Educational Approaches in Autism: 
What we know about what we do

Rona Tutt*, Stuart Powell and Mary Thornton
University of Hertfordshire, UK

There has been little attempt to relate well-known educational approaches in autism to increased psychological understanding about the condition. This paper addresses that gap. Four discrete educational approaches to autism (Higashi, Lovaas, Option, TEACCH), and two ‘eclectic’ approaches (SPELL, one LEA specific), are explored within the context of four psychological interpretations of autism. Our purpose is to better understand how the different educational approaches in autism align with, or diverge from, the core purposes of teachers, namely to develop independence and critical thought to the optimum level possible for individual pupils, irrespective of their underlying condition.

Introduction

Individuals with autism present some key challenges for those concerned with their education and care. For individuals without autism fundamental teacher beliefs about the nature of the learner and about the acts of learning and teaching may enable the construction of a template of effective, and ultimately good, practice. Yet in autism standard templates may not apply. For example, teaching and learning in respect of the non-autistic is predicated typically on the assumption that communication between teacher and learner happens. What often remains at issue for teachers is how that communication can be made to happen more effectively. Yet, according to the diagnostic criteria of DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), the learner with autism, by definition, lacks awareness of primal aspects of communication that inevitably leads to lack of key understandings and an inability to develop general abilities and specific skills. So, where it may be possible to provide, for example, signing as an effective, alternative way of communicating for individuals with a hearing impairment, such provision in autism might lead to the child

*Corresponding author. High Trees, 89 Willian Way, Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire SG6 2HY, UK. Email: ronat@naht.org.uk
signing to the ‘listener’ but with his/her hands obscured under the table. This seemingly bizarre action by the child is understandable if one accepts that the normal precepts underpinning what counts as a communicative act (that is, a purpose and an understanding of the needs of the listener) will not be available to the child with autism. In short, the functional communication skills might be taught but those skills would not be applied by the child in an effective and meaningful way.

Similarly, for educators generally, teaching and learning is essentially a social, interactive event—the transmission of sociocultural knowledge in a largely social dimension. However, for the individual with autism, it is not so much that learning about social events is difficult or that learning with others is hard, but that when learning occurs, it is not mediated by social understanding—it remains at the level of the personal, is wholly objective and therefore will seem, to the observer, mechanistic and ‘rigid’. And again, where usually one can assume that a child has the ability to imagine and that therefore what is required of the teacher is to find ways of stimulating and extending that child’s imagination, in autism no such assumption can be made, impairment of the ability to imagine being a prerequisite for the diagnosis, (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It is more a question of accepting that the autistic way of thinking is not underpinned by such ability and that skills such as extrapolation or ‘going beyond the information given’ will therefore be affected. The issue here is that autism creates a context for developing learning and teaching that cannot rely on the template of the usual assumptions and predictions and subsequent teacher actions and reactions.

**Approaches to Autism**

Because of these essential and profound differences in the way in which individuals with autism relate to learning and to teaching and the way in which those differences manifest as not amenable to typical notions of good practice, the area is full of ‘approaches’ to all aspects of pedagogy including curriculum design and delivery as well as teaching style. Generalist teaching principles often have to be discarded in favour of individually tailored strategies and tactics.

Yet a danger arises. Just because a child presents in a way that challenges conventional pedagogical wisdom and just because some things seem to ‘work’ where others do not, teachers should not be distracted from basic principles of education that transcend mere matters of teaching procedure. For example, the authors would not wish to argue for a kind of approach to teaching children (any children) which might induce harm—be that psychological or physical. Neither would we wish to advocate an approach where educating the individual is reduced wholly to a matter of training for specific tasks in the world. Even where an individual has real difficulty in taking responsibility for his/her own actions, we would argue that a fundamental educational aim would need to be that the kind of tasks such an individual engages in at school and the kind of approach taken by teachers should be directed to achieving independent and critical thought. Clearly, this will be achieved at whatever level is possible and appropriate for the child. When considering new educational
Educational approaches in autism 71

approaches for individuals with autism, even though the changed nature of the relationship between teaching and learning may spur teachers to consider alternatives to their usual practice, there is a need to remain focused on what the amended approaches mean in terms of core purposes as teachers and what it is that is actually being achieved when ‘success’ is claimed for a particular approach in contrast with any other.

