

## Research note

# Parents and Educators Working as an Action Research Team

by Britt Edwards ([brittedi@hotmail.com](mailto:brittedi@hotmail.com))

## Contextualization

This paper summarises the key elements of an action research project that is currently being undertaken in the field of education. The study considers views held by special educators and is also informed by the psychology, medicine and social work fields as it delves into characteristics of autism spectrum disorders, behaviour management approaches, autism interventions and parent support services.

This research shifts away from the traditional research approaches of psychologists and educators who study autism intervention approaches. Traditional research in this area tends to be quantitative and statistical in nature which is in line with the medical model of disability that is predominant. Instead this research is framed by a social model of disability and employs qualitative, participant action research methods to not only gather data but also assist the parent participants to implement effective behaviour management practices at home.

The researcher has experience in the field of special education and values the role of parents in developing intervention approaches that are used to teach children with autism. A focus on professionals and in particular teachers, empowering parents through assisting them to reflect, problem solve and enact change in regard to the behaviour of children with autism, is pivotal to this work.

**Abstract:** *This article introduces a new PhD participatory action research project. An outline of the contributions intended to be made by this study are highlighted and an overview of the research methodology is explained. A school based approach that encourages positive social behaviour of children with autism is the key component of the research, where parents and educators join forces to problem-solve behaviour issues in the home. The behaviour intervention approach that is used offers a practical and naturalistic way of teaching students appropriate behaviour. This article details the research model which includes parent and educator collaboration and is unique as it contributes 'insider' perspectives. This qualitative study allows an educator who has been diagnosed with high functioning autism and parents of children with autism an opportunity to voice their concerns, understandings and successes in regard to behaviour management.*

## Introduction

The research project *From School to Home: Behaviour Management Strategies for Parents, Carers and Educators of Students with Autism*, employs a participant action research group design. It is aimed at investigating how the behaviour management strategies used at Barwon Valley School can be successfully used by parents of children with autism. The school is in the regional city of Geelong, in Victoria, Australia and is a school for children with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. This research allows staff and parents from the school to share effective and practical strategies in managing the behaviour of children with autism. The need for this research was identified by staff at the school who were concerned about the lack of resources available for parents of children with autism. Staff saw an outstanding need for teachers at the school to share their knowledge of autism and the school based approach to behaviour that works so well in the classroom. This approach was

developed in consultation with a behaviour consultant and educator, Jim Crawford, who has years of experience working with children and adolescents who have autism. Jim has himself been diagnosed with high functioning autism and has offered crucial insights into autism that have made the approach such a success.

## **The Research Approach**

A participatory action research approach was chosen as it allows participants to work collaboratively to problem-solve behaviours of children with autism that are proving problematic for parents. Participatory action research is when concerned parties come together to examine current practices that are problematic in an attempt to make improvements (Wadsworth, 1998). An action research approach provides the flexibility to trial ideas and modify the direction of the study. These elements are pivotal in allowing parents to develop their understandings of autism and seek the guidance they individually and collectively require to assist their child. As noted by Reason and Bradbury (2002), a capacity of action research is the ability to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives and thus create new forms of understanding. In addition, participatory action research makes use of co-researchers, who in this study are the parents, teachers and behaviour consultant. These co-researchers work in conjunction with the university researcher and actively participate and shape the university researcher's understandings and interpretations of the concepts unearthed during the research process.

In working together the action research participants will reflect on the behaviour of the children with autism in the group and the management practices used with them. The process of identifying behaviour, analysing behaviour, assigning strategies, implementing strategies, modifying strategies and reflecting on the success of strategies and changes in behaviour make up the main components of the study for parents. Teachers will be involved in analysing behaviour, developing recommendations and at times providing additional assistance to parents in modelling strategies or seeking support from therapists or other school staff if required. Jim's role as an educator, behaviour consultant and someone with autism will be to add his own distinctive understanding of the behaviour of the children in the group. Jim will also be involved in providing insight for parents and teachers about behaviour and autism more generally that can assist with understanding the behaviour, and with identifying and refining strategies for parent use. Parents and teachers will provide their personal interpretations and analysis of the research process for the researcher to analyse once the process is complete.

