Voice of the Child - An Investigation into the Social Inclusion of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Mainstream Primary Settings

Inclusion has become an integral component of special education in recent years. However, challenges persist in assessing outcomes of the inclusion process, particularly the social outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This article is based on a study which investigated the social inclusion of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who were fully enrolled in mainstream Irish primary settings, using the perspectives of children with ASD and their peers. Social acceptance and rejection of children with ASD were measured using the Social Inclusion Survey. The Guess Who measure was also used to identify behavioural descriptors associated with peer acceptance and rejection. Findings showed that children with ASD do not experience the same levels of social inclusion as their typically developing peers. In addition, low levels of 'pro-social' cooperative behaviours and high levels of 'costly' shy, help-seeking and disruptive behaviours were identified as barriers to inclusion for these children. It is hoped that an identification of behaviours associated with social acceptance and rejection will help inform social interventions for children with ASD in mainstream schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterised by impairments in social and emotional understanding and deficits in communication and in flexibility in thinking and behaviour (APA, 2004; Jordan, 2005). Children with ASD are not a homogenous group and they comprise distinct individual learners (Guldberg et al., 2011). However, due to the nature of their difficulties one of the greatest challenges for an individual with ASD is navigating the social world. School can be the source of both challenges and opportunities for developing social skills and peer relationships for children with ASD. Therefore, goals such as social attainment must be prioritised for these children in school settings.

In Ireland, a key policy promoting change in special education was the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act. This document brought inclusion to the fore, advocating an inclusive education for all children with SEN (EPSEN, 2004). While there are many explanations of inclusion in the literature, there is no explicit definition provided in either the Education Act (1998) or the EPSEN Act (2004). However, it is clear that the aim of inclusion is to enable all children to participate in an educational community that values their uniqueness (Knight, 1999). Boutot defines social inclusion as 'the concept and goal of promoting and maintaining acceptance and friendships for children with ASD within the general education classroom' (2007, p. 156). Currently in our education system, children with SEN are predominantly enrolled in mainstream settings (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). However, placing children with SEN in mainstream settings with their typically developing peers does not guarantee inclusion and friendships (Boutot, 2007).

A report identifying barriers to inclusion for children with SEN in mainstream schools highlighted the need to produce empirical evidence on effective inclusive school policies and classroom practices in Ireland (Travers et al., 2010). In order to assess the effectiveness of inclusive initiatives, both the academic and social achievement of children must be assessed. Indeed in England, where inclusion has been part of legislative policy for decades, the Office for Standards in Education (2004) reported that outcomes of social inclusion were poorly monitored and assessed by schools, with no systematic assessment tool in place (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). The Department of Education and Science (DES) (2007a) guidelines state that "an inclusive school is characterised by a continuous process of development and self-evaluation with a view to eliminating barriers to the participation of all students in the catchment area" (DES, 2007a, p.9). This is the challenge facing Irish schools today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to determine the effectiveness of inclusive practices, the academic and social outcomes for children with SEN enrolled in mainstream schools must be assessed. Previous research has indicated that friendships and a sense of belonging play an important role in the success of inclusive outcomes for children with ASD (Balfe and Travers, 2011; Prunty, Dupont and McDaid, 2012). Social acceptance has also been shown to be crucial for developing interpersonal skills and a sense of self in relation to others (Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). However, maintaining and building friendships requires a variety of interpersonal skills which may prove particularly challenging for children with ASD and can affect their social relationships with others.

Social Acceptance of Children with ASD in Mainstream Schools

Prior research suggests that children with ASD are more likely to experience exclusion at school than their peers or pupils with other types of SEN (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000). A study conducted by Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller (2007) investigated the involvement of children with ASD in mainstream primary classes. Participants included 398 children attending second to fifth grade classes, 17 of whom had a diagnosis of ASD. Each participant completed a written survey which assessed friendship nominations and reciprocity, friendship qualities, peer acceptance, social networks and loneliness. Results showed that children with ASD reported lower peer acceptance, companionship and friendship reciprocity than their peers (Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). The findings from the study showed that while children with ASD were present in the mainstream class, they were not experiencing a wholly inclusive environment.

