

IMAGINING A FRIEND WITH AN AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER: INCLUSION STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

People with disabilities can be viewed negatively and labelled with negative stereotypes because of their health status (Harder et al., 2022). This condition, known as ableism, also affects people with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), who may experience discrimination from childhood (Turnock et al., 2022). In order to find possible useful solutions and to address Agenda 2030's goals, this study aims to find inclusion strategies through a writing activity. As imagining a positive relationship with a person from a different group can reduce negative attitudes (see Crisp & Turner, 2009), it was hypothesized that the content of an imagined text about a friendship relationship can provide important insight to promote social inclusion. Specifically, as autistic spectrum disorder is one of the diagnoses with greater deficits in terms of social and relational abilities, the study aimed to identify useful actions to promote friendship with people with this disability. Participants were 26 university students ($M = 2$; $F = 24$) in the fourth year of a degree course in primary education ($M_{age} = 27.38$; $SD = 6.80$). They enrolled in the workshop "writing and inclusion" and, among the activities, they were also asked to write a text in which they had to imagine that one of their closest friends is a person with an autistic spectrum disorder. Specifically, they were asked to describe how they became friends, what connects them and what they do when they are together. A content analysis was performed. Results from the students' texts showed that school was the most common setting in which friendships had started. Interest in sports, films, painting were the reasons for creating a bond during childhood and being curious, sharing an experience, being informed about ASD, having parents who become friends are elements that can foster this friendship. This relation is seen as an opportunity to develop a new perspective, to appreciate the value of small things and to understand each other beyond words. In adulthood, friends continue to do some activities together (e.g., walking in nature, going to the cinema), although possible problems are also taken into account. To reduce social isolation of people with disabilities, especially people with autistic spectrum disorders, promoting openness as a personality trait and knowledge about the condition (individual level actions), shared experiences (educational interventions), friendships between parents (familiar level actions) can be useful to reduce isolation and promote lasting friendships. Strengths, limits and educational interventions of this study are discussed.

Keywords: *Inclusion, writing activities, autistic spectrum disorder, disability, ableism.*

1. Introduction

Ableism is a new form of discrimination that affect people with disabilities. It based on the assumption that people should have a normal body and each condition that differ from this assumption is considered a defect rather than a difference (Campbell, 2001; Goodley, 2014). This condition led to define people with disabilities with negative stereotypes and to behave in a biased way toward people with disabilities leading to several difficulties from a health and social relation prospective (Mannor et al. 2024).

People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may also be subject to negative evaluations and experience discrimination from childhood (Turnock et al., 2022). The resulting social isolation can be particularly challenging for people with ASD, as they have impaired social abilities due to their medical condition (APA, 2013), and therefore find it difficult to overcome. Consistently, the WHO (2023) emphasised that social stigmatisation is one of the main factors that compromises quality of life.

Thus, identifying effective strategies to encourage socialisation from an early age can help to foster positive relationships and constructive friendships with people with disabilities, especially with ASD, thereby promoting inclusion, which is one of the aims of Agenda 2030.

It is already known from the literature that inclusive settings, i.e., “schools for all”, have a positive impact on the social interaction and participation of people with disabilities (Dell’Anna et al., 2022), as well as on shared experiences between people with and without disabilities (e.g., Paluck et al., 2021). According to Allport’s (1954) contact theory, shared activities can reduce the distance between different groups and an extension of this theory, the imagined contact theory (Crisp & Turner, 2009), suggests that imagining positive interactions can also be useful for this purpose.

Based on this assumption, the present study — which is part of a larger investigation into writing activities and inclusion — aims to identify effective inclusion strategies in the text resulting from an imaging activity. Indeed, as writing about a potential friendship with someone with ASD can trigger the imagined contact effect, it was expected that the content would provide valuable insights into strategies for reducing social isolation and promoting the inclusion of people with autistic spectrum disorder.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were fourth-year university students on a primary education degree course. They were attending the “Educational Psychology” course, which includes a 10-hour laboratory activity. The course tutor provided students with the opportunity to choose from a range of different workshops, one of which was “Writing and Inclusion”. Students were informed that this workshop was part of a research project, and that they would be asked to complete a questionnaire and carry out some writing activities as participants. Participants provided consent for their participation and for the treatment of their data.

2.2. Measures

A questionnaire was used to collect descriptive information about the participants, such as their year of birth and gender. Other questions were about their experiences of disability, such as working or volunteering experience (from 1 = *never*, to 4 = *always*), and whether they have relatives with disabilities (*yes* or *no*). Further questions concerned autistic spectrum disorder: How would you rate your knowledge of autistic spectrum disorder on a scale from 0 to 10? Have you ever studied autistic spectrum disorder in your studies?

Information about a possible friendship with a person with autistic spectrum disorder was investigated through an individual writing activity. Participants were given the following assignment: “*Imagine you have had a long friendship with someone with autistic spectrum disorder since childhood. Describe how you became friends, what bonds you together, what you do together, and what you plan to do next weekend. Write a text of at least 500 words and send it using the link*”.

2.3. Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the composition of the sample. A content analysis of produced texts was also performed.

