

Chapter 10

Discussion

The SAG was influenced by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and Vygotsky's work (Daniels, 2008). Furthermore, according to the eco-systemic approach (Bruder, 2000; Upton & Cooper, 1990; Cooper, 1990), a mixed group of children can be perceived as one system where the interactions of all children with each other could be studied. Therefore, the major theoretical and research interest of this thesis was how the development of a person in a peer network can be accomplished and how the development of a peer network could be achieved. In addition to this, there was the effort this study to take place in a real school context, so a pragmatic approach was adopted as this happens in an increasing number of research projects concerning students with autism (Howlin et al, 2007).

Through the analysis of data deriving from students' interactions in the 2 final semesters in primary school 2 trends were confirmed: a first trend was a shift from little or no interaction, to more frequent interactions. A second trend, that could be observed, was a shift from negative interactions to more positive interactions. Similar findings have been presented by Roeyers (1995), as this has already been mentioned in the literature review. Furthermore, the appearance of some spontaneous stable dyads between mainstream peers and students with C.D. or between 2 students with C.D. reinforces his remark that "children with autism or a related disorder can develop peer relations, if appropriate social contexts are made available for them" (Roeyers, 1995, p. 162). During the 3 sessions of SAG in secondary school, there was a decline in students' interactions. This could be attributed to the fact that these sessions were shorter, but this is also in accordance with a finding mentioned in the literature review; according to Pellegrini and Long (2002), youngsters' peer affiliations decreased, initially with the transition from primary to secondary school, and then recovered. The decrease in youngsters' peer affiliations during the transition of students with autism from primary to secondary school has been confirmed through personal accounts, too (Cotton, 2002).

The SAG is designed as an approach in a way that can accommodate the needs of a group of students who have mixed level of abilities. Therefore, members of a SAG group could be students with and without communication difficulties or students who have different level of special needs.

In later implementations the constant use of questionnaires in each meeting could be avoided because this was necessary for the needs of a research project but it is not vital for an educational programme which takes place in a school environment. However, there could be a measure created for a less intensive assessment, for example a form where all topics discussed could be mentioned and the students could choose “an island of feeling” and a number about how they feel before and after this intervention.

There could also be interesting alterations about the synthesis of SAG; for instance, the analogy of mainstream and children with special needs could be changed with more mainstream students taking part in relation to students with special needs. The analogy could be 2:1 or 3:1. In this way a stronger peer network for more ‘fragile’ students could be created during this transition. Furthermore, some older mainstream students could take part in some sessions so that younger mainstream students could feel more encouraged and supported themselves. Older students could make the presentations of some topics to younger students and perhaps the sessions in this case could occur in the secondary setting. This could be an additional factor of familiarization with the new environment for younger students. Apart from that, older mainstream students will not have to struggle to adjust themselves at the same time in the new setting, so they could find it easier to support younger students (mainstream or not) when they start secondary school perhaps as their ‘buddies’. With more mature students the practitioner could also be more open about the kind of difficulties that younger students with communication difficulties may face in the new setting. However, this would mean that primary and secondary school should co-operate more intensively and this may not be easy. Perhaps it would be useful some specific practitioners to be responsible for this in both schools. If there are only 1 or 2 students with special needs or more specifically with communication difficulties, SAG could still take place with fewer students; it is common in communication skills programmes the groups of individuals not to be too

big (Jones, 2007; Kamps et al, 1992), because children need individualised support even for subtle improvements in their behaviour (Goupil et al, 2002), which should not be underestimated. If there are students with communication difficulties going to different schools, the session could be common but different informative materials could be provided to them. Practitioners could also decide about the ratio of mainstream children and children with communication difficulties taking into account the level of special needs of children with communication difficulties and the profile of possible mainstream “buddies”. During the selection of mainstream students for SAG, existing network of friendships could be taken into consideration. If the participation of mainstream students is not possible, the “structure” of SAG sessions and this way of preparation for transition to secondary school could still be put in practice.