Voice of the Child

The perspective of the individual child is a critical factor when evaluating the effectiveness of inclusion (Norwich and Kelly, 2004). The views of 38 pupils with SEN attending special or mainstream classes on their school experiences were explored by Prunty, Dupont and McDaid (2012) using focus groups and interviews. Friendship was a prominent theme across many students' accounts and it appeared to impact significantly on their enjoyment of school. In this study, children identified spending time with friends and engaging in activities with them as important factors in school life. These findings are supported by research conducted by Balfe and Travers (2011) which investigated the views of 191 students including children with SEN from six schools on what makes them feel included in school. Findings showed that playing games with peers, being included in activities and friendships were all viewed as very important by the children.

Role of Peers in the Social Inclusion of Children with ASD

Peers appear to play a significant role in the social inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education. A study by Jones and Frederickson (2010) used the perspectives of peers to examine behavioural characteristics predictive of successful social inclusion for children with ASD in mainstream settings. The Social Inclusion Survey (SIS) was used to measure classmates' willingness to associate with their peers with ASD and the Guess Who Social Behaviour and Bullying Measure was also used to gain an insight into children's perceptions of their peers with ASD (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). In the study, peers rated children with ASD significantly more often as classmates with whom they would prefer not to work. The Guess Who measure completed by peers reported that students with ASD were more likely to be described as help-seeking and shy and less likely to be described as co-operative (Jones and Frederickson, 2010).

Social Inclusion and the Social Exchange Theory

Jones and Frederickson (2010) suggest that the relationship between behavioural descriptors and the social rejection of children with ASD may be linked to the Social Exchange Theory which was illuminated as far back as 1959 by Thibaut and Kelly. This theory explains motivation for affiliation with other individuals in relation to the perceived costs and benefits of interacting with them. According to the theory, children will be more likely to associate with others when the benefits of interacting with them, for example enjoyment, access to resources, feeling good about oneself and receiving praise from adults, all outweigh the costs (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). Research by Frederickson and Furnham (2004) investigated the sociometric status and peer assessed behavioural descriptors of pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and their peers. Their study found that children who experienced the greatest social acceptance displayed the highest scores for cooperation which could be termed a 'benefit' behaviour and lowest scores for disruptive and help-seeking behaviours which could be termed 'costly' behaviours. Pupils who were socially rejected displayed an opposite pattern of behaviours (Frederickson and Furnham, 2004). At present, there are little systematic measures available for teachers to assess the social development and levels of acceptance experienced by children in their class. This study seeks to investigate and evaluate the levels of social inclusion experienced by children with ASD in Irish mainstream primary schools with the aim of improving social outcomes for these children in primary education.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection comprised two quantitative surveys: the SIS and the Guess Who Behaviour and Bullying Measure. Both surveys were completed by 371 students from first to sixth class attending two urban and two rural mainstream primary schools in Ireland. 25 of the participants comprised high-functioning male students with a diagnosis of ASD between the ages of seven and 13. A control group consisting of 40 male pupils matched in age and class level was then selected. The remaining 306 male and female typically developing peers also completed the surveys. An analysis of the measures completed by all participants was conducted for the group of 25 students with ASD and a control group of 40 male typically developing peers only. Participants were chosen by convenience sampling - from one base school and three schools known to the researcher, for ease of data collection. Purposive sampling was also used to ensure that a sufficient number of children with ASD participated.

Measures

The SIS comprising two questionnaires was used to assess the social status of children with ASD (Frederickson and Graham, 1999). The two groups of children

(children with ASD and their peers) completed the Like to Play (LTOP) and Like to Work (LTOW) questionnaires. The questionnaires had a list of classmates' names on one side and opposite each name, participants had to choose from one of four options indicating their preference to work or play with that classmate. The number of smiling, sad and neutral faces were tallied, entered individually and then totalled for pupils with ASD and for the control group. Social status was then assessed using a Forced Choice Probability (FCP) method. This FCP technique assumes that three choices given, either the positive, neutral or negative choice are equally likely to be assigned. The FCP method uses a criterion probability level of .05 because this ensures that for the range of participants in the study, the cut off scores represent the predominant response of the group which is operationalised as more than half of the choices received in the three categories (Frederickson and Graham, 1999). These cut off scores were used to determine the social acceptance/rejection of children with ASD in this study. Where the total number of smiling/sad faces equalled or exceeded the cut-off score, the pupil was described as being popular/rejected with the group concerned. This coding scheme was used to determine the social acceptance or rejection of children with ASD by their peers in mainstream schools.

