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Integration is More Than Just Being There: Improving the Social and Educational Experience of Children with Autism in Mainstream Early Childhood Educational Settings

Professor Mitchell K. Byrne

Lidija Balaz

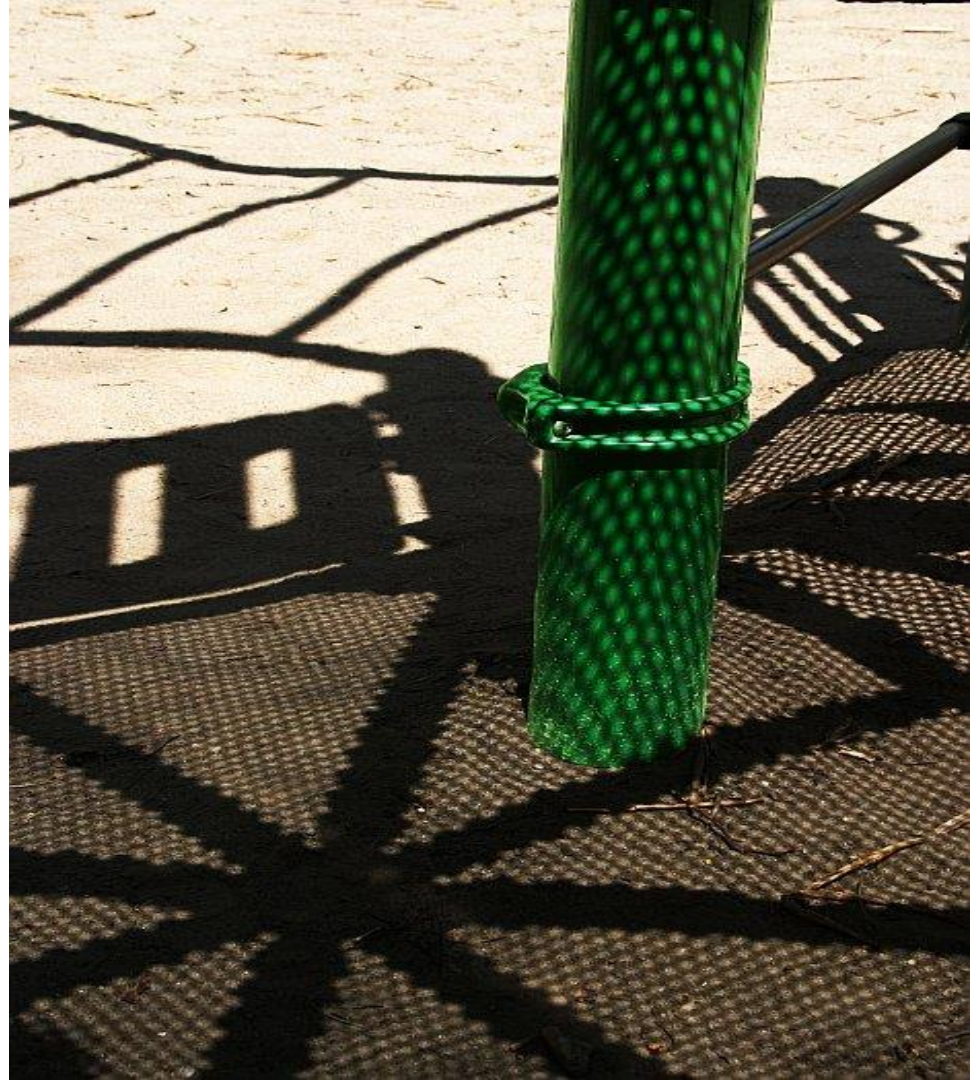
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What good is
mainstream education
if your best friend is a
green pole?

*A Social Skills Program for
students with High
Functioning Autism in
mainstream schools*



Inclusive Education

- Inclusive education is not simply about geographic location within an education system, but also about creating an environment that enhances presence, participation, acceptance & achievement of all students in school (Ainscow, 2007).
- Ramps to enable people with mobility difficulties to access everyday life
- People with Autism need *Social Ramps* to enable access to every day life
- Breaking down prejudice, eradicating stereotyping and building tolerance



Understanding our Peers

- Based on the idea that social-communication difficulties are *functional* deficits that cannot be eliminated
- Equity: more people have ASD than are paraplegic, yet we modify the environment for the walking disabled
 - ASPECT suggest 1 in 70; CDC report 1 in 59
- Modify the environment for socially-disabled by de-stigmatisation & enhancement of competencies of **peers** to relate to ASD



Understanding Our Peers: the Early Years

Lidija Balaz

Balaz, Byrne & Miellet (under review) International Journal of Disability, Development and Education

Children are not immune from forming prejudicial stereo types

- “Children begin developing attitudes about various groups in society as early as ages three to four. Initially such attitudes are quite flexible. However, as children grow older such attitudes become more difficult to change”
- (Debra Byrnes, 1995)





Where do children learn prejudice?

Not just in the home! (although overt and subtle parental behaviours are important)

- Peers
- Teachers
- Media

Children model what they see and hear

Children keep doing behaviours that are rewarded or if they see other people being rewarded for the behavior

Usually social rewards (approval)



Bullying and Discrimination

- The impact of bullying can be long lasting and place the bullied child at significant risk of long-term harm (Vidourek, King, & Merianos, 2016).
- Discrimination, often shown as **social rejection** in schools, is detrimental to children's development (Kinnear et al., 2016).
- Evidence from studies into early childhood education support the existence of exclusion and bullying even at this early developmental stage (Cameron & Kovac, 2017; Heinze et al., 2015; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Tonya & Bryan, 2018) .





Bullying and ASD

Children with ASD are more susceptible to bullying than their peers without ASD and are more at risk due to their impaired social communication skills, stereotypical behaviours and limited range of interests that make them “stand out” from other children and likely targets of ridicule (Hwang et al. (2018).

Furthermore, children with ASD have difficulty forming and maintaining close friendships or positive peer relationships, an established protective factor against peer victimization (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015).

