

The Effect of COVID-19 on Social Isolation for Children with Special Needs in Primary Education

Suzette Kearns has over 19 years in the field of education, as a teacher and in various leadership roles. Formerly an Advisory Teacher supporting Children and Young People (CYP) with Cognition and Learning and Social and Emotional Mental Health, Suzette is now the Lead Advisory Teacher for Physical Disability and Sensory, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Multi-Sensory Impairment and AAC at Gloucestershire County Council. Her role involves advising teaching staff of best teaching practice for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), ensuring children receive the support they require to have a fulfilling inclusive education. Through her GCC LA role I have contributed to workstreams at local, county, and national level to develop provision for CYP with SEND.

Recently Suzette completed an MA in Education at the University of Worcester specialising in SEND and Inclusive Education. This continues her association with the University of Worcester having previously received a BA QTS Hons degree.

This article will focus on the changes in delivery of education by professionals in an attempt to reduce the effect of social isolation resulting from the effect of COVID-19 on children with Special Needs in primary education. Social isolation is in direct contrast to Ubuntu's fundamental values of equality, accountability and reconciliation. Without appropriate provision, pupils with Special Needs may well find themselves unable to access non-discriminatory educational provision to an even greater degree than is "normal", and will be failed by a system that does not treat all fairly.

Ubuntu's values are reinforced through United Nations Human Rights (1989), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994) and (Tegler *et al.* 2020) acknowledging that all children, regardless of social economic circumstances, ethnicity, gender, or functionality, have the right to express their opinions and to participate in inclusive and equitable education.

In recognising this universal human right the Bercow Report (2008), commissioned by the Government, provided recommendations to transform the provision and experiences of children and young people with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), critical for development and reduction in social isolation (Communication Matters, 2013).

To reduce social isolation, and promote inclusivity, justice and equality the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises Alternative Augmented Communication (AAC) as a method of effective communication. The importance of AAC to the lives of children and young people is recognised in current Education and Health Care Funding and Service Delivery Guidelines in England and Wales (Department for Education, 2013; NICE, 2016) and in a growing body of research evidence (Clarke, McConachie and Wood, 2001; Light and McNaughton, 2012; Ganz, 2015). Therefore, there is an obligation on teachers, schools and appropriate educational bodies to promote the availability and use of new technologies, including AAC.

The potential for AAC to support communication should not be underestimated. According to Johnston, Reichle and Evans (2004) AAC strategies and tools have implicit potential to improve the lives of individuals with communication difficulties by promoting independence and the development of social relationships so as to reduce social isolation.

AAC strategies and tools are communication methods which either supplement or substitute an individual's speech and/or writing (Clarke, Price and Griffiths, 2016). AAC is, therefore, a fluid, multi-modal repertoire of resources used in everyday communication interactions which can be unaided or aided. Unaided approaches rely on a user's body to convey messages, for example, gestures, signs and facial expressions, whilst aided communication requires additional materials or devices. Aided AAC is further subdivided into high tech versus low tech aided options. Low tech aids or devices encompass communication books or boards (non-electric), written words on paper, photographs, or symbols. High tech aids include speech generating devices (SGDs) (Beukelman and Mirenda, 2013) known as voice output communication aids (VOCAs) on personal computers or laptops (Schlosser, 2003).

The lack of aids and support alongside the challenges of social and pedagogical inclusion of children with complex communication needs are noted by practitioners as key challenges to their successful implementation of AAC. This is supported by National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, 2002, Andzik, Chung, and Kranak, 2016, and Tonsing and Dada, 2016.

These challenges, plus the effects of social isolation on both teachers and children, have been further accentuated during COVID-19 lockdown emphasising the need for a greater understanding in designing effective CPD for teachers going beyond traditional settings (Timperley *et al.*, 2007; Weißenrieder *et al.* 2015) and focussing on virtual learning, a medium which the majority of teachers have not used previously on a regular basis.

To reduce social isolation and support professionals to provide well designed virtual learning there is a need for collaboration achieved through virtual networking. Scutt's (2020) research suggests opportunities for professional collaboration are a key feature of school environments where professionals develop their effectiveness. The concept of collaboration is slightly "nebulous" due to the variety of forms that collaboration can take (Scutt, 2020). Collaboration shares knowledge and expertise, provides exposure to challenge and alternative perspectives to encourage reflection and action, and a sense of building collective teacher efficacy.

To build a sense of collective teacher efficacy, Vangrieken *et al.* (2015) research identified a number of preconditions for effective collaboration categorised into three characteristic types: personal, structural and group. The personal characteristics are the individual's willingness to collaborate and belief in the value of doing so. As Scutt (2020) states a desire and willingness to learn from others is a powerful driver in improving one's own effectiveness through collaboration. Structural characteristics are having the time, space and opportunity to engage in collaboration. Finally, the group characteristics are deliberate choices made as to the group size, blend of skills, knowledge, relationships and culture within the group.

To support learning and reduce isolation during COVID- 19 a virtual learning network group was established commensurate with Vygotsky's "Social Constructivism" theory (1968),

utilising social interaction to construct new ideas. Reflecting Vangrieken *et al.* (2015), practitioners invited to attend this group needed to be supporting children with a physical disability (PD) and use AAC in mainstream Local Authority (LA) and Multi Academy Trusts (MAT's). In accordance with Vygotsky (1968) and Piaget (1952) ascertaining practitioners experiences of using AAC was sought to extend learning through an instructional scaffolding approach (Bruner, 1973). These social experiences enabled challenges and problem solving to be discussed, knowledge to be "socially constructed", ideas pooled, and shared agreements reached regarding the use of AAC.

Importantly, to enable knowledge to be "socially constructed" the significance of children's immersion in AAC through modelling and breaking the task into smaller parts was addressed. Not all the practitioners were aware of the importance of the "core words" to support children in everyday school routines to aid consistency and familiarity. "Core words" comprise 75-80% of the words used in our everyday speech such as "go", "more", "I" and "you". Using core words within school routines enables children to become familiar with the smaller steps in an interaction within a natural environment, therefore, leading to a successful communication exchange (McCarthy, 2021).

To further support successful communication in school, the discussion within the network group highlighted the importance of schools being "communication friendly" in which communication can take place. This is supported by the Goossens, Crain and Elder (1992) "Engineering the Environment" approach to model AAC throughout the child's environment whether at school or in the home. An additional benefit from the network group and critical for professional CPD, was establishing a common language using "core words", as noted above, to be used by all practitioners to enable social inclusion. This has also been recognised in The Education Endowment Foundation SEND Guidance Report (2020).

Despite the challenges COVID- 19 has presented, such as social distancing and 'bubbles' which are not conducive to formal or informal collaboration opportunities, if we continue to foster the right culture, signpost opportunities and provide encouragement, practitioners can continue to benefit from collaboration even in the virtual world (Scutt, 2020). To reboot the future and sustain social inclusion Post-COVID-19 education needs to be examined through the lens of Ubuntu's framework and its potential to celebrate and value all aspects of diversity.

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Suzette is willing to discuss using network groups in the future. Her email address is: suzette.kearns@gloucestershire.gov.uk.