The same two groups completed the Guess Who Social Behaviour and Bullying Measure. In this measure, all children were asked to identify anyone in their class who fitted each of the behavioural descriptors – co-operates, disrupts, shy, fights and seeks help. Data from this questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using a coding system designed by Norah Frederickson (Frederickson and Jones, 1999). The number of times a pupil's name was ticked for each behavioural descriptor by the whole group was calculated for each pupil and this figure was then divided by the number of pupils present in the group (Frederickson and Jones, 1999). This gave the proportion of peers who nominated each pupil as fitting specific behavioural descriptors.

Ethical Issues
This child-centred research was carried out with ethical intent and with the full informed consent of the participating schools and their Boards of Management. Each questionnaire contained a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, what was involved and the role of the participant which was read aloud to them by the researcher. All participants had an opportunity to ask the researcher questions and they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. Written consent was obtained from all participants and parental consent was also sought and received before questionnaires were completed. All participants placed their completed questionnaires in a sealed box in the room to ensure anonymity and each group

was debriefed after the study. In addition, the researcher provided participants with the opportunity to discuss any issues they had in relation to the study in confidence during the following two weeks. All questionnaire transcripts were stored in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator.

FINDINGS

Social Inclusion Survey

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for students with ASD and comparison students on social acceptance and rejection measures from the SIS. Social acceptance/ rejection of children with ASD was analysed by tallying the number of smiling, sad and neutral faces which were entered for each child by their same sex peers and the whole class group. Cut off scores with a criterion probability level of .05 were used to determine social acceptance and rejection. Results showed that children with ASD experienced significantly lower levels of social acceptance and higher levels of social rejection than the comparison group on both the LTOP and LTOW questionnaires.

Table 1: The results of the SIS for children with ASD and the comparison group

	Students with ASD n=25			Control Group n=40		
Like to Play	**Accepted**	**Rejected**	**Neutral**	**Accepted**	**Rejected**	**Neutral**
Same Sex	3 (0.12)	4 (0.16)	18 (0.72)	21 (0.53)	0 (0)	19 (0.48)
Whole Group	1 (0.04)	4 (0.16)	20 (0.8)	18 (0.45)	0 (0)	22 (0.55)
Like to Work	**Accepted**	**Rejected**	**Neutral**	**Accepted**	**Rejected**	**Neutral**
Same Sex	2 (0.08)	3 (0.12)	20 (0.8)	24 (0.6)	0 (0)	16 (0.4)
Whole Group	2 (0.08)	3 (0.12)	20 (0.8)	24 (0.6)	0 (0)	16 (0.4)

Relationship between social acceptance and rejection (SIS) and Guess Who behavioural descriptors

Table 2 shows the relationship between social acceptance and rejection and different behavioural descriptors which was investigated using Spearmans product-moment correlation coefficient. The relationship between the coefficients was deemed statistically significant when the p value was less than .05. Findings revealed the presence of a significant large positive correlation between social

acceptance and cooperative behaviours, indicating that cooperative behaviour was associated with greater social acceptance. It also showed a significant medium negative correlation between social acceptance and shy behaviours suggesting that this behaviour led to less social acceptance among peers. In addition, there was a small non-significant negative correlation between social acceptance and the descriptors: disrupts, fights and seeks help.

Results showed the presence of a significant medium negative correlation between social rejection and cooperative behaviour, suggesting that cooperative behaviour led to less social rejection. In addition, there was a medium positive correlation between social rejection and disruptive behaviour, with this relationship approaching statistical significance. Results also showed a small non-significant positive correlation between social rejection and fighting, shy an and help-seeking behaviours.