Children with ASD generally don’t “look” different, leading to the assumption that their behaviours are characterological (or the consequence of bad parenting)



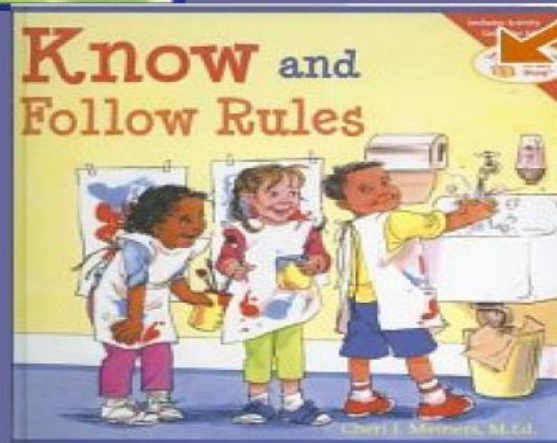
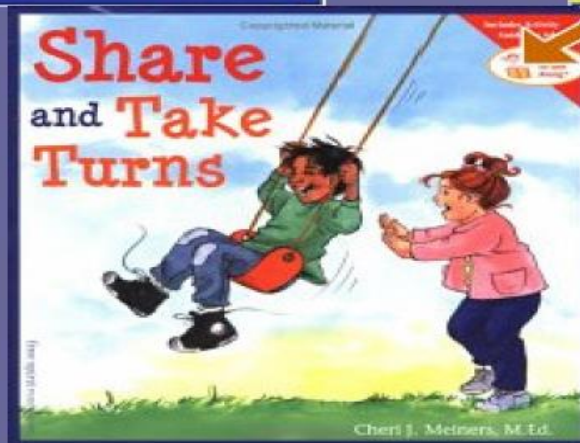
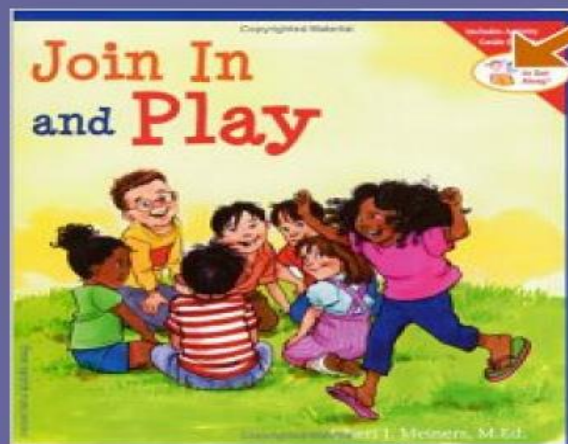
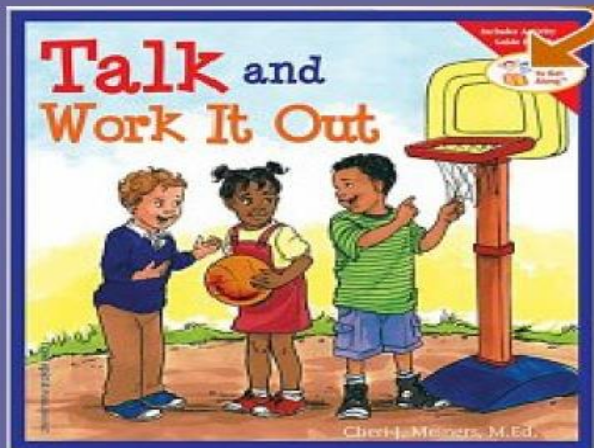
How have professionals responded to support children with ASD in mainstream environments?



- Change the child with Autism so that they fit the social stereotype of the mainstream environment better
- Programs to assist children with ASD to maximise their developmental opportunities are important!

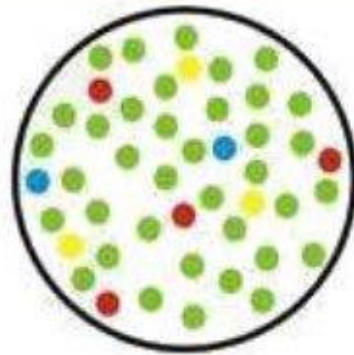


Student Books

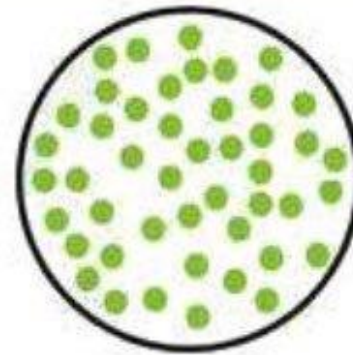


Cheri J. Meiners (2005). Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

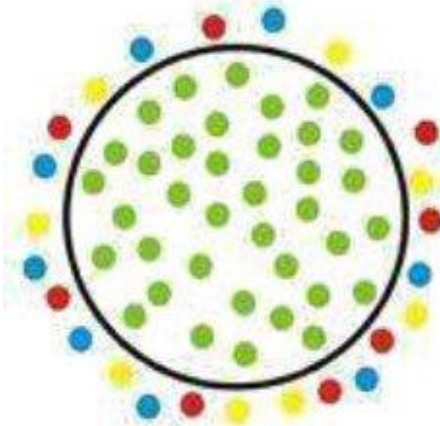
What do we
mean by
inclusion?