It is also our contention that teachers’ practice should have some basis in an understanding of the particular psychology of this group of children. In short, the selected pedagogy and approach adopted ought to relate to the child’s way of learning. In our discussions below it is clear that many approaches to autism are based on what is perceived to ‘work’, rather than the child’s way of learning. In addition, evidence for ‘what works’ is often lacking, and frequently does not relate to basic principles of education, namely, enhancing independence and critical thought.

This paper takes six educational approaches to autism and discusses them in the context of different psychological interpretations of autism. We do not claim that these interpretations are mutually exclusive and we have taken the risk of oversimplifying both approaches taken and the psychological and pedagogical theorising in an attempt to draw out the issues. The paper critiques some of the main approaches to teaching pupils with autism and in so doing attempts to describe links between practice and theory, with a view to increasing understanding of likely efficacy of approach. Autism, perhaps more than any other condition, attracts curative and therapeutic approaches in education (Powell, 2000) as well as in medicine. These range from the unpleasant through the unlikely to the plausible and potentially useful. Those involved in the education of children with autism may come under pressure to adopt a particular approach by those concerned to see progress in a child who may be seemingly ineducable, at least in terms of commonly accepted teaching methods. Parents, teachers and administrators are vulnerable (albeit in different ways) to claims of ‘success’ which may or may not be substantiated. This paper is intended in part to offer practitioners a brief, accessible review of some of the currently used approaches and some analysis of their place vis a vis current psychological theories about the way children with autism think and learn, and, therefore, how they need to be taught.

The Scope of this Paper

Four psychological theories about autism are selected here in relation to the six approaches. It is important to note that there is no attempt to compare and contrast the validity of the theories or to resolve any contradictions between them. Rather, they are accepted in the present context as offering useful insights into the process of pedagogy. So far there has been little attempt, on the part of researchers, to look at well-known educational approaches in the light of increased knowledge about the underlying condition. Yet, it may be suggested that the more successful approaches are likely to be those that can be found to have a sound psychological basis.
Of the six educational approaches chosen, the first four selected are the most regularly cited in review articles relating to pedagogy in autism (Jordan, Jones, & Murray, 1998) and the other two are more recent eclectic approaches. Omitted from this review are medical treatments which aim to improve the condition by targeting the ‘cause’, or by relieving specific symptoms, such as mood swings, aggression or self-injury. Likewise, no mention is made here of therapeutic methods, such as music therapy, music interaction therapy, art therapy or drama therapy. Such therapies are generally considered part of a child’s curriculum rather than an approach to that child’s education. (Although the Higashi schools use an approach called ‘daily life therapy’, this describes a whole approach to a child’s education and not just a therapeutic element within it; see Aarons & Gittens, 1999). In omitting in this way we make no value judgements about efficacy but rather have restricted our attention for the sake of clarity and because of the constraints on space. The first four of the six educational approaches are considered in alphabetical order.

Four Common Approaches within Autism

Daily Life Therapy (Higashi)

This approach was developed by Kitahara in Japan, where the first school founded on this method opened in Tokyo in 1969. The Japanese word ‘Higashi’ means ‘hope’. The approach is said to be holistic, with the emphasis on learning as part of a group. A programme of vigorous physical activity, including music and dance, aims to develop both strength and concentration. The theory behind this is that exercise releases endorphins, which inhibit anxiety and reduce hyperactivity (Howlin, 1998). In addition, the regimented routine allows little time for pupils to relapse into their ‘autistic states’ (Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1993). The aim is for the pupils to become as independent as possible by learning to conform within a group situation, rather than through one-to-one teaching. Through imitating the teacher and their peers, they are also taught self-care skills. A second school based on the same methods was established in Boston, America, in 1987, and has proved popular with some parents from the United Kingdom, some of whom have sought the help of local education authorities in meeting the fees. Recently, a school adopting this approach has been established in the UK.

