

Strategies by a Teaching Assistant to Support the Classroom Talk of a Child with Communication and Interaction Difficulties in Italy: A Case for Promoting Social Scaffolding Training

Authors : Lorenzo Ciletti, Ed Baines, Matt Somerville

Abstract : Internationally, supporting staff with limited training (Teaching Assistants (TA)) has played a critical role in the education of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Researchers have notably illustrated that TAs support the children's classroom tasks while teachers manage the whole class. Rarely have researchers investigated the TAs' support for children's participation in whole-class or peer-group talk, despite this type of "social support" playing a significant role in children's whole-class integration and engagement with the classroom curriculum and learning. Social support seems particularly crucial for a large proportion of children with SEND, namely those with communication and interaction difficulties (e.g., autism spectrum conditions and speech impairments). This study explored TA practice and, particularly, TA social support in a rarely examined context (Italy). The Italian case was also selected as it provides TAs, known nationally as "support teachers," with the most comprehensive training worldwide, thus potentially echoing (effective) nuanced practice internationally. Twelve hours of video recordings of a single TA and a child with communication and interaction difficulties (CID) were made. Video data was converted into frequencies of TA multidimensional support strategies, including TA social support and pedagogical assistance. TA-pupil talk oriented to children's participation in classroom talk was also analysed into thematic patterns. These multi-method analyses were informed by social scaffolding principles: in particular, the extent to which the TA designs instruction contingently to the child's communication and interaction difficulties and how their social support fosters the child's highest responsibility in dealing with whole-class or peer-group talk by supplying the least help. The findings showed that the TA rarely supported the group or whole class participation of the child with CID. When doing so, the TA seemed to highly control the content and the timing of the child's contributions to the classroom talk by a) interrupting the teacher's whole class or group conversation to start an interaction between themselves and the child and b) reassuring the child about the correctness of their talk in private conversations and prompting them to raise their hand and intervene in the whole-class talk or c) stopping the child from contributing to the whole-class or peer-group talk when incorrect. The findings are interpreted in terms of their theoretical relation to scaffolding. They have significant implications for promoting social scaffolding in TA training in Italy and elsewhere.

Keywords : children with communication and interaction difficulties, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, social scaffolding, teaching assistants, teaching practice, whole-class talk participation

Conference Title : ICAPE 2024 : International Conference on Applied Psychology and Education

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : February 19-20, 2024