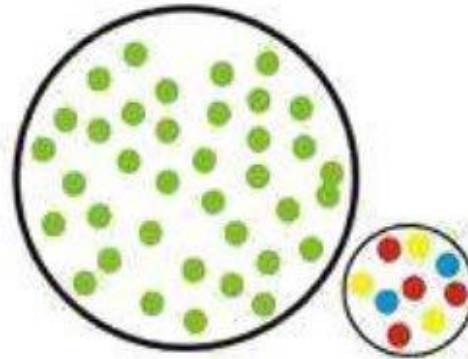
Inclusion



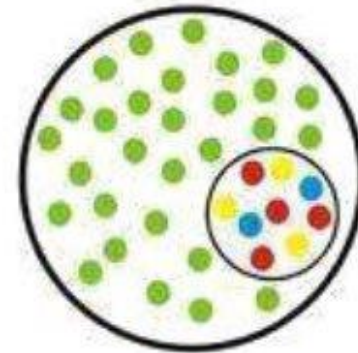
Assimilation



Exclusion



Segregation



Integration



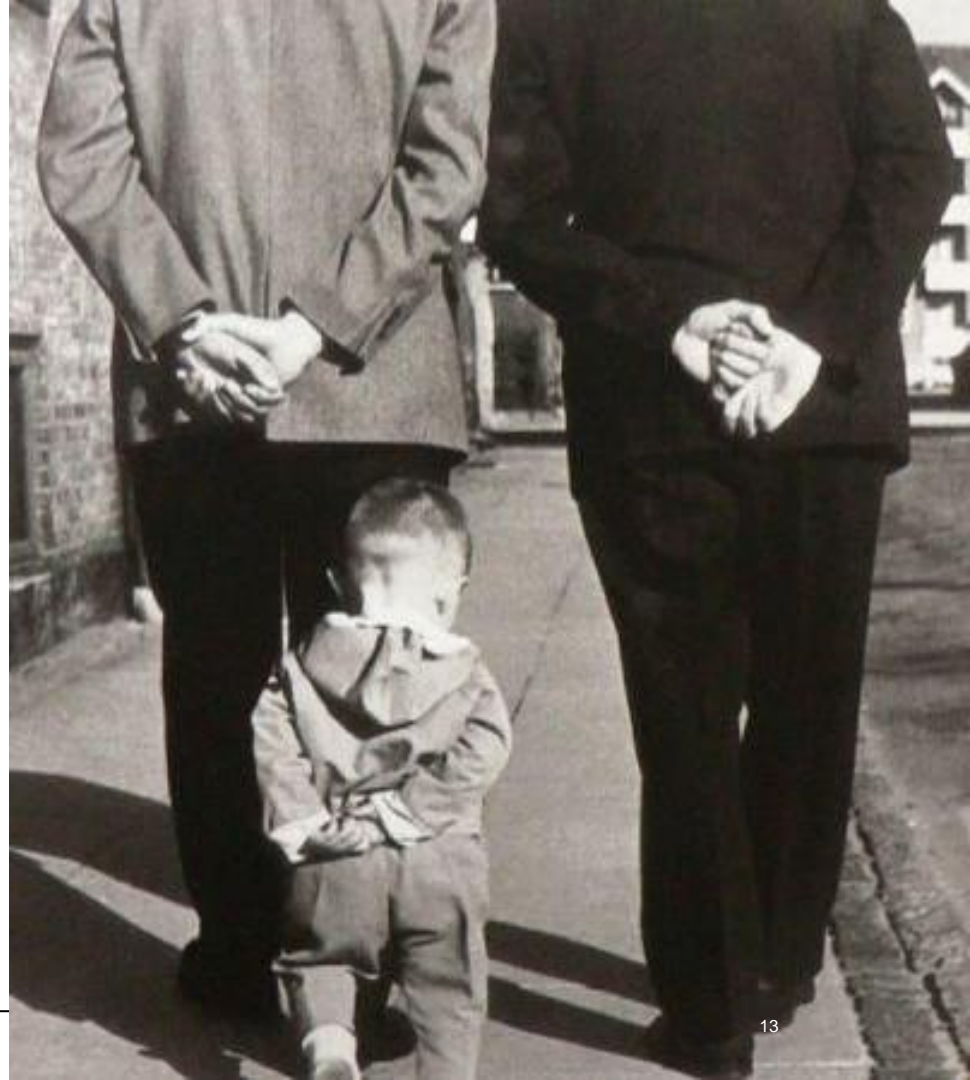
The importance of the social environment

Peers copy bullying behaviours
(Sijtsema et al., 2014).

Social role modelling



Potential to use similar processes to
attenuate bullying .