To date, there has been little in the way of systematic research into the success of this approach, although Watters and Watters (1980) have found that high levels of physical exercise help to reduce self-stimulation and improve attention and learning potential (cited in Trevarthen, Aitken, Papoudi, & Robarts, 1996). Another study, by Richardson and Langley (1997), looked at different interventions and concluded that improvements in toilet training and eating behaviour were more marked in pupils at the Higashi school than in pupils educated elsewhere. Higashi pupils also showed a more marked reduction in self-harm and in physical aggression towards others. They conclude by suggesting that there would be some potential benefits in introducing daily life therapy as an intervention for pupils with autism. There is,
Educational approaches in autism

however, less evidence that this approach increases a child’s understanding or his or her ability to function outside the group setting (Jordan & Powell, 1995).

While Higashi schools do seem to have some effect in helping to control both stereotypic and disruptive behaviour, the regime could be seen as harsh and demanding, with little scope allowed for individual differences. This raises the question as to how far it is acceptable to insist on a high level of conformity, when the underlying educational aim is to promote independence and critical thought. To do so would run counter to what it means to be educated. Certainly, conformity to certain standards does form a part of the overall aim of commonplace education within the UK, but this is not quite the same as a deliberate intention to change the way children are for a perceived ‘better’ kind of commonality. Some adults with autism, including Sinclair (1992) and O’Neill (1999), have been critical of attempts to change the personality of people on the autistic spectrum.

Looking at this approach in the context of different psychological interpretations of autism, it could be argued that limiting the potential for each individual to develop as a distinct personality, by teaching specific skills in a group situation and expecting a high level of conformity, is in conflict with what would be suggested about the psychological learning needs of children with autism arising from both Hobson’s (1993) work on interpersonal relatedness and Baron-Cohen’s (1995) on ‘theory of mind’. The latter has argued that autism is a cognitive disorder interfering with social functioning and resulting in a failure to understand how other people think and feel. In other words, the empathy that the normally developing infant acquires, and which allows him or her to understand that people have different perspectives, is lacking, but may, to some degree, develop later, depending on the level of cognitive functioning, the severity of the autism and the child’s educational experiences. Hobson also stresses the need for the person with autism to be encouraged to relate to others, as he sees the condition as a social deficit that leads to an asocial way of thinking and an inability to develop satisfactory relationships. It seems reasonable to assume that both Baron-Cohen and Hobson would be wary of an approach that neither treated children with autism as individuals, nor encouraged them to try to understand others in those terms.

A third interpretation of autistic ways of thinking concerns executive functioning (Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991). Here people with autism are viewed as having a cognitive dysfunction, whereby their natural impulsivity makes it hard for them to plan and to reflect on their learning in order to problem solve. If this is the case then such a deficit is not likely to be helped by the Higashi method’s emphasis on imitating adults and the other children in the group, rather than being given opportunities to practise having to work out situations for themselves.

The Higashi approach might be said to fare better in the context of a view of autism as being concerned with difficulties of ‘central cohesion’ (Frith, 1989). Here autism is seen as a cognitive disorder that interferes with the central thought processes, although peripheral input remains intact. Encouraging pupils to focus on copying the teacher’s example might be said to help them focus on what is most relevant, moving them away from a tendency to absorb detail without reference to the
whole picture. However, even here, it is not necessarily the case that pupils with autistic spectrum disorders would learn to generalise this skill and to shift their attention to the most salient elements of any given situation. (More information about psychological theorising is given in other texts, such as Powell, 1999).

