

Autism and Visual Impairment: individual educational needs and the school practice in England.

RESEARCH REPORT

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RÉSUMÉ : Le but de ce travail est d'étudier les considérations actuelles concernant les pratiques éducatives pour les enfants atteints d'autisme et de déficience visuelle commune (ASDVI) dans différents contextes. Pour cette étude, a été examiné la pratique dans trois écoles spécialisées résidentiels en Angleterre. Chacun de ces paramètres ont des spécialisations différentes, comme l'autisme, VI, ou de graves difficultés d'apprentissage (SLD). Ce rapport vise à clarifier les complexités des pratiques différentes qui entourent le soutien des enfants atteints de ASDVI dans différents contextes et vise également à informer sur la mesure dans laquelle les zones d'accord et de désaccord entre et parmi les professionnels sont capables d'inspirer une amélioration future de la provision disponible. Les résultats de la présente étude suggère que les différences fondamentales inhérentes à ce domaine de travail constitués sur l'ethos de chaque école et la formation des professionnels, ainsi que sur la disponibilité

des fonds, ce qui limite la capacité d'appliquer des interventions adaptées aux besoins individuels de chaque enfant.

MOTS-CLÉS: l'autisme, la déficience visuelle, ASDVI, la perte visuelle, les besoins individuels, la pratique scolaire.

ABSTRACT : The aim of this study is to investigate the current considerations regarding the educational practices for children with joint autism and visual impairment (ASDVI) across different settings. For this study, was examined the practice in three specialized residential schools in England. Each of these settings have different specializations, such as autism, VI, or Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD). This report seeks to clarify the complexities of different practices surrounding the support of children with ASDVI across different settings and also seeks to inform about the extent to which areas of agreement and disagreement between and among professionals are able to inspire future improvement of the provision available. The outcomes of the present study suggesting that core discrepancies inherent within this area of work consist on each school's ethos and professionals' training, as well as on the availability of funding, which limits the capacity to apply interventions tailored to each child's individual needs.

KEYWORDS: *autism, visual impairment, ASDVI, visual loss, individual needs, school practice.*

Exploring ASDVI

Children with ASDVI are a heterogeneous group, and their needs can range from severe and complex to mild depending on the individual. In addition, concerning the overlaps which are well documented between children with autism and visual impairment such as communication, socialization and imagination (Brown et al. 1997; Hobson, 2002), raises a series of scientific arguments for the aetiology and the manifestation of these behaviours in each group as well as in children with ASDVI. This kind of overlapping behaviours, often referred as "autistic like features", "autistic tendencies" or "blindisms" (Scholl, 1986; Cass et al, 1994; Hobson and Bishop, 2003) create a conflict between professionals of whether can be considered part of the core diagnostic criteria for autism in this population (Baron-Cohen, 2002; Hobson and Bishop, 2003). The sighted individual with autism appears to apply a different set of rules and criteria when processing sensory information, where the individual with VI is trying to compensate the lack of visual communication by using alternative channels of communication, such as touch, body contact, or oral language (Webster and Roe, 1998; Jordan, 2004). These emerging overlaps might be involved in the overall socio-cognitive development of the

child and it is important to take them into account before providing a child with a diagnosis of autism.

As Gense and Gense (2005) indicate, pupils with ASDVI present with a wide range of abilities. Whereas a child might be best served by a curriculum that focuses on functional skills, another child will be better served by full inclusion in a typical mainstream classroom. When designing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for pupils with ASDVI it is crucial to incorporate all the main difficulties arising from one or the other condition, as well as from the combination of them. Thus, an expanded core curriculum (ECC, Hatlen, 1996) which was initially proposed to support pupils with VI in a range of areas, especially learning and communication, may be crucial for a pupil's better learning functioning, and each setting is vital to identify these needs early and to apply the most appropriate services.

Methods

Research was conducted in 3 schools in the West Midlands, England, each with different specialities: VI, ASD, and SLD (see below, Table 1.).

Semi-structured interviews took place with different members of staff across the three settings. In addition, they were carried out several non-participant observations of

teaching sessions with children with ASDVI (n=10) and play time activities. In order to gain further detailed evidence from the whole practice for pupils with ASDVI, documents such as school's prospectus, calendar of activities, and other policy documents were also examined.

Results of the study

Placement Decisions

Placement or transition of a child in all the schools that participated in the present study, whether with ASDVI or not is a multifactorial process that is undertaken by SENAS.