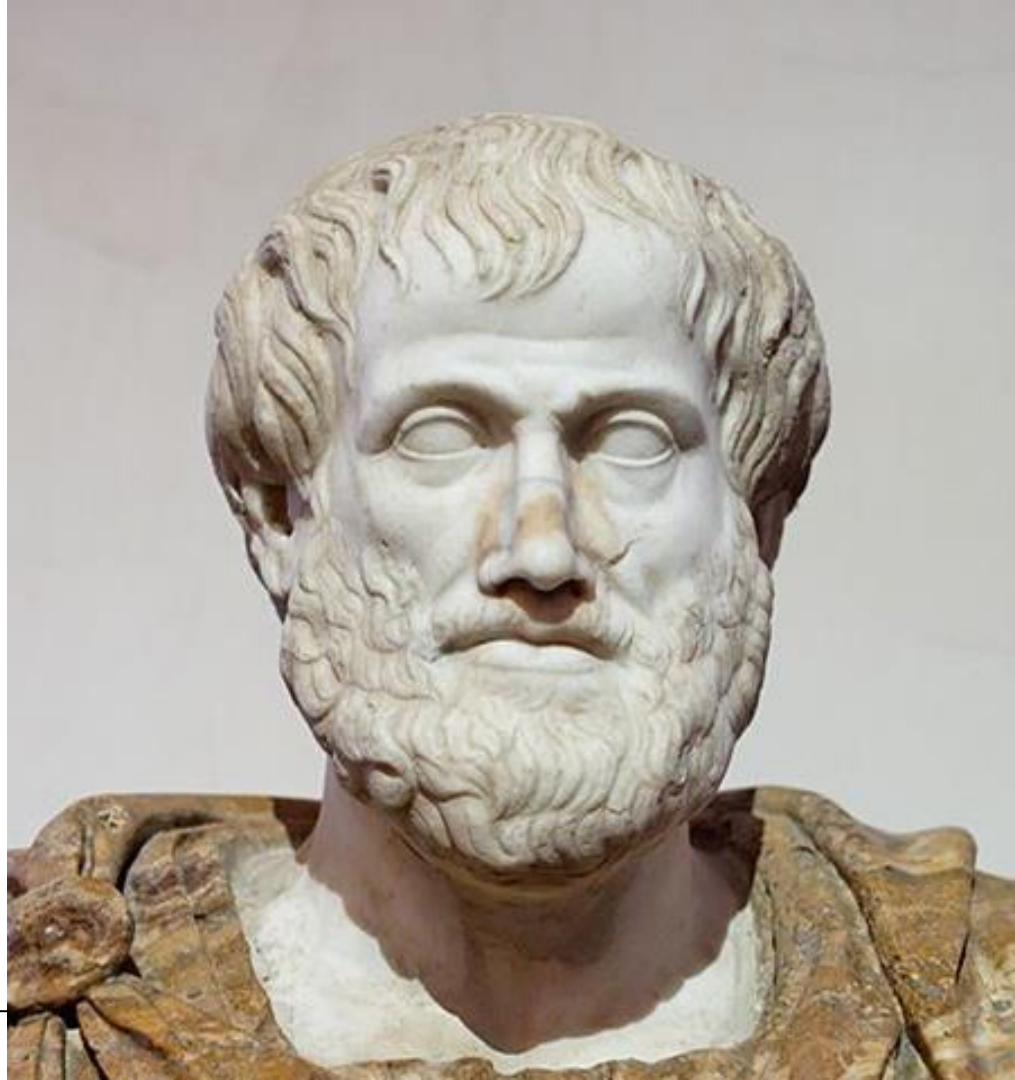
Understanding Our Peers

- Staniland & Byrne (2013) developed and assessed the effects of the autism anti-stigma program '**Understanding our Peers**' on typically-developing adolescent boys
- Followed up with adolescent girls by Ranson & Byrne (2014)
- Descriptive information, which emphasises the degree of similarity between students with HFA and their peers.
- Explanatory information, which emphasises the lack of control students with HFA have over their symptoms.
- Directive information, which gives instruction and guidance on how to interact with students with HFA.
- Improvements in knowledge and attitudes and some improvement in behavioural intentions



Implications

- Typically developing students may need explicit instruction on the necessary skills to successfully engage with peers with HFA to reduce their uncertainty and increase their confidence to act in line with positive attitudes
- Is high school too late?
- Aristotle said: **“Give me a child until he is 7 and I will show you the man.”**

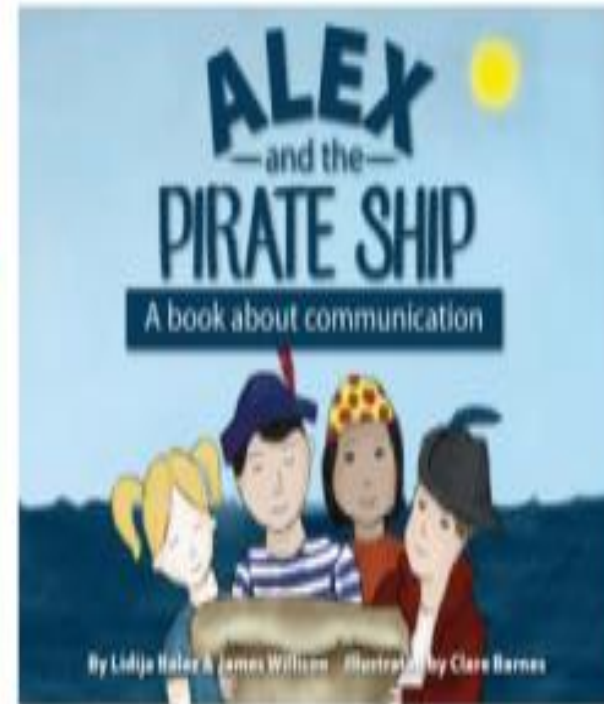
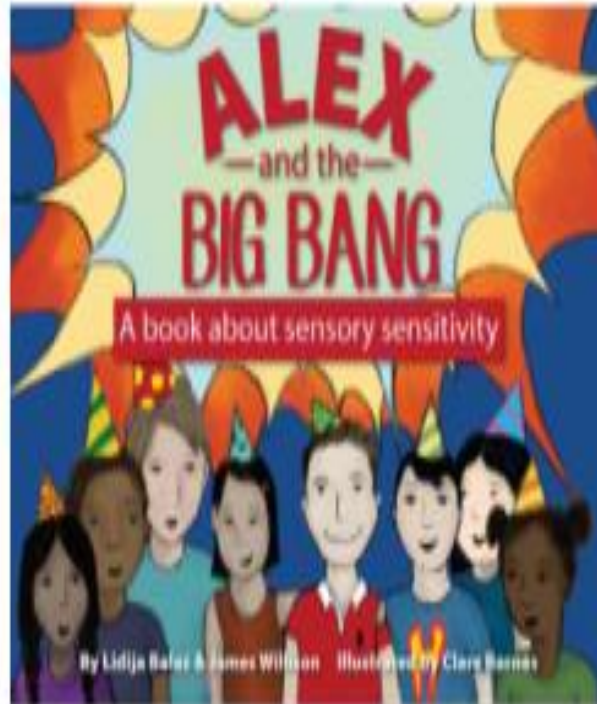
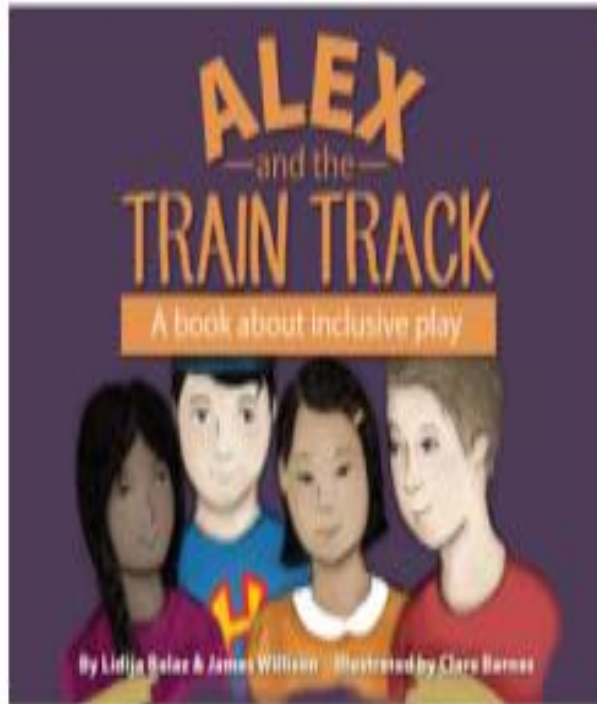