## **The Need for the Research**

This research is innovative as, traditionally, research involving parents of children with autism has been primarily informed by scientific quantitative data and formal, standardised assessments (Bretton and Tonge, 2005; Bromley *et al*, 2004; Lecavalier *et al*, 2006). Instead, this research seeks to invite parents to share their personal understandings and experiences of implementing the behaviour management approach suggested and reflections of the research group format. A deliberate move away from the standardised psychological assessments of child behaviour and parental stress has been taken. The data collection techniques employed in this study have been used in an effort to minimise the time required of parents. This avoids requiring parents to spend hours completing formal assessments that would not particularly inform the researcher of whether the behaviour management strategies were helpful. The forms allow parents to voice their opinions and express ideas in a more informal, user friendly manner with questions posed in language that is easy to understand and prompts reflection.

The importance of this research lies both in the format of the research process, which enables collaboration between parents and educators in valid research, and the approach to

managing the behaviour of children with autism that is being communicated to parents. The use of teachers of children with autism to assist parents is not used widely as a formal intervention approach to autism, if at all. The involvement of Jim Crawford in the group, a teacher, expert in behaviour management and person who is autistic, is also a key element of the research. The contribution of people with autism in research acting as co-researchers is ground-breaking and will challenge the current practices of researchers in the field. Another endorsement for the research is the manner in which problems with the current services that are provided for children with autism and their families will be addressed through this work. The study will demonstrate a model that assists both children with autism and their parents in a distinctive way. The majority of services currently available for children with autism are difficult to access due to demand and expense. In addition, being clinical, they are impractical and are not conducted in the home or school environment where children spend most of their time. This work will provide a means of addressing the deficits noted in the current services provided.

A broad justification for this research being conducted in the manner detailed above is the consideration of the disempowerment that has plagued and continues to plague parents and children with autism. Dowling and Dolan (2001) report on a qualitative study that confirmed that the whole family of child with a disability suffers from unequal opportunities and outcomes. This disempowerment comes as a result of professionals not clearly communicating crucial knowledge about autism and effective interventions. Professionals have privileged access to information and control its disclosure (Avdi *et al*, 2000). Billington (2006) goes one step further and proposes that professional accounts do not emphasise sufficiently, or represent accurately, the actual experience of being autistic. Barton (1996) writes of a challenge that is building momentum that people with disabilities and subsequently their family members have a voice that should be heard to effectively participate in decisions which affect them.

Strength of this research design is that it allows for the professional knowledge of staff and the practical knowledge of parents to be shared during the data collection period. Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (2003) pinpoint a key element of such collaborative work between teachers and parents in noting that the ideal roles of teachers and parents should be to work together along agreed schedules that involve input by both parties. This study is designed in such a way that parents will have an opportunity to share with each other their personal experiences and understandings and to have their views and knowledge recorded in a final dissertation and made public. Barton (1996) notes that, in the future, parental views are likely to be increasingly powerful in shaping official discourses. Publication of this research will offer a means of parental views being voiced in the academic arena.

In summary, the research is focused on conducting a group problem solving approach to behaviour with parents, teachers and an autism consultant, then analysing the findings that stem from participant reflections and evaluations during the data collection process. From this analysis suggestions will be made about future practices that schools and other agencies may employ in working with parents. The findings of this research will be made available to other schools and organisations who work with people with autism.

As this research is currently being conducted any relevant information, comments or useful references would be appreciated by the researcher. More information about the whole school positive social behaviour approach is available at [www.autismapproach.org](http://www.autismapproach.org) and the author can be contacted at [brittedi@hotmail.com](mailto:brittedi@hotmail.com)

## References

- Avdi, E., Griffin, C. and Brough, S. (2000) Parents' constructions of professional knowledge, expertise and authority driving assessment and diagnosis of their child for an autistic spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 73, 327-338.
- Barton, L. (1996) *Disability and society: Emerging issues and insights*. Essex: Longman.
- Billington, T. (2006) Working with autistic children and young people: Sense; experience and the challenges for services, policies and practices. *Disability and Society*, 21(January), 1-13.
- Brereton, A. and Tonge, B. (2005) *Pre-schoolers with autism: An education and skills training programme for parents*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Bromley, J., Hare, D., Davidson, K. and Emerson, E. (2004) Mothers supporting children with autism spectrum disorder, social support, mental health status and satisfaction with services. *Autism*, 8, 4, 409-423.
- Dowling, M. and Dolan, L. (2001) Families with children with disabilities- inequalities and the social model. *Disability and Society*, 16, 1, 21-35.
- Lecavalier, L., Leone, S. and Wiltz, J. (2006) The impact of behaviour problems on caregiver stress in young people with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 50, 3, 172-183.
- Meighan, R. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2003). *A sociology of educating* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Continuum.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2002) *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage Publication.
- Wadsworth, Y. (1998) What is action research? *Action Research International*, Paper 2. Available Online from <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>