Lovaas

Behavioural and cognitive behavioural approaches have been widely used for pupils on the autistic spectrum and have focused on two main areas of development: teaching specified skills and managing the behaviours which are perceived by teachers to obstruct learning. The Lovaas approach is a behavioural one (Cohen, 1998) which originally made use of punishment, but in current practice typically does not go beyond a sharp ‘no’. Instead, rewards such as food are used for a correct response. The approach was developed by Lovaas in the 1960s. Based on early intervention, the programme starts with children under 2-years-old, where possible. The individual child undergoes 30 to 40 hours a week of treatment from a team of therapists, family members and helpers, the aim being to provide optimal treatment and education for most of the child’s waking hours. The specific behaviours of the child are targeted rather than any perceived needs arising from the autism being addressed. A programme for pre-school children may be based largely on play skills interspersed by short breaks. For a school age child, there will be a greater emphasis on acquiring academic and social skills. The approach is primarily an auditory one (though, clearly, instructions could be given by gesture), yet children with autistic spectrum disorders are known to have visual rather than auditory strengths.

While research by Lovaas (1987) and McEachin (1987) claimed that 43% of pupils will achieve normal functioning, the sample used was so small as to make the research statistically unreliable. Howlin and Rutter (1987) suggest that, while early intervention along behaviourist lines may result in gains in both social and language development, these may not be a long-term benefit, but disappear once the intensive help has ceased. Like the Higashi regime, because the Lovaas method is very intensive and demanding, there is little room for allowing for a child’s individual needs and personality. Powell and Jordan (1997) contrast the spontaneity of the Option approach (which is discussed next in this paper) with the complete conformity required by Lovaas, where the child has to try to make the one and only correct response the adult is seeking.

Lovaas’ behavioural approach was not designed specifically for pupils with autism. Indeed, Lovaas is not concerned with why children with autism behave as they do. Although children undergoing this method may be located with a series of helpers for most of their waking hours, there is little attempt to build up relationships. Attention is not paid to helping children find meaning in the world around them or learning how to reflect on their actions. In other words, the Lovaas approach seems to have little in common with any of the four noted psychological understandings of autism. The typical use of the auditory channel, rather than facilitating autistic
thinking within the visual medium, is further evidence that Lovaas has not been adapted to fit in with what is now known about the nature of autism.

**Option method**

This approach was devised by the Kaufmans in 1976 after their son was diagnosed autistic and is now based at the Option Institute in Massachusetts. The Kaufmans were dissatisfied with the behaviourist approaches that were currently available and tried instead to understand what lay behind the behaviours exhibited by a child with autism (Kaufman, 1994). This led to an interactive approach which has three dimensions: to accept and approve of what the child does; to offer a therapeutic experience which would entice him or her out of isolation; to develop a teaching programme by breaking down the components of a task into manageable steps.

The Option method uses a specially designed playroom. Therapists (and once they are trained, the parents) seek to enter into the child’s world, rather than expecting the child with autism to conform to normal patterns of play. The idea is that the child will feel in control and thus be enabled to take the lead. The adult accepts the child’s behaviour and responds to that lead, making his/her actions more predictable and therefore less frightening. By imitating what the child does and making play an energetic and exciting experience, the adult engages the child in reciprocal activities, while developing the ability to communicate and socialise.

The Option approach forms an interesting contrast with Higashi, as the emphasis is on one-to-one learning with the child taking the lead, rather than learning in a group situation in a predetermined manner, without regard to the child’s individuality. It is also very different from Lovaas, where the child is coerced into making one correct response.

There has been little systematic research into this approach. Jordan et al. (1998) state that the only evaluation has been in terms of rationale and practice, rather than outcomes, while the idea of imitation being used as a bridge to closer cooperation, has been found to be of value (Nadel & Peze, 1993, cited in Trevarthen et al., 1996). Our own research (Tutt, 2001, unpublished thesis) indicates that teachers feel strongly that there are limits to how far this is either practicable or helpful in the school setting. Nevertheless, the same teachers do believe that to build on a child’s interests (in this case in a very immediate and particular sense) is more likely to lead to cooperation and motivation than insistence on a high level of conformity. Further, it has been argued (Jordan & Powell, 1995) that using the child’s obsessions as a starting point for learning is a better strategy than trying to reduce those obsessions.