Whilst each school has little contribution to this procedure, the main factors involved in the decision are the severity of each condition, the child's family's permanent address, as well as other individual needs, such as the availability of Braille in a specific school.

Children with ASDVI have a wide range and complexity of difficulties and needs, which in some cases that examined are met and in other cases are not. For instance, a girl with high functioning autism who recently transferred in the nursery department of School B from another autism specialist school, observed to prefer interacting with a non-autistic boy than with another low functioning girl with ASDVI, perhaps because

she did not receive any feedback from the low functioning child. This worked as an alternative means of social inclusion where the pupil with ASDVI is engaged with alternative pathways of communication and social learning. On the other hand, in the same school a pupil with severe autism, a mild VI condition, and severe learning difficulties was received an overall teaching approach which seem to be limited efficient. A Senior Teacher who works on a daily basis with this particular child states that the Local Educational Authority (LEA) has refused several requests to have this pupil transferred to an autism specialist school and underlines:

"I feel completely useless when I am working with an undoubtedly sighted pupil. Especially when I haven't trained to work with children with autism, and there are no available funds and time for one to one support to overcome this anyway."

In such cases, limits on the budget that LEAs have to administer to fulfil every child's individual needs create extra barriers for requests for school transitions. As a result, the choice of an inaccurate or incomplete IEP which results from the initial misleading placement might have a lifelong impact on a child's with ASDVI daily functioning and future life.

Assessment of individual needs

Every of these schools have its own procedure in assessing the individual needs of children with ASDVI, which depends on each school speciality and focus of provision, and reflected in the teaching approaches later on. For instance, school A has a particular priority to pupils' autism and gives emphasis on the assessment of communication and social skills, when school B gives a provisional focus on social skills and independence training for all the pupils. In School C the primary concern is the initial assessment and support of a child's visual and social skills, as well as the support in behavioural issues. A commonly used assessment tool in Schools A and C that focuses on behaviour and communication is the 'Antecedent, Behaviour and Consequence' recording chart (ABC) aiming to identify links between the behaviour and every child's environment. On the other hand, School C focuses on children's social skills and independence by using the Oregon Project (6th Edition) for Preschool Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired (The OR Project, 1986).

Regarding the assessment of the mobility, orientation (M&O) and independence skills, only schools B and C provide this kind of assessment since they have this training

available as an additional curriculum area. These settings have a broad and continuous evaluation of the visual skills of their pupils (e.g. visual acuity, peripheral visual field, reading level, light and colour perception) as well as in providing educational implications after the assessment. In school A, students with ASDVI are not attending any external mobility or independence classes before entering Key Stage 5 and pupils receives external VI support from Council's Sensory Services, twice a year. However, sometimes settings seem to be unaware in including specific areas in their assessment, such as a descriptive profile of development and learning as well as every child's profile of sensory interactions, which is vital in designing a successful IEP and monitor effectively every child's progress.

Learning for children with ASDVI

Every of the schools that examined have specific learning arrangement and school ethos to meet children's with ASDVI individual needs. For instance every school's attitude is covered by elements of Social, Emotional Aspects of Learning guidelines (SEAL, DfES 2005) accompanied from visual aids. However, there are core differences on the overall philosophy which its school and members of staff adopt to support their pupils. It would be helpful to give the following quotes of Teachers in different schools regarding their schools' ethos in meeting individual needs:

' Our provision is based on the idea that a child with autism will become an adult with autism, therefore this 'autistic culture' will be always a different way of life. '

Senior Teacher, School A

'It's important to create future adults which will be socially functioning in all aspects of life, thus every child is strongly encouraged to follow School's routine since 'autistic routine' might not be always realistic.'

Senior Teacher, School B

'From our point of view it's crucial to provide a balanced provision where most valuable parts of the VI centred approaches and interventions are carefully combined with the valuable parts of the ASD centred approaches.'

Deputy Head Teacher, School C

As highlighted in Table 1. in some settings is provided Braille training (school B), M&O training (schools B & C) or extensive augmentative communication training (school A) ,where in other schools is not. In addition, professional not always have the same qualifications and experience in working with these pupils. Thus initial and further

assessment of the individual needs of pupils with ASDVI is partially determined from members' of staff qualifications and experience.

Teaching pupils with ASDVI

Each of the settings examined, initially is aiming to assist every child in his/her acquisition of an effective way of socializing and communication, by using modified versions of *PECS* (Bondy and Frost, 1994) where some activities are presented in a timetable with large-sized images and modified contrast and using practices advocated by the *TEACCH* approach (Lovaas, 1987) such as work systems where a pupil with ASDVI is able to know what the activity is, and the available time, thus the child is able to control and monitor his/her environment. However, Teachers in school B underline that extra availability of some interventions such as TEACCH might be really vital, but something like this requires one to one support which is not available in all settings because of limited availability of funds.