Understanding Our Peers: The Early Years

Restricted & repetitive behaviours

Sensory sensitivities

Difficulties with social communication



Goals

- Reduce bullying
 - Verbal
 - Physical
- Enhance engagement
 - Inclusion by typically developing peer
 - Social participation by child with autism
- Enable peer initiated problem solving



The Intervention

- 3 story books integrated into “story time”
- “Educator Manual” produced to provide guidance on discussion of story content & ideas to extend learning through play
- Each book read for 2 weeks (6 weeks for all three) & discussed by children with educator facilitation.
- Repeated after mid-point data collection





This is Alex.

Today is Monday. He is wearing his favourite super hero shirt, his blue train conductor hat and his super fast running shoes.

Alex goes to preschool on Mondays.

Do you have a favourite shirt, hat and shoes?



Goal: to introduce children to the restrictive and repetitive behaviours of Autism and practice positive social behaviours
(knowledge & skills)

What to do as the story is read?

What to talk about after the story has been read?

Book 1 - Alex and the Train Track

Lesson Plan

Goal: To introduce children to the restrictive and repetitive behaviours of Autism, and practice positive social behaviour.

Story time: What to do as the story is read

- Gather the children to the regular group story area
- The first time the story is read, hold up the book cover and ask, "What do you think this story is about?" This will encourage the children's attention. Discuss answers briefly.
- During the first week read through the story each time completely to help all children grasp the story plot. Respond to the children's comments as appropriate.
- During the second week, pause during readings to facilitate engagement. As an example, the following questions may be asked:

- Q1 "Do you have a favourite shirt, hat or shoes?"
- Q2 "What toys do you like to play with most?"
- Q3 "Do you like playing trains with your friends?"
- Q4 "Where do you think the missing pieces are?"
- Q5 "Does it look like William has a lot of friends?". "Why do you think he is playing all by himself?". "What do you think William would like his friends to do?". "How could you be a kind friend to William?"
- Q6 "How come William isn't talking to Alex?". "What do you think Alex is feeling?". "What would you feel if your friend was ignoring you?"

Q7 "What could Alex do?". "What would you do?". "What would be some not very nice things to do?". "What would a kind friend do?"

Q8 "Were Alex and his friends being kind to William?"

Discussion: What to talk about after the story has been read

Ensure all children have an opportunity to respond and encourage a response from any child who appears less engaged.

Talk about the Plot:

- Why were Alex and his friends looking for the 2 pieces of train track? Where were they?
- What did Alex do? (Asked William). What else could have Alex done?

It is particularly important that you ask the children the following question:

Why is William only moving the train backward and forward?

Possible answers and suggested teacher comments are:

- He likes the way it feels in his hands
- He likes to watch the way it moves
- He doesn't yet understand different ways to play with the train

Data collected

- Observations of peer interactions with 24 children diagnosed with autism or screened as likely to have a diagnosis and in the process of formal diagnosis
- All children aged between 3 to 5 years
- 9 ECEC centres
- 523 typically developing children enrolled across the centres
 - Opt out option (none opted out)