The most crucial factor in order to achieve positive outcomes is related with the synthesis of the group. The personal judgment of practitioners should play the most important role about the children who are more suitable to take part regarding their empathy and reflection skills and also taking into account who are the students (mainstream or not) who may most benefit by this approach. The SAG could also include students who come from social classes who find adjustment to school more challenging (Dockett and Perry, 2005). Such kind of programmes could not force students to interact with one another. However, there may be instances where assistance may be offered to a child with communication difficulties through a good “chemistry” with a mainstream peer. Even few children to be supported and protected in this way, this would still be an important achievement, taking into account all the consequences of bullying or bad school experiences (Dubin, 2007; Jackson, 2002). Not all mainstream children are appropriate at the same level to participate in such an effort. Some could be great supporters and have a good time themselves in a rather simple and open hearted way. Others may take part without causing problem but not really being so enthusiastic about supporting peers with communication difficulties and others may not want to be involved at all. Apart from the fact that children’s wishes and personal choices should be treated with respect, how mainstream children feel greatly influences the “success” of this kind of efforts. The practitioners may have a “feeling” about who would be the most appropriate

mainstream children to choose but always as a voluntary activity. The synthesis of the group should be flexible. Students should feel free to leave at any time and new students could be recruited at all times, as long as the analogy of mainstream students and students with special needs remains unaltered. Of course, it is better 'reliable' students to be recruited from the very beginning. In the recruitment of mainstream students it is important to make clear to students that it is a completely free choice to participate in the group, but that they should be responsible to continue taking part until the end, to inform the practitioner about future absences or justification of them or to give one or two week notice before leaving the programme. Furthermore, mainstream peers should understand that one of the aims of the programme is to have fun but another important aim is to support each other and especially those students who are more 'fragile' (without any more detailed or clear references to specific students). Mainstream students should be consciously aware that it is a programme about facing alongside with other students a change and a challenge and that this experience should not be considered as an individualized issue where interaction with other students is not really anticipated.

As far as rewards to students are regarded, more 'appraisal' should not be given to mainstream peers (as 'helpers') in relation to students with C.D., because all peers should be treated in the same way. If there is a problem with the disclosure of the diagnosis of some students with C.D., mainstream peers should be given the explanation that some of the students who take part in the SAG may find the adjustment to the next setting more challenging because of some reasons (without more detailed information about these reasons); however, it is important to influence in some way peer expectations regarding their classmates with C.D., as Disalvo and Oswald (2002) have noted. More able students with C.D. may not wish to be 'stigmatized' by their participation in a social skills programme in the school setting; for these students the participation of mainstream students is an encouraging factor to accept taking part in such a group. Otherwise, the children themselves or their parents may reject the school's suggestion regarding the child's participation in the programme. However, older students attending the secondary school could receive a special appraisal in an emotional or emotional and material way e.g. there could be reference to this programme in the school newspaper (Dockett and Perry, 2005).

Probably a social reward at this age is more appropriate than a material. The main conclusion is that there is a wide range of combinations regarding the synthesis of the group or the content of the programme. Ideas could be picked up by students themselves in the beginning of the procedure or as the procedure evolves. Perhaps students with communication difficulties could make some suggestions about mainstream peers they have good relationships with, if mainstream peers are chosen by the same primary school as students with communication difficulties. It may prove to be very helpful to build on already 'formed' positive relationships. But even in this case it is better all mainstream students to express spontaneously their desire to participate in the group and among all volunteers priority to be given to those who were mentioned by students with communication difficulties.

It is surprising that even emotional and social needs of 'mainstream' peers may be identified during their participation in this group, which are not so evident during the lesson as students do not interact so freely there. Children with lower levels of social sensitivities and sympathy towards others could be identified better than in a "typical" classroom lesson. Sometimes, these children are also in need of support because in this way they may put their personal welfare in danger in the future but also influence in a negative way the lives of others. Generally, the synthesis of the group is a crucial and valuable tool in the hands of the practitioner. It is better some factors, as the analogy, to remain unaltered, because all students need to feel that there is a stable structure in this programme and especially those with communication difficulties. However, if really unexpected problems occur, the practitioner should feel free to try to find the most favourable solution. But it is improbable that very intense problems in students' social interactions would come to the surface, if there is a careful choice of students from the very beginning.