On the other hand, there are core differences in the interventions applied in each school which often serving every school's basic ethical principles and approach. For instance in the school A each child mainly works in his/her own work station where are widely used *Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC)*, 'social scripts', as well as elements of *SCERTS* (Prizant, et. al., 2006) . On the other hand, in school B the majority

of the interventions available are taken from the Oregon project and pupils with ASDVI usually are engaged common activities such as *'Circle of Friends'* where they are able to work in the same activities as their non autistic peers. Furthermore, members of staff in the school C having as a primary concern to compose a balanced combination of different interventions are including strategies such as reinforcement of the preferable behaviours different proactive strategies such as *'Looking for triggers'* (antecedent control strategies) and teaching replacement skills (functional equivalents). Finally, in this particular school it is recognized that one to one support might not be effective on a daily basis when applied as the one and only method. As a Deputy Head of the School underlines:

'Working alone and in your own way is not always realistic, and we need to provide the chance in every child to develop relationships with peers and share this different way of life.'

Based on this school's perspective is concluded that a successful provision for pupils with ASDVI is based on the combination of different methods which arises by the effective collaboration between different professionals.

However, it is worth mentioning that this 'model provision' in the school C is provided only where the necessary funding is available; conversely alternative strategies of support are applied. When the vital funding is not available, professionals need to choose not the most reliable intervention but this intervention which each professional is more familiar with from his/her training . Thus, the absence of continuing professional development (CPD) unavoidably creates a 'professional sciolism' where the Teacher of a child with overlapping impairments experiences tremendous difficulties in evaluating a child's behaviour. Especially for children with ASDVI a Teacher's insecurity in interpreting a child's behaviour, creates insecure feelings to the professionals about the efficiency of his/her performance. Regarding this issue the school's A Deputy Head Teacher states:

'Sometimes is extremely difficult for us to interpret a child's behaviour whether arises from child's autism, VI or both. Therefore, often we are giving an object in the child and evaluate afterwards his/her behaviour from his/her reaction.'

It is really important to have a clear understanding of what causes a child's behaviour and choose the most suitable approach. However, most of the Teachers who work with children with ASDVI, appear to develop a 'teaching panacea'

attitude when training limitations, inevitably forcing them to choose not the most effective but the most directly available strategies and interventions .

Conclusions and Recommendations

Children with ASDVI are a heterogeneous group of pupils and each one has unique individual needs. As shown in this study some of these pupils are effectively supported when others seem to get totally inappropriate support. The results of this study suggest that professionals working with this group of children found themselves experiencing problems when they trying to interpret a child's behaviours and choose the appropriate intervention. CPD and funding availability are two areas of concern that consistently emerge from Teachers in relation to the efficacy of their daily basis work with those children. However, the zones of assessment, learning and CPD need to re-configuring their roles alongside with LEAs' and other services' function, in order to improve the provision available.

In addition providers often appear to feel discouraged and frustrated in finding inadequate services, thus the greater challenge lies in creating a delivery service which will be seamless and transparent for everyone. On the other side, LEAs are struggling

with the increasing demand for services that exceed the resources to pay for them, thus funding availability and management needs to move forwards in order to be flexible and diversified in regards to adequately consider the unique needs of children with ASDVI. Furthermore, immediate and proactive steps must be taken from LEAs in order to set some very specific teaching and learning guidelines for the support of children with ASDVI, as well as to identify the specific prevalence of children with ASDVI in each authority.

Therefore, an interesting way to develop study in this area would be to undertake a study of the prevalence of children with autism who have also VI accompanied by a special consideration on the efficacy of current or new interventions for children with ASDVI. Whatever the way forward, the strengthen of the CPD where a comprehensive training program designed to prepare professionals to effectively serve this group of pupils as well as mutual collaboration between professionals, settings and services can help the provision to maximize impact on the lives of children with ASDVI.

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Table 1. Schools' basic characteristics

	School A	School B	School C
Specialization	ASD	VI	SLD
Number of pupils	115	44	25
Age Range	3-12	2-16+	4-19
Children with ASDVI	2	5	7
Teachers' Qualifications	ASD	VI	ASD/VI
Braille Training	No	Yes	No
M&O Training	No	Yes	Yes

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