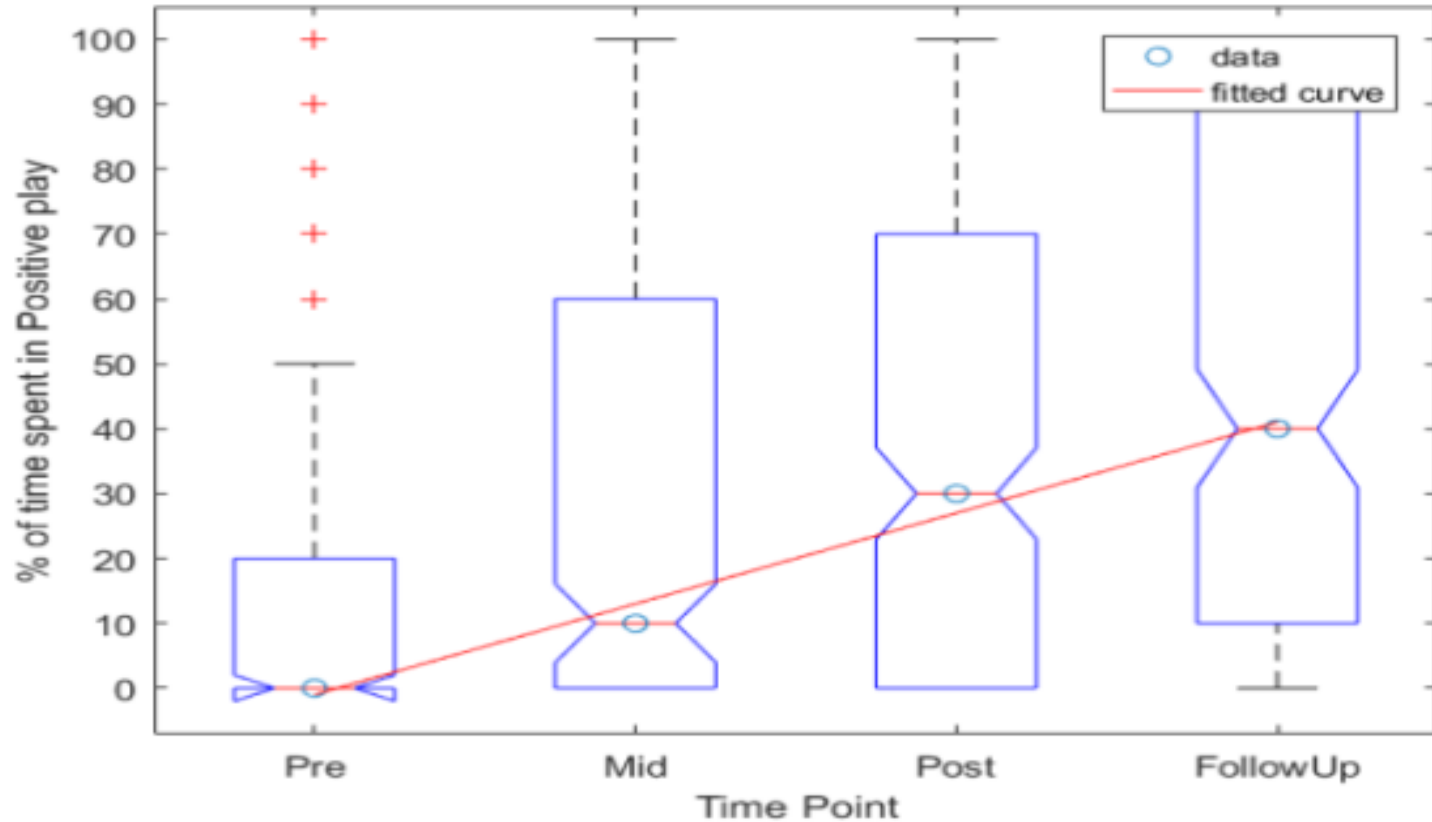


Measure

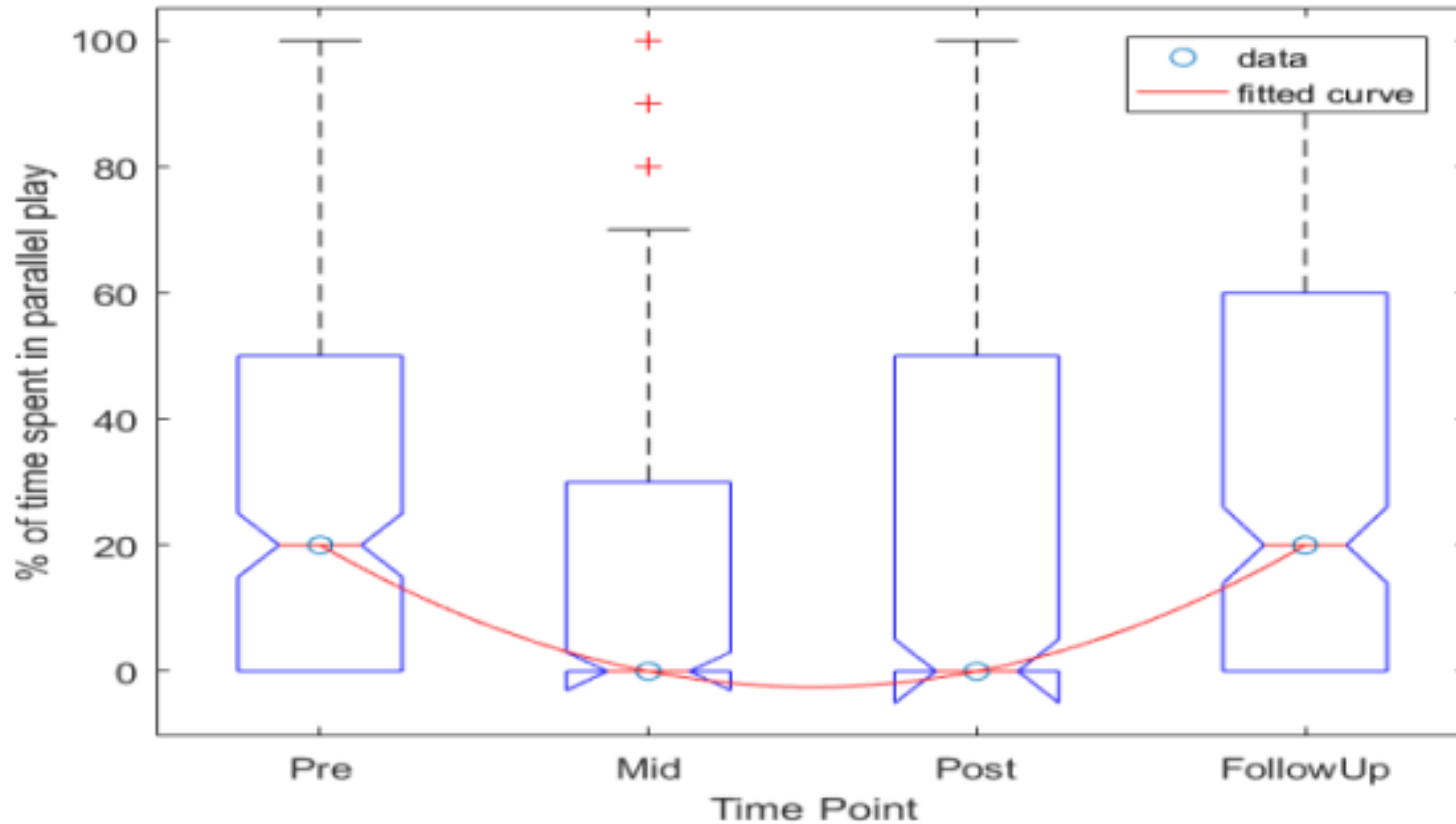
- Time spent in each type of play/interaction
 - Solitary play
 - Parallel play
 - Positive engagement
 - Negative verbal behaviour
 - Negative physical behaviour
 - 2 hours of observation per child per time point
 - baseline
 - Mid point (6 weeks)
 - Conclusion (12 weeks)
 - Follow up (18 weeks)
- 25% co-rated by 3 independent raters. Kappa's around .97



