

Analysing the everyday interactions of autistic students

What might you hear if you listened in on an autistic student's casual conversations and interactions with classmates and teachers? **Gareth D Morewood** and **Devon Drews** reveal how doing so can help school staff to more readily understand the experiences of an autistic child in school and adapt existing interventions accordingly.



It has long been established that speech and language provision, when part of a developmental (educational) need as opposed to a medical (acquired) one, is an educational issue. Indeed many schools offer specific Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) groups as part of their provision^a. However, that aside, how often

do students' conversations in classrooms get observed and language recorded?

How often do we encourage the voices of young people in lessons and structured learning environments? Not just through traditional 'pupil voice' activities^b often used as whole-school tools of 'measurement' for

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supporting school improvement^c and informing teacher delivery, but really listening to students and hearing what they say as part of a daily discourse, post specific intervention? This article considers observations made by Drews, an undergraduate student, during a voluntary extended placement at Priestnall School in the summer of 2011. Observations were made in lessons of students who had received interventions, group work and specialist SALT provision for needs on the autistic spectrum. The purpose was simple - to provide an ethnographic record of discourse between students, and consider some of the broader terms arising from these conversations within an inclusive mainstream setting.

Conversations were recorded and transcribed immediately after each lesson and done so without prescription - each record is simply what happened. This allows unparalleled access into the unstructured conversations of young

people with autism and other peers during regular lessons in a large mainstream secondary school. They captured spontaneous language and behaviours of an autistic child in different subject areas in the mainstream school, with specific considerations to the presence of other students, of a TA and teacher interactions and teaching styles all of

which have potential to impact upon classroom dynamics.

Observations

When considering the data, different themes emerge. These include:

- The use of greetings for initiating and sustaining interactions appropriately and context



- dependently
- The use of humour (both appropriate and inappropriate)
- Information supporting initial ideas about when and why interaction is better when talking about something that interests individuals – this was not always the case
- Noise distractions – of individual students ‘creation’ and from peers/others
- The appropriate use of language and in the correct contexts, situations and environments
- Displaying of specific behaviours, often the altering of the student’s voice when speaking in some situations, acting out a part

Many of these themes will be witnessed in different classrooms across the country. However, for the purposes of these unstructured recordings, in an environment where young people with autism achieve considerable successes^d, this affords the reader a unique opportunity to

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see how young people with autism interact in an accommodating and supportive environment. The 'ethnographic eavesdropping' allows the reader to 'be there' and as a developing methodology, will allow for further, detailed analysis over time.

The 'eavesdropping' begins...

The first sets of observations were in a year 8 maths lesson taught by Morewood. The relationships between the students were well established - many had regular meetings as part of the review of their needs, and a number had been part of the Nurture Group previously.

S is a young man on the autistic spectrum, supported under partnership arrangements with a local special school. The whole school 'saturation model'^e allows S to be part of mainstream classes without dedicated direct support

- the eavesdropping affords a unique perspective of his daily routines.

S sits at the back of the classroom in the corner with another boy facing him - this is his usual seat, always the same, always there ready for him when he arrives. S arrives 5 minutes into lessons after the other students have arrived to avoid the busy corridors.

The classroom dynamics were interesting as S arrives - the rest of the class have just been told off before S enters.

The class had already been given the work and were sat down quietly. S enters the room quietly.

Throughout the lesson when S is completing his work alone and in silence, he doesn't seem to be able to sit still – shaking his legs, hands over his mouth and moving slowly back and forth.

Teacher: Hi.

S: Hi. – responded positively and promptly to greeting of the teacher

During the lesson the teacher comes over and makes an effort to introduce S to the lesson, and tells him what he is expected to do. S began to fidget a lot before he sat down and was holding his leg...

T: How's the leg Mr. S?

S: It's better now, thank you!

The teacher asks S to work in pairs with the boy on his table (this is always the pair S works in), S seems willing and excitable.

Teacher begins to tell S about his weekend – whilst in conversation with S there is good interaction with both talking, but once another student got involved S went quiet.

S responds to his name in the register "yes sir" in a high pitched distinct voice, the teacher mimics it back to him.

T: (Looking at the maths work)

What's an acre?

S: An acre...is an acre. (uttered in a

different voice)

T: Look you've got 3 (correct answers)

S: No 4, no I've got 4.

T: That's a low voice S.

S: It's because I'm growing up.

T: (diverting his attention to another student, T asks them to get on with their work)

S offers encouragement when another pupil says "sir I can't do this", responding with "yes you can" (and making laughing noises afterwards to himself). This re-occurs later in the lesson;

P: Sir, I can't do it.

S: Try again...try....try....try.

S often repeats things; and this is usually part of a positive comment to peers. One of the traits of autistic children is immediate echolalia – this is 'speech that consists of echoing back what the child has just heard'^f. Although echolalia is seen

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in almost all typically developing children at a young age, it remains with autistic children. Echolalia is used by some children due to a lack of comprehension of what is being said or asked of them, Siegel continues. This adopted or learned technique gives children with autism who may be experiencing poor comprehension of language a chance

to digest meaning.

There are also several instances where S enjoys using different voices, not necessarily as acting out a part for a play, but higher pitched voices and very low ones, Siegel comments that 'almost all autistic children with spoken language have an atypical tone of voice'. Often the presence of this atypical tone of voice is due to a lack

of comprehension of the additional emotional meaning that the tone affixes to language and so is over used inappropriately. Siegel proposed it as it being like a child having to deal with two languages, a language of intonation and a language of content.