One of the apparent strengths of the Option method is the attempt to help the child to build up a relationship with another person as a starting point to further learning. Both Baron-Cohen and Hobson’s perspectives on autism, while different from each other, stress that, whether autism is seen as a cognitive disorder affecting social functioning, or as a social dysfunction affecting cognitive development, the ability to relate to, and understand the actions of others, is central to helping people with autism learn about themselves and others. (The issue of children with autism learning about ‘self’
is addressed by Millward, Powell, Messer, & Jordan, 2000). It seems probable that children need to become aware of the self before they can empathise, and that empathising lies at the heart of being able to socialise successfully.

Imitating the child, initially as a way of attracting his or her attention, could be said to address Frith’s notion (Frith, 1989) of the difficulty children with autism face in developing a sense of central coherence, as the child is being helped to focus on what is meaningful for him/her (or rather what is constructed to be meaningful by another). Also, within the Option approach it is advocated that the environment should be adapted to assist the child’s understanding, so that, instead of being a cause of confusion, the environment becomes enabling. This might be seen as assisting in the development of executive functioning, although the question remains on both counts as to how far learning would be generalised to other situations. In terms of the usefulness of this approach in the context of educational settings, there is also the question as to how far a child can be allowed to take the lead, when teachers will have in mind the skills that need to be taught, and for pupils with autism, a larger number of skills require specific teaching, as they are less likely to learn through experience.

**TEACCH**

The acronym stands for the ‘Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communications handicapped CHildren’. The approach originated in the work of Mesibov, Schopler and colleagues and has been developed by them at the University of North Carolina over the last 30 years. It is a ‘cradle to grave’ approach in recognition of autism as a lifelong disorder (Schopler, 2000). Like the Lovaas method, it is basically a behaviourist approach, but with greater flexibility to allow for incidental learning as well as structured teaching, and with a focus on developing appropriate communication skills and personal autonomy, rather than mainly seeking to reduce problem behaviours. It also draws on advances in psycholinguistic knowledge and the use of alternative methods of communication where appropriate. It contrasts with Lovaas in being largely a visual approach. Typically, the spoken word is reinforced by visual material, such as photographs, rebus symbols and sign language. TEACCH aims to improve both social interaction and communication by means of a specially created environment in which the child with autism can function and through a specially adapted teaching approach.

Usually, each pupil has his or her own workstation (or area for work), which is kept as distraction-free as possible. An individual, visual timetable will indicate the events for the day and the order in which they will happen. The rest of the classroom is set out with clearly demarcated areas for each activity. The intention is to create a sense of routine, organisation and predictability. This in turn is aimed at helping pupils feel more secure and less bewildered by what is going on around them. Each pupil is individually assessed on a regular basis, so that the teacher is very clear about what needs to be taught next. A sense of group identity is encouraged by the pupils having times when they are all engaged on the same task, such as greeting each other at the start of the day or sharing snack times. Parents are encouraged to feel that they
are partners in their child’s education and to continue with some of the elements of the approach in the home setting.

Mesibov, Adams, and Klinger (1997) showed that there was evidence of parental satisfaction and research evidence for the rationale of the approach, but Jordan et al. (1998) point out that while there have been several studies on the TEACCH programme, little has been done to compare outcomes with pupils being taught using other approaches. Although TEACCH is at root a behaviourist approach, unlike Lovaas, it has been developed to take account of the visual strengths of people with autism.

Furthermore, within the TEACCH approach is the idea of the educational environment being clearly demarcated into different working areas, including pupils having their own workstations. This could be seen as responding to Frith’s view that the central thought processes are damaged, causing the person with autism to focus on incidental information rather than taking in the whole. Sitting in their individual booths, with a clear system for starting and finishing their tasks, could be interpreted as a way of helping pupils with autism to focus in on what is relevant.