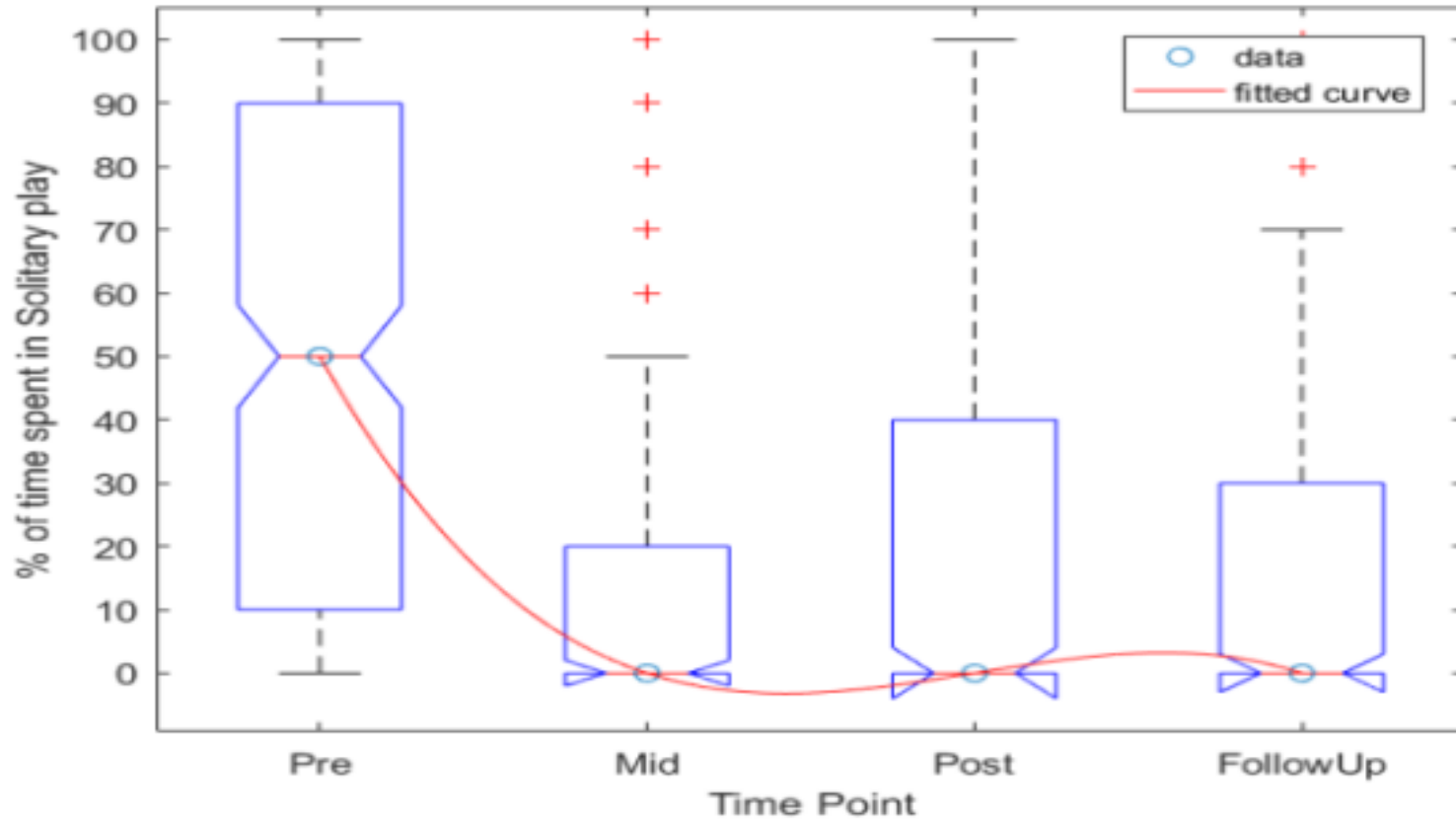
Results – Positive Play



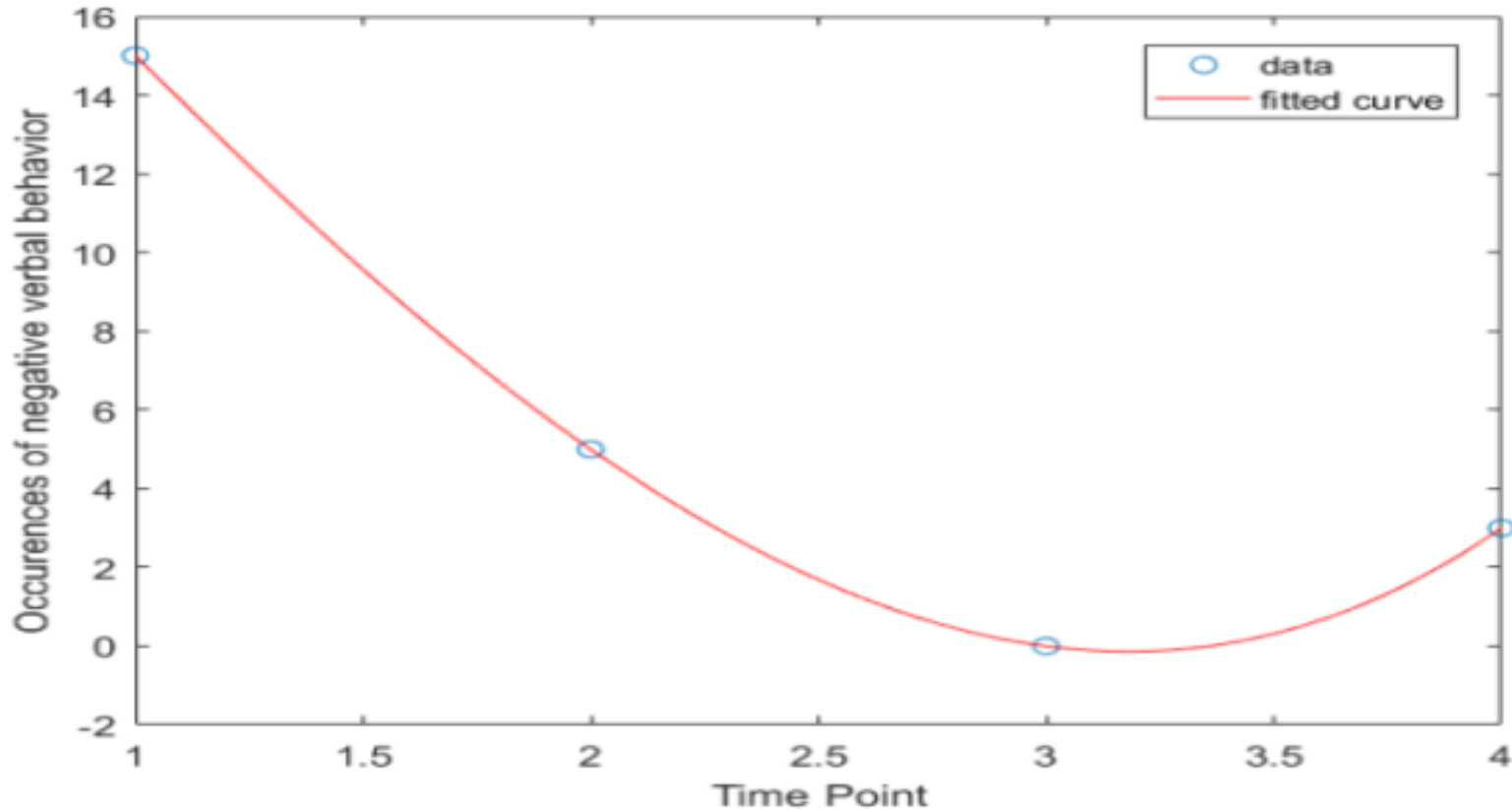