It could also be highlighted that the practitioners should be creative and having 'refined' social skills themselves in order to support such a group which should be 'serious' and 'light-hearted' at the same time. This programme respects the fact that practitioners should have the freedom to make personal choices up to a degree. On the other hand the structure of the programme is a 'safe framework' without being too restrictive which can be included as a transitional activity in the curriculum for students with communication difficulties or other kind of special needs. It could also

be mentioned that in this way more opportunities for art activities could be provided to all students and not only to those belonging to more privileged social groups, as it may be the case for music or art therapy at least in some countries. It is also very important the members of the staff who will support this effort to believe in the beneficial effects that this may have for students, because this is reflected in the degree of their commitment and consequently influences the attitude of students, too. Generally, practitioners should support children's feeling of "belonging to a group", to be very committed to find and to provide the necessary materials to the group and to have the support by other members of the staff themselves and not be isolated, in order to organize some activities for the children, such as having a visit to the new school. One positive element of the SAG programme is that it can be implemented easily in a variety of settings and that there is no need for any kind of specific training for example in art therapy or drama therapy, even though the practitioner should seek information about different activities in written sources or by coming in contact with more specialized practitioners in these areas of art activities, if this is possible.

Limitations of Study

Some limitations of the present research study could be mentioned. As this took place in a school context, there were some factors which were not under my control, such as the choice of student participants; the author could make some suggestions but the final decisions were taken by members of the staff who had more knowledge about this specific context. It was also not easy for the author to come in contact directly with members of the secondary school staff, so as information and material to be collected regarding secondary school. Furthermore it was not possible a visit of the SAG team to secondary school to take place or some members of the secondary staff to come and speak to SAG students, even though these ideas had been discussed. If these could have been included in the programme, this could have become more interesting and useful for all students.

From an organizing point of view, it is not possible SAG to be implemented each year with a similar synthesis, because there are not usually many students with C.D. who intend to go to the same secondary school. It could also prove to be difficult

students with C.D. by many primary schools of a wider area who will go to the same secondary school to be gathered in one primary school in order to take part in SAG meetings, even though this was accomplished in the present research study. Last but not least, sometimes it is challenging mainstream students and their parents to understand clearly the importance of this effort for students with C.D., because a balance should be achieved between sincerity and discretion. Perhaps there should be some sessions only with mainstream students so as this to be discussed and clarified in the beginning or during the whole SAG programme. In addition to this, there could be in the context of SAG a more specific allocation of mainstream students as buddies of specific students with C.D. This is in accordance with Bekman's opinion; he argued that the use of dyads ensures that mainstream peers do not start to play with other nondisabled children as has often been observed in mainstream settings (Beckman, 1983). In the present research project this problem was faced during the participation of the first group of mainstream students, who decided to stop taking part in this effort, when they were asked to interact with the other students of SAG and not only with each other. Therefore, in the case of the first group of mainstream students it was not achieved the enthusiasm of mainstream peers to be maintained, as this has been mentioned in some other studies where peer support was recruited (Baron-Cohen & Howlin, 1993). However, this did not happen again with the second group of mainstream peers.

Key Findings

Regarding the first research question ('Will there be any differences found in the assessment of children's concerns and expectations before and after each part of the approach, as these are reported by children themselves?') there was a positive change in the answers given by all students almost in all cases.

As far the second research question is concerned ('Will the relationships being developed in the SAG be maintained in the new setting?'), there was great similarity between the patterns of interactions reported by children themselves in the end of primary school (peer nomination form in summer term) and in the end of the research project in secondary school (final questionnaire about their transition from primary to secondary school). This finding includes peer relationships which were developed between students with C.D. and mainstream peers (Wen- Teagan, Bailey-

Jerry). However, data deriving from sociograms reveal that during secondary school sessions there was a decline in interactions between mainstream peers and students with C.D. in relation to the final SAG session in primary school. But this could be also attributed to the fact that the sessions were much shorter and there was not enough time given to children in order to feel at ease with the activity and comfortable with each other.