In addition, TEACCH involves the careful grading of tasks for each individual, intended to allow them scope to problem solve within a safe environment, while individual timetabling and a structured approach to each day aims to control impulsive behaviour by making what happens more predictable. Both these last two points might be seen as responding to Ozonoff’s views on the difficulty of executive functioning, by providing pupils with the optimal conditions for attempting problem solving and helping them control their impulsive behaviour through staff planning with them the activities they will be doing.

The emphasis on the importance of developing both social and communication skills could be seen as addressing issues raised by the remaining two theories, making TEACCH the only one of the four methods mentioned to address, albeit without any overt intent, the four theories currently under discussion, and to do so in a way that recognises the classroom context. Indeed, this fortunate symmetry could be argued to be one of the reasons for the success of this method, which is thought to be the most widely used with people with autism (Jordan et al., 1998). However, a note of caution may need to be added, as the basically behaviourist approach of the TEACCH method suggests that behaviours learnt in a specially adapted environment are unlikely to be generalised to other situations.

Eclectic Approaches

SPELL

Although there continues to be controversy about which methods are most appropriate for pupils with autism, there is a move towards combining elements of several approaches rather than adhering rigidly to one. The National Autistic Society (NAS), for instance, has developed the ‘SPELL’ approach, (Smeardon 1998), which stands for Structure, Positive, Empathy, Low arousal, Links. The ideas behind this are as follows:
● ‘S’tructure, so that the child is able to predict events and anxiety is reduced. The environment is modified to support learning and communication.

● ‘P’ositive approaches and expectations, which enhance self-esteem and build on the strengths of the pupil with autism.

● ‘E’mpathy, whereby the teacher tries to see the world from the child’s viewpoint, and devises an individualised learning programme based on how that child thinks and learns.

● ‘L’ow arousal, where a clear, calm and clutter-free environment encourages the pupil to learn; the approach is non-confrontational and both physical education and relaxation techniques are seen as important in helping to promote an orderly atmosphere.

● ‘L’inks refer to links with parents, other professionals and the community at large. The National Curriculum is followed to maximise opportunities for inclusion in mainstream schools.

A Local Education Authority Approach (LEA)

In one not untypical shire county in the UK, with a mix of both urban and rural areas, an LEA policy was drawn up in 1998 by the staff of the LEA’s Autism Bases under the leadership of the Senior Advisory Teacher for Autism. This policy sought to ensure that the six ‘Autism Bases’ followed the same principles. The approach is described as a synthesis of interactive, cognitive and behavioural methods through which the pupils’ difficulties with communication, social interaction and rigidity of thought are addressed. This involves:

● Assessment, to ensure each pupil’s needs are understood.

● Structure, so that the pupil is helped to make sense of a confusing world.

● Visually mediated instructions using schedules and cues.

● Emphasis on the development of communication and social interaction.

● Use of behavioural strategies.

● Integration with a wider peer group.

● Direct teaching of self-help and life skills.

● Physical activity in regular periods throughout each day.

● Parental support and participation in their child’s individual programme.

Although the two eclectic approaches do not mirror each other, it will be noted that there are many similarities, despite the NAS establishing its principles in terms of its own specialist schools for pupils on the autistic spectrum, while the LEA had set up Autism Bases attached to special schools (for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and those with severe learning difficulties). It is interesting to note that the study by Jordan et al. (1998) on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment, where all the main approaches to autism were considered, concluded:

There is no really strong evidence to suggest that one approach for a child with autistic spectrum disorder is better than another, although there is a consensus of findings that
early intensive education that involves the parents and includes direct teaching of essential skills with an opportunity for planned integration can produce significant changes in children with ASD. (Jordan et al., 1998, p. 7)

In one sense this implies that an eclectic approach, which draws on the best practice from a variety of approaches, may be a good way forward and could be used to justify the stance taken by both the NAS and the LEA quoted. However, it does not necessarily follow that just because there is no evidence to justify advocating one approach over others, that a mixture of methods will be any more beneficial. What we really need to know is what effects are produced by which strategic aspects of the range of approaches and how implementation affects outcome.

