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Autism: Equal Opportunities and Inclusive Practice

Introduction

Sage (2004) states that autism was identified by Leo Kanner in 1940s. The National Autistic Society (NAS) (2017) suggest there are three main areas of difficulties known as the triad of impairments. Which include difficulties with social communication, social interaction, and social imagination creating daily barriers for children with Autism. Peer and Reid (2012) emphases that the field of special educational needs has undergone significant changes over the last quarter of a century. In addition to the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice Wales (2002) which provides practical advice as well as statutory duties to ensure an effective provision for children with special educational needs (Welsh Government, 2017a). However, Donaldson's (2015) Successful Futures report and A curriculum for Wales- a curriculum for life report (2015) also emphasises that the curriculum is somewhat dated and needs to be changed in order for successful futures for all children. The report aims to do this by underpinning the curriculum by;

- Working in partnership
- Strong school to school working
- Inspiring leadership
- And inclusivity

Inclusion

Foley and Leverett (2008) describe inclusion as recognising that children are people who know things too, suggesting that listening and co-constructing is crucial to inclusive practice contributing to children's social, emotional and mental wellbeing. However, Tutt (2007) states that the Strategy, Removing Barriers to Achievement 2004 debated on clarification of the meaning of inclusion and considered that inclusion does not mean including all pupils in mainstream school but including all schools with an inclusive educational system. Additionally, Play Wales (no date) states that the Seven Core Aims of Wales utilises the UNCRC to underpin priorities and objectives within Wales. With a particular focus on article 23 that children who have any disability should receive care and support in order to lead a full and independent lives. This highlights that children's rights are widely considered and all children should have equal opportunities.

Strategy 1

Source: Google images, (2018)

Social Stories are a method of communication for children with autism and can be used with parents and professionals supporting the child. NAS (2017b) describe Social Stories as short descriptions of a particular situation with specific information about what to expect and why. Enabling children to develop self-help skills, help understand their own and others behaviours, support transitions, provide positive feedback as well as being used as a behavioural support strategy. According to NICE (2013) Children with autism often have difficulties in social communication and behaviours as well as cognitive, learning, language, medical, emotional and behavioural issues. Collins and Foley (2008) emphasis that children with autism have extreme difficulties with social functioning including social communication, social understanding and imagination. According to NAS (2017b) that Social Stories can be tailored to cover a specific event or activity providing clear and precise information and the reasons why. Which may enable children to obtain the knowledge and understanding to make sense of events and activities going on around them. However, according to NAS (2018) that due to limited quality research on Social Stories it is not yet possible to review the impact. Similarly, Chan and O'Reilly (2008) suggest that there is minimum numbers of controlled studies to evaluate the effectiveness of Social Stories.

Strategy 2

Source: Google images, (2018a)

The second strategy chosen is Picture Exchange Communication System commonly referred to as PECS. According to Bogdashina (2005) that there are advantages of using the PECS in comparison to other pictorial systems as the child is taught intentional interaction which is meaningful from the beginning. Pour-Ismaili et al. (2010) conducted research using PECS and speech therapy and found that children who had used the PECS had increased listening, language, cognitive and social communication skills in comparison to speech therapy. Similarly, Charlop-Christy et al. (2002) reported that autistic children can quickly obtain the skills to use PEC's effectively, which increases social communication and decreases challenging behaviours.

Barriers, Equal Opportunities and Inclusive Practice

Communication

According to Rahn (2017) that by using an effective communication tool to enable children to voice what it is they want or need will limit communication barriers. Additionally, Soomro and Soomro (2018) found that children with autism using a PECS app enabled children to better communicate with others. By providing children with an interactive app may mean that children with autism maybe able to improve communication.

Behaviour

NAS (2017a) suggests that challenging behaviours can be referred to behaviours that create barriers for children to engage and patriciate within the classroom. Charlop et al. (2002) research suggests that PECS decreases challenging behaviours and improves social behaviours. Thiemann and Goldstein (2001) conducted research on Social Stories and peer interaction the evidence suggested that Social Stories enabled autistic children to engage with peers. Cutting (2015) emphasises that schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to school policies to ensure children with any form of disability can participate fully in school life. In addition to this the Equality Act (2010) places a duty to ensure equal opportunities regardless of protected characteristics. Therefore, it is important to consider managing behaviour policies that should be tailored to consider individual needs not a mainstream approach to ensure equal inclusive opportunities for children and reflect achievable and realistic expectations.

Environment

The learning environment can also be a barrier for children with autism, Davidson's (2010) study found that through listening and observing children with autism that it is possible to limit barriers for example colours, lights and noise. Therefore, suggesting if staff have the opportunity to consider the environment may support inclusion as less opportunities for challenging behaviour to arise. NICE (2013) suggests that changes to children's environments are managed by limiting the effects of change on the child. It could be argued that social stories could be used to ensure inclusive practice. According to Maslow's Hierarchy (1954) in order for learning to take place then children need to be in an environment that meets their basic needs this includes being in an environment that is safe and secure whilst also appealing to inspire motivation and curiosity.

Brodzeller et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of routines and structure and suggested that an environment combined with visual aids and strategies enables autistic children to thrive.

Training

According to OECD, (2017) the Welsh Education Reform Journey that Wales is committed to providing high-quality and inclusive education and is strengthening processes by reforming high-quality teaching development. Furthermore, 'ALN Transformation Programme' Welsh Government (2018b) focuses on training for professionals, to ensure that effective support for children with ALN. However, Gasper (2010) emphasises barriers practitioners face to training such as time constraints, funding issues, staffing restrictions and lack of resources.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident there are many barriers and disadvantages that children with autism can face. However, the UNCRC (2010) embeds children's rights within policy and practice and Successful Futures report (2015) considers that schools should actively motivate and encourage children to participate through inclusive practice and high quality staff and training.

Furthermore, it is apparent through the use of effective strategies such as PECS, Social Stories, policies and legislations such as the SEN code of practice Wales (2002) and the Equality Act (2010) can support inclusive practice for children to receive equal opportunities regardless of disability.

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