emphasising the teacher's ability to be actively engaged and truly playful in their interaction with the play and learning of a child with autism. This will further extent our understanding of how teachers can actively support children's inclusion in playful learning communities.

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