For S, these voices are always spoken with a smile and 'cheeky' persona. S has a good understanding of the reactions he gets when adopting these different voices. These routines are often witnessed, and form the everyday routines with regard to communication and interaction for S in lessons and at home. Although this characteristic was unique to S, none of the other students responded to it, demonstrating a common acceptance within the class and among his peers.

Back in the classroom, S burps and the teacher's attention is drawn towards him and away from the rest of the class...

T: Mr. S! [Said by the teacher in a

tone that implies socially the idea of a response or apology]

S: Sorry (again in a distinct high pitched voice), if I don't, you know what will happen, I will get constipated ...and be sick!

Although other students from behind S are becoming distracted and beginning to distract the rest of the class, S completely ignores it and doesn't even turn around to see what's going on.

Two other students begin to argue over whose work is the best - S initiates communication and interrupts settling it by suggesting "there is no best, no there isn't, no...no....no...no" (again repeating the words several times).

It appears that some of the other children in the class bounce off each other, with lots of verbal communication, but S doesn't participate. He continues to work quietly and interject when he feels the need.



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A lot of tension is flying around the room - the class is excitable and arousal levels began to increase. Other children begin to join in but S doesn't react and isn't interested. S catches the teacher's view and begins to pull faces in response to the T saying: "I don't think anyone can do it" (talking about the worksheet).

The teacher comes over to the table on various occasions to encourage communication/interact between them.

T: Begins to tell them both a story about the Muppets.

S: Don't you like the Muppets, G (another student)?

G: No I don't (this was the first direct interaction between the two boys halfway through the one hour lesson).

Another student, P, makes a comment about the Teacher's happiness.

Defensively, S joins in:

P: Sir, you're never in a good mood.

S: You are in a very good mood most of the time.

G: Mumbles an utterance to S (but there is no further response to G)

S: Hey, you know what sir, you're happy one trillionth One billionth of a trillionth.

T: Does that mean all of the time?

S: Yes.

T: Thanks. (T shakes the hand of S as a formal acceptance of the comment)

As the conversation begins to develop and more pupils begin to participate in the interaction, S again withdraws himself from the conversation.

A Teaching Assistant comes over and begins to ask S questions, he doesn't take much interest and after a short while the TA walks away and leaves S and G interacting in conversation together.

Throughout the duration of the lesson when S is working independently, he tended to make noises and put his hands over his mouth on more than one occasion.

For example going "D...D...D... D...D..."

The developing conversations and interactions between S and G show that in reducing the stress and anxiety related elements of the lesson, both students, after some time, felt able to interact as well as maintain acceptable work levels. It was interesting to note however, that it was half an hour into the session before S began interacting with any other students and it was only once a topic had been established by the teacher that S engaged in interaction. Wing and Gould⁶ suggested that children with autism could be categorised according to social impairment classifications. One of these he labelled 'the passive group' in which a child does not actively avoid contact but nor do they do anything to initiate contact/interaction with others. Research frequently suggests that complex social behaviours - such as initiating conversation - are typically poor for children with a diagnosis of

autism^h, though some research does suggest that implementing (Pivotal response training) PRT has been highly effective in increasing complex social behaviours including initiations. PRT is the process in which peers or others working around and with the child are trained to implement strategies, incorporate modelling, role playing, and didactic instructions in order to promote motivation and generalisation in children with autism. Therefore, for a child like S being in mainstream school – where his peers have the potential to learn specific techniques which can potentially enhance his social skills – gives him the best opportunity to integrate like other 'normal' children in his class.

By educating peer groups with regard to understanding and tolerance, young people with autism can be allowed an opportunity to interact positively, consequently reducing anxiety and isolation which can damage an individual's sense of self. A sense of acceptance, like that

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adopted with S in these observations, can encourage growth and given time, can enable him/her to contribute to the community which he/she is part of. Inclusion in its truest sense, perhaps?

This demonstrates a key element of the model established at the school - not overreacting to 'off-task' conversations and attempting to 'fit' students into prescribed learning methodology, but allowing flexibility in the accepted levels of communication and interaction whilst affording an appropriate and personal balance between academic and social outcomes.

The lesson continued: Teacher made a joke to S and although it took him a while to respond, he did find it funny despite the majority of the children telling the T it wasn't funny. S commented: "It was funny".

The TA approached S and G again...

TA: How are you doing?

S: Ok.

TA: Are you cheating?

S: Yes, I do like cheating.

TA: Why do you like it?

S: Because it's fun.

There was a clear sense of humour as 'acceptable' off-task behaviour during the observations. Humour exchanges are a vital element in the social development of children in everyday

life, a means of communicating emotion and opinions. Interesting to note that despite research proposing individuals with autism and aspergers syndrome do not understand humour^j, S demonstrates an ability to adopt ironic humour, such as teasing and sarcasm. The ability to share this humour with others, as S does with both the teacher and G,

has been linked with the possibility of constructive impacts of continual positive reinforcement^k. Werth et al similarly linked humour as a successful intervention for managing behaviour and aggression in particular analysis of autistic cases.

Initial conclusions

This small overview of the use of 'ethnographic eavesdropping' provides an interesting new approach that could be used by school staff to better understand the needs of and lived reality of students with autism. Analysis and reflection on the normal day to day interactions between students with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) and their peers, as well as between students with autism and their teacher, can tell us much about the development of key social communication skills, as well as the application and transferral of taught concepts relating to social communication skills into everyday communications. This is much more



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effectively analysed through day to day interactions, than through analysis of concept mastery within intervention groups alone.

Acceptance of individual traits and understanding of effective approaches that work with particular individuals emerged as a key finding of this small scale research. This is central to the development of truly inclusive school environments rather than contexts which simply serve to integrate students into 'one size fits all' norms and expectations.

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