Having been developed more recently than the four specific approaches, the two eclectic approaches postdate the theories under discussion. Although they are based in part on evidence derived from practical experience of educating pupils with autism, they have set down principles that could be seen as relevant in helping pupils to overcome the particular difficulties which theorists have suggested may underlie the autistic condition. For instance, the emphasis on empathy, communication and social development could be seen as addressing difficulties related to the theory of mind and interpersonal relatedness. Modifying the environment so that it is clearly set out, giving instructions visually and providing a high level of direct teaching, might all be seen as ways of helping pupils to focus on what is relevant and thereby assisting in the development of central coherence, (as explained earlier). Providing structure to the day and to each task, based on careful assessment of the pupils’ needs and setting the work at an appropriate level, might be said to enable pupils to develop executive functioning.

While there is as yet no consensus on a unifying theory of autism, the two eclectic approaches have been able to build on a body of knowledge about the possible nature of autism, enabling them to set down researched principles which address and seek to overcome the difficulties which theorists see as being a fundamental part of the autistic condition.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to consider how the educational approaches discussed relate to psychological theories about the autistic condition. In the event, although none of the earlier approaches was based on any particular framework, there was some correlation between the various approaches and psychological theories about autism, particularly in the case of TEACCH. The more recent eclectic approaches, which have attempted to build on educational good practice at a time when more evidence of the psychology of autism is available, may have helped to show that there is a connection between sound educational practice and underlying theories about the nature of autism itself. Furthermore the report by Jordan et al. (1998) which concluded that no one method has all the pedagogical answers for how pupils on the autistic spectrum should be taught, might be said to offer some justification for an eclectic approach.
There is of course the danger that apparent eclecticism could mask an ad hoc approach. For a so-called eclectic approach to be effective, it would have to be based on principles of: (a) how children with autism are able to respond in learning and teaching situations; and (b) what can reasonably be counted as worthwhile knowledge and skills for children with autism. In our view, the principles on which a teacher or curriculum designer operates in this respect would need to be based on a synthesis of psychological understandings and practical experience of cause and effect in day to day teaching and learning situations.

The main difference, in the view of the authors, between TEACCH and the two eclectic approaches, may be said to lie in the degree of emphasis on structure, in a behaviourist sense, as advocated by TEACCH, where the difficulty of generalising learned behaviours must arise, and the more flexible eclectic approaches, where there is no rigid adherence to a particular way of working. It could be argued that the eclectic approaches reflect the need to help the pupil come to terms with a range of conditions and events, recognising that to provide too controlled an environment may not, in the long term, equip pupils for life in the real world. It also allows for individual differences and encourages development of independence and critical thought by using aspects of different approaches according to each pupil’s level of learning difficulty, the severity of their autism and, crucially, each one’s particular personality. For, first and foremost, all children, whether or not they have special educational needs, will be individuals, with their own preferred way of responding to their environment and the learning opportunities within it. Although there are characteristics that unite those with autism, there will be many ways in which their individual differences and preferences will also be apparent.

In this paper, the argument has been not that effective teaching in autism is dependent on psychological understandings of a theoretical kind, but that considering its processes and procedures within the context of those understandings can only enhance any approach to the education of such children. This consideration might usefully take the shape of an informed interchange of ideas between those concerned to create a conceptual understanding of the way the psychology of autism functions and those concerned with effective pedagogy and curriculum delivery. This could also assist in striking a balance between using the knowledge available of how pupils with autism learn best, and allowing scope for how individuals will respond to the learning environment because of who they are. Finally, we suggest that the ‘informed interchange’ noted above should take place in a context in which fundamental assumptions about what counts as learning, and how the process of teaching and learning is interpreted, are challenged. We would argue that those challenges should be made with due regard to what is valued about the educative process and with respect for the integrity of those who learn differently.

References