Regarding the next research question ('Were these relationships helpful in the transition of children to secondary school, according to the perspectives of children themselves, their parents and the involved practitioners?'), the majority of all the participants in the research project replied in a positive way. More specifically, according to the main practitioner, this programme was mostly beneficial for 2 students with C.D., Drew and Casey, who were better integrated in secondary school that they would have been without their participation in the group. These were 2 students with C.D. who did not belong to the main feeder primary school but to 2 different primary schools. The principle teacher of pupil support stated that it was "really beneficial" for Drew and Casey that "they met each other before school". She also added that "it was successful this year that many children came together with C.D.". However, she believed that the peer support concept had not "worked", because mainstream students did not have many interactions with students with C.D. She attributed this to the following reason: "Children at this stage become selfish. They are interested about themselves". She also stated that in their school students are being supported adequately to adjust to the new setting through other activities. What the author could add regarding the opinion of this practitioner is that this programme is based on strengthening peer interactions, because in the literature review it has come to the surface that in some inclusive settings, where high functioning children with autism are accepted, teachers are usually occupied monitoring academic progress and disciplinary issues while the practice of inclusion rests primarily on mainstream schoolmates rather than teachers (Cotton, 2002; Ochs et al, 2001). But apart from that it could also be stressed that for students with C.D. interactions between them and furthermore interactions between students with C.D. and their peers need some kind of constant scaffolding by the school (Brewin et al, 2008; Stephens, 2005) and it is more unlikely them to emerge and be sustained

completely spontaneously as the result only of a previous social skills programme or as the result of the empathy, sensitivity and understanding of mainstream peers; for instance in the personal account presented by Cotton (2002) it became obvious that the already existing peer network of Bernard by primary school was not sustained 'naturally' in the secondary school. This case is presented in more depth in the literature review. In the case of the present study it was not accepted by the school a greater number of weekly SAG sessions to take place in the secondary setting in a systematic way; this is in contrast with the opinion expressed by some relevant researchers, such as Jindal-Snape (2010) and Forest et al (2004), that a systematic and planned transition programme should start several months prior to the transition and carry on for several months post-transition. Apart from that the 3 meetings in the secondary school did not take place during the first period of students' transition from primary to secondary school. Moreover, the time available for the 3 sessions in the secondary school was rather limited and the part of group discussion regarding transition to secondary school had to be omitted. These limitations had a negative impact on the effectiveness of the programme and the way this was perceived by some participants, students and adults. The educational psychologist reported that students with C.D. had formed a bond with each other. This may not have been the 'typical friendship' but it was obvious that they were functioning as a group in secondary school. It was not possible to have information by parents of 1 child with C.D. Apart from this case, parents of all other children with C.D. replied that the relationships which were developed in the SAG in primary school were helpful in the transition of children to secondary school. Parents of 3 mainstream students (Alexis, Brett and Jerry) highlighted the factor of social interactions/ meeting new children as beneficial regarding the activities of the SAG and helpful in the children's transition to secondary school.

In the final research question ('Was the experience of taking part in the SAG perceived as positive, according to the views of all participants?'), all SAG students replied that they enjoyed their participation in the SAG. This finding bears a similarity with the conclusion of Yang et al. (2003) and Wolfberg and Schuler (1999) who reported that their programme was mutually enjoyed by all members of the integrated play groups. Furthermore, Whitaker (2004) reported a similar finding

regarding his own research project with peer tutors of children with autism; according to him, all 10 peer tutors of children with autism found the tutoring sessions enjoyable. This study has been presented more analytically in the literature review. Additionally, one more project which could be mentioned was reported by Jones (2007); in this study again all of the peer tutors of children with autism reported that they had enjoyed this experience. This study is being described in greater depth in the literature review. In the present research project students with C.D. as a group enjoyed more their participation in this programme than their mainstream peers. The main practitioner answered that she found enjoyable observing interactions during sessions. The deputy head teacher in the first primary school expressed the opinion that it was difficult for her to organize the fulfillment of this programme, because this was not going to take place in her own school. Furthermore, she highlighted the fact that it is not often to have many students with C.D. who will go to the same secondary school. The deputy head teacher in the second primary school said that she did not find challenging the participation of the school in this research project. Additionally, she said that she would be willing to arrange something similar in the future, because she believed that the SAG was very beneficial to all students; but in this case, she would have had more speakers from secondary school, if they would be willing to do this. The principle teacher of pupil support in secondary school reported that organizing the SAG in secondary school is rather challenging, because it is difficult and time consuming to organize a lunch time activity. More generally, she regarded that this was good as a research idea, but she would not include it each year, because there are already many activities in place in relation to transition to secondary school and students settle in the secondary context. However, she made the positive remark that SAG was beneficial for students with C.D. at the time it took place, because there was the coincidence that year many students with C.D. to come together to secondary school. The educational psychologist in secondary school reported that the group was very successful, because this extended programme during transition helped all children to explore their feelings, as it was pitched at the right level, the tasks were appropriate and it was pupil friendly. The remarks of the educational psychologist are in accordance with the suggestion of Yang et al. (2003); according to this researcher, play sessions