Table 2: The relationships between social acceptance/rejection and behavioural descriptors

Variables	Spearmans Product-Moment		
	Correlations		Significance
The relationship between social acceptance and cooperative behaviour	r = .510	n=65	p = .000
The relationship between social acceptance and disruptive behaviour	r = -.146	n=65	p = .245
The relationship between social acceptance and shy behaviour	r = -.359	n=65	p = .003
The relationship between social acceptance and fighting behaviour	r = -.023	n=65	p = .857
The relationship between social acceptance and help-seeking behaviour	r = -.097	n=65	p = .443
The relationship between social rejection and cooperative behaviour	r = -.429	n=65	p = .000
The relationship between social rejection and disruptive behaviour	r = .337	n=65	p = .006
The relationship between social rejection and shy behaviour	r = .249	n=65	p = .045
The relationship between social rejection and fighting behaviour	r = .087	n=65	p = .49
The relationship between social rejection and help-seeking behaviour	r = .009	n=65	p = .942

It must be noted that the presence of a correlation does not mean that these descriptors cause social acceptance or rejection. Therefore, in order to test the effects of peer rated behavioural measures on social acceptance and rejection, multiple regression analyses were conducted. This analysis assessed the link between social acceptance/rejection and five peer-rated descriptors in the Guess Who as well as the presence of ASD in the children surveyed.

Behavioural Predictors of Social Acceptance/Rejection
The correlations of the variables are shown in Table 3. The prediction model was statistically significant, (F (6, 58) = 8.036, P<.001) and accounted for approximately 40% of the variance of social acceptance. ($R2 = .454$, Adjusted $R2$ = .397). Social acceptance was primarily predicted by cooperative behaviour, with high levels of this behaviour predicting greater levels of social acceptance. The remaining variables were not shown to contribute uniquely to social acceptance, while group status was the second greatest predictor of social acceptance.

Table 3: Multiple regression analyses predicting social acceptance/rejection by peer-ratings of behaviour (Guess Who)

		Beta	T	F change (df)	R squared change	Significance
Social Acceptance				8.036 (6,58)	.397	P = .000
	Cooperates	.382	3.466			P = .001
	Disrupts	-.181	-1.216			P = .229
	Shy	-.065	-.509			P = .613
	Fights	.140	.971			P = .336
	Seeks Help	-.001	-.005			P = .996
	Group Status	*-.372*	*-2.834*			*P = .006*
		Beta	T	F change (df)	R squared change	Significance
Social Rejection				7.113 (6, 58)	.364	P = .000
	Cooperates	-.227	-2.005			P = .050
	Disrupts	.258	1.688			P = .097
	Shy	.069	.525			P = .602
	Fights	.135	.911			P = .366
	Seeks Help	.072	.571			P = .570
	Group Status	*.201*	*1.490*			*P = .142*

The correlations of the variables for social rejection are also illustrated in Table 3. The prediction model was statistically significant, $(F_{(6, 58)} = 7.113, P<.001)$ and accounted for approximately 36% of the variance of social rejection. (R^2 = .424, Adjusted R^2 = .364). Social rejection was primarily predicted by disruptive behaviour, with high levels of disruptive behaviour predicting greater social rejection. However, none of the variables contributed uniquely to social rejection. The second highest factor to contribute to the social rejection of the child was cooperative behaviours (See Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Children with ASD are not as Socially Accepted as their Peers

This research found that children with ASD who participated in the study did not experience levels of social acceptance on par with their typically developing peers. Results from the SIS showed that the majority of children with ASD were rated as average, suggesting that their peers felt indifference to working or playing with them. These children also received higher rejection ratings than their classmates (See Table 1). The contrast in acceptance levels for children with ASD and their peers is consistent with previous research which found that this group is more likely to experience lower peer acceptance and friendship reciprocity at school than their classmates (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000; Chamberlain Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2006). These findings lend strong credence to Boutot's (2007) statement that placing children in mainstream settings with their peers does not in itself guarantee inclusion and friendships.

Barriers to Social Inclusion – Within Child Factors

Low levels of 'Pro-social' Behaviours
Statistical analyses revealed the presence of a large significant positive relationship between cooperative behaviour and social acceptance, indicating that high levels of these behaviours were associated with greater social acceptance (See Table 2). This finding supports previous research linking social inclusion and the social exchange theory, which explained that peer acceptance was associated with positive social behaviours while peer rejection was associated with the opposite (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). According to this theory, the lower ratings of acceptance and higher ratings of rejection received by children with ASD relates to the perceived social costs for peers of associating with uncooperative pupils (Frederickson and Furnham 2004; Jones and Frederickson 2010).