Results – Parallel Play



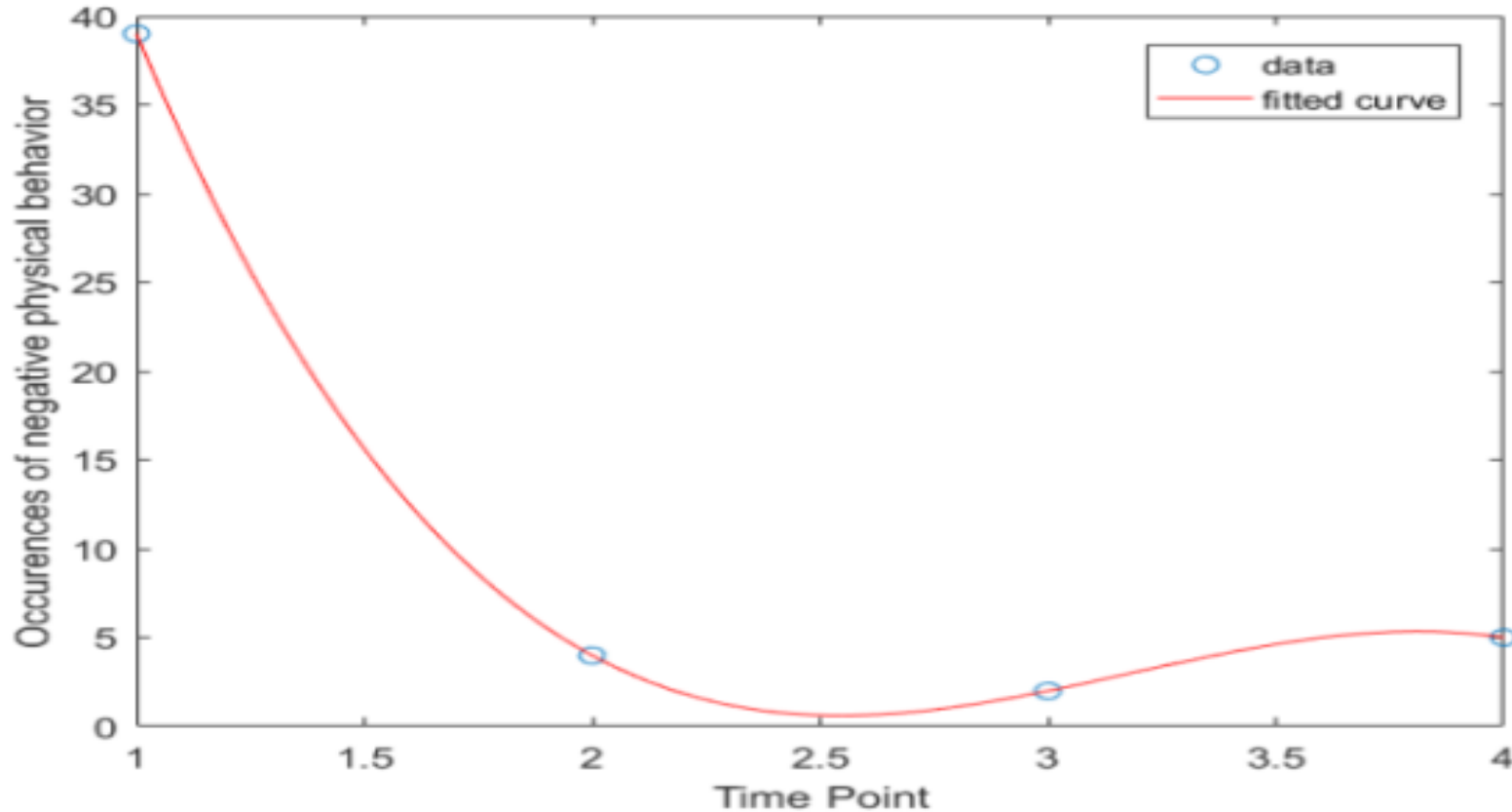
Results – Solitary Play