should be tailored to the interests, the developmental capacities and the sociocultural experiences of all players, as this has been mentioned in the literature review. The educational psychologist described the climate of the SAG session as relaxed, but the students were also clear about what they were doing and focused. Therefore, the educational psychologist in secondary school perceived as positive the experience of taking part in the SAG. Finally, parents of all SAG students gave a positive answer to this question, however parents of students with C.D. valued more the participation of their children in the research project. In other similar studies it has been found that parents of mainstream students believed that peer tutoring had a positive impact upon their children (Jones, 2007). Especially, in one other case it has been reported that parents of mainstream students gave a very positive feedback about their children's participation in a programme where their children were the peer tutors of children with autism. The parents of these mainstream students were also willing to recommend the peer tutoring experience to parents of other mainstream students (Whitaker, 2004). This study has also been mentioned in the literature review more analytically. However, there is also a contradiction which could be pinpointed between the research study of Whitaker (2004) and the present research study: in this study parents of mainstream students were more hesitant regarding the evaluation of their children's participation in this project; for example, it was expressed the opinion by some parents that their children would have adjusted satisfactorily to the secondary setting without the participation of their children in this group. In the author's opinion this attitude could be attributed at least partially to the fact that perhaps it was not clarified enough to mainstream students and their parents that one of the main goals of this programme was mainstream peers to support students with C.D. during their transition from primary to secondary school; this happened so as this effort to be discreet towards students with C.D. and their parents, but this probably had also the result this endeavour to be rather underestimated by mainstream students and their parents. Ochs et al (2001) have stated that children whose diagnosis is fully disclosed enjoy more consistent social support in the classroom and on the school playground. Generally, it is important the self-awareness of students with C.D. to be supported in a very sincere way, without taking into account if there is an official statement regarding special educational

needs or not. Additionally, as this has been suggested by Doyle and Iland (2001), mainstream students should be taught to recognize and assist students with ASD, so as mainstream children to be more supportive towards them and to prevent the bullying of them; again mainstream students should be taught to do this, even if there is not any kind of disclosure of an official statement regarding special educational needs or even if such a statement does not exist.

For many of the reasons mentioned in the conclusive chapter the author hopes that there will be some future research projects about this approach and that some practitioners will feel that it is worthwhile to implement this in their own school and with their own students, mainstream or not. As a concluding remark, it could be pinpointed that even subtle changes in the attitude of some mainstream students towards students with special needs could influence the school ethos. At this stage of the evolvement of special education emphasis is given on 'internal' inclusion regarding the students' interactions. A more 'hands on' way to influence the students' attitude can be more effective than mere lectures or posters, according to the educational principle of 'active' learning through personal experiences (Agalliotis, 2000). Systematic small group interventions which could take place constantly in the school setting addressed mainly to more 'fragile' students but with the participation of mainstream peers could contribute greatly to the creation of a more inclusive school ethos in the long term (Jones, 2007). The school ethos needs time to become more 'mature' which means more inclusive; the constant presence of such programmes can have a 'silent but strong effect' in the formation of such an ethos. Even few mainstream students with this attitude could make a difference in the successful educational inclusion of students with special needs. The author believes that the goal towards 'internal' inclusion between students with and without special educational needs should be build on the well-known and hopefully commonly shared expectation that "a little bit of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise." (1 Corinthians 5:6). Even though it was very difficult SAG to be organised, perhaps because it was a new idea, a remarkable co-operation of 3 primary schools was achieved and there was positive feedback by the great majority of all participants, children and adults. In schools where there are other activities orientated to support students during this transition, members of the staff could decide how this could be

combined constructively with already existing programmes or activities. Before the implementation of this educational programme there could be a short preparation part for mainstream peers who will participate as volunteers. In this first part mainstream peers could be informed about the mentality of students with autism. This more 'cognitive' part could precede the interactional part and could strongly empower it. The combination of these 2 parts could lead to a new category of inclusive approaches for students with autism and their mainstream peers, which could be considered as cognitive-interactional and could be called in this way. Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning that apart from all the inclusive efforts for students with autism, there should be also provision for their need to be alone sometimes (Vuletic et al, 2005).