High Levels of 'Costly' Behaviours
Children with ASD received higher nominations than the comparison groups for shy and help seeking behaviours which could be termed 'costly' behaviours. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Jones and Frederickson (2010). Interestingly, there was only a small non-significant negative correlation between social acceptance and help seeking behaviours, despite children with ASD receiving high nominations for this behaviour. The lack of a relationship could be attributed to the level of support being provided to pupils with ASD (Frederickson and Furnham, 2004). If the level of support provided by teachers or an SNA is high, it may be sufficient to meet the higher demands for help from the pupil with ASD, as well as offering support to other pupils who are working with them. Thus, there is no social cost to working with children who require additional help and this does not affect their levels of peer social acceptance. Results from regression analyses suggest that it is highly likely that it not one unique 'costly' behaviour causing lower peer acceptance of children with ASD but rather an interaction of many traits (See Table 3). Yet again, the perceptions of peers play a crucial role in their response to children with ASD. Classmates may be more responsive to appeals for support if the behaviour of the target pupil suggests that they are deserving of this help. Therefore, while shy and help-seeking behaviours may be inherent in the child with ASD, peer training focusing on pupil strengths and empathy training can encourage support for these students, leading to higher social acceptance by peers.

CONCLUSION

Limitations
The primary limitation of the study is the method of sampling with participants chosen by convenience and purposive means. There is also a possibility that participants may have responded with a response set as they were aware the researcher was a teacher. Despite these limitations, the research has derived some interesting findings which apply to the social inclusion of children with ASD in the Irish educational context.

Implications of Findings
The lack of social acceptance experienced by children with ASD is a cause for concern, particularly as many of these children are currently participating fully in mainstream settings across Ireland. From these findings, it is clear that schools need to adopt stringent assessment procedures to measure the social progress and outcomes for children, particularly those who are vulnerable such as children with

ASD. Without these assessments and subsequent interventions, children with ASD will continue to participate on the periphery of the mainstream class and they will hold a negative experience of friendships from a young age. Furthermore, it is of pivotal importance that interventions at primary level target the social relationships between children with ASD and their peers early in primary school. Cooperative learning groups and explicit training of social skills have shown to improve social outcomes for children with ASD. Moreover, evidence has shown that a more tolerant attitude by peers is crucial in eliminating barriers to inclusion for this group. In order to maximise the effectiveness of social interventions, a wider approach encompassing not only the child with ASD but their peers too must be used and these interventions need to be extended to the mainstream class. The voice of the child was shown to be a powerful assessment tool in assessing social progress and this measure should be used more often to explore the child's social experiences in school.

The study presents strong evidence that certain types of behaviours exhibited by children with ASD impact on their social acceptance by peers. Low levels of cooperation and high levels of shy, help-seeking and disruptive behaviours can all act as barriers to inclusion. While it is possible that some of these traits are inherent in the child with ASD, social training has shown to target undesirable behaviours and improve social skills in children with ASD. One such example is cooperative learning activities. This strategy could be implemented in the mainstream class to help children with ASD in a less obtrusive manner, while also developing their social relationships with classmates. Cooperative behaviour is also highlighted as a unique contributor to social acceptance in this research. It is important that children with ASD are taught to comply with classroom routines and consequently high levels of cooperative behaviours could balance the other 'costly' behaviours, leading to increased willingness by peers to associate with these children. Findings from this study support key elements of the social exchange theory, where children are shown to associate with their peers only if there are benefits and no social costs attached to doing so. Peers need to be made aware of the challenges which their classmates with ASD face and this awareness may encourage a more inclusive and tolerant attitude towards these children. Finally, positive social relationships between peers should be acknowledged and rewarded by school staff.

Children with ASD perceive the details of their environment in a different way to their typically developing peers. In the same way, it is unrealistic to expect that children without ASD can even begin to imagine the world through the eyes of children with ASD. However, schools can educate their pupils about ASD and allow all children to participate in social interventions as part of a school inclusion

programme. This has the potential to enhance the perception of all pupils in the mainstream setting, encouraging them to embrace difference and fostering a more inclusive environment in mainstream classrooms.

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