3. Results

3.1. Sample description

The participants were 26 university students ($M = 2$; $F = 24$) in the fourth year of a degree course in primary education ($M_{age} = 27.38$; $SD = 6.80$). Their involvement with disabled people was valued at 2.52 ($SD = 1.16$) in a work setting and 1.40 ($SD = .82$) in a volunteering context. Despite 84.6% of participants declaring that they had studied autistic spectrum disorder in their academic course, they evaluated their knowledge of the disorder at 5.19 ($SD = 1.82$). Among the participants, 88.5% did not have a relative with a disability, whereas 11.5% declared that they did.

3.2. A friendship with a person with autistic spectrum disorder

The school was the most commonly indicated setting for the first meeting, where friendships had started. Indeed, 17 participants said that it was at school, 3 talked about a sporting setting, 3 about a friendship formed through family, while 1 person indicated the church and another a volunteer centre.

When describing what creates a bond, participants talked about having a common interest in games or films ($N = 2$), being able to practise a sport together ($N = 4$), or being involved in creative activities such as painting or playing the piano ($N = 8$). They also mentioned having similar habits, such as being tidy ($N = 2$).

Among the strategies for supporting friendships, participants emphasised the importance of spending time together ($N = 8$), as well as talking to each other ($N = 9$). They highlighted the significance of acquiring knowledge about diseases ($N = 2$), as well as being curious about their friends' special abilities or characteristics ($N = 6$). The significance of a friendship between parents of children with ASD and without disabilities was also emphasised by 3 participants.

Friendships with people with ASD were described as deep bonds ($N = 4$), leading to a new perspective ($N = 9$), i.e., learning something new and appreciating the value of small things, as well as the importance of silence and slowness.

Being friends can be difficult during adulthood ($N = 2$), but numerous shared activities were also reported, such as spending time in nature ($N = 14$), enjoying culture (e.g. movies, art, music and museums; $N = 11$) and spending time together (e.g. cooking, eating ice cream and shopping; $N = 10$).

4. Discussion

The present study was conducted to identify effective strategies for fostering friendships with people with ASD. Social impairment is indeed one of the main characteristics of people with ASD (APA, 2013), and reducing its impact on everyday life is important for promoting their inclusion in society.

Participants' answers suggest that schools are an important place to encourage friendships between students with and without disabilities. This supports the idea of favouring this kind of organisation in an educational setting and promoting the “school for all”, as emphasised in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). However, schools and social or religious centres can also play an important role by continuing to promote shared activities, which have already been shown to be effective in reducing distance (Allport, 1954). Indeed, participants wrote that the opportunity to do activities together (from sports to culture) during childhood and adulthood creates a bond. However, sharing activities is not sufficient: participants emphasised the importance of making an effort to befriend someone and being curious about their differences, which they also identified as an added value of this kind of friendship. This suggests the need to develop a specific mindset that requires deep cultural and educational intervention towards values of tolerance, democracy and equality between people. In addition, participants emphasise the importance of having knowledge and awareness of ASD, which is useful for at least two reasons. Firstly, receiving information about another social group is a strategy that can improve individuals' attitudes (Paluck et al., 2021). Secondly, offering knowledge and real answers to something difficult to understand, i.e., ASD, represents a problem-solving strategy rather than an avoidance strategy. This kind of approach promotes positive growth for children and adolescents and fosters people's well-being in the long term (Richardson et al., 2021). The results also highlighted the importance of parents, showing that a friendship between parents provides an opportunity to establish a friendship with a child with ASD while also consolidating that relationship. This highlights the importance of fostering a robust social network for children with ASD and their families. It also provides further confirmation of contact theory. In fact, one condition for efficient intergroup contact is the support of those in authority, a role played by parents in children's friendships (Allport, 1954).

4.1. Strengths, limits and future directions

This study explored a new topic based on the imagined contact theory (Crisp & Turner, 2009), adding new content to this area of literature, particularly with regard to exploring and analysing imagined content. Focusing on disability, particularly ASD, this study also led to an examination of ableism and strategies for inclusion, which are among the main goals of Agenda 2030. However, this study also has some limits. The sample size is small, so the results cannot be generalised. Additionally, the imbalance between male and female participants must be acknowledged. Furthermore, no attitudes towards people with disabilities were measured after this activity, so it is only possible to hypothesise the activation of the imagined contact effect. Nevertheless, all the content showed positive considerations about people with ASD, emphasising a possible positive outcome in this respect. Future studies should consider developing this line of research further, by using writing activities to identify new strategies for improving perspective-taking and social inclusion.

Policymakers should take these results into consideration. Clinical and educational institutions that work with children and adolescents with ASD and aim to promote inclusion need to foster social relations among their parents, too. In other words, they should take a more holistic approach to the whole family. Schools and other social contexts should encourage cooperative activities to promote positive interactions between children. All educational stakeholders, from families to communities, should promote values such as tolerance, persistence, and an openness to difference as the basis for social relationships.

4.2. Conclusions

This study underlined the importance of finding new strategies to promote social inclusion and, at the same time, suggest some possible directions. At the individual level, it is important promoting personal openness and tolerance, as well as knowledge and an appreciation of the effort involved in building relationships. At the family level, participants' texts seem to emphasise the importance of networking within the family to create and promote lasting friendships. At the educational level, shared experiences emphasise the importance of using cooperative learning approaches and other group activities to reduce social isolation. Political and institutional stakeholders should consider these possible lines of actions to support people with autistic spectrum disorder as well as people with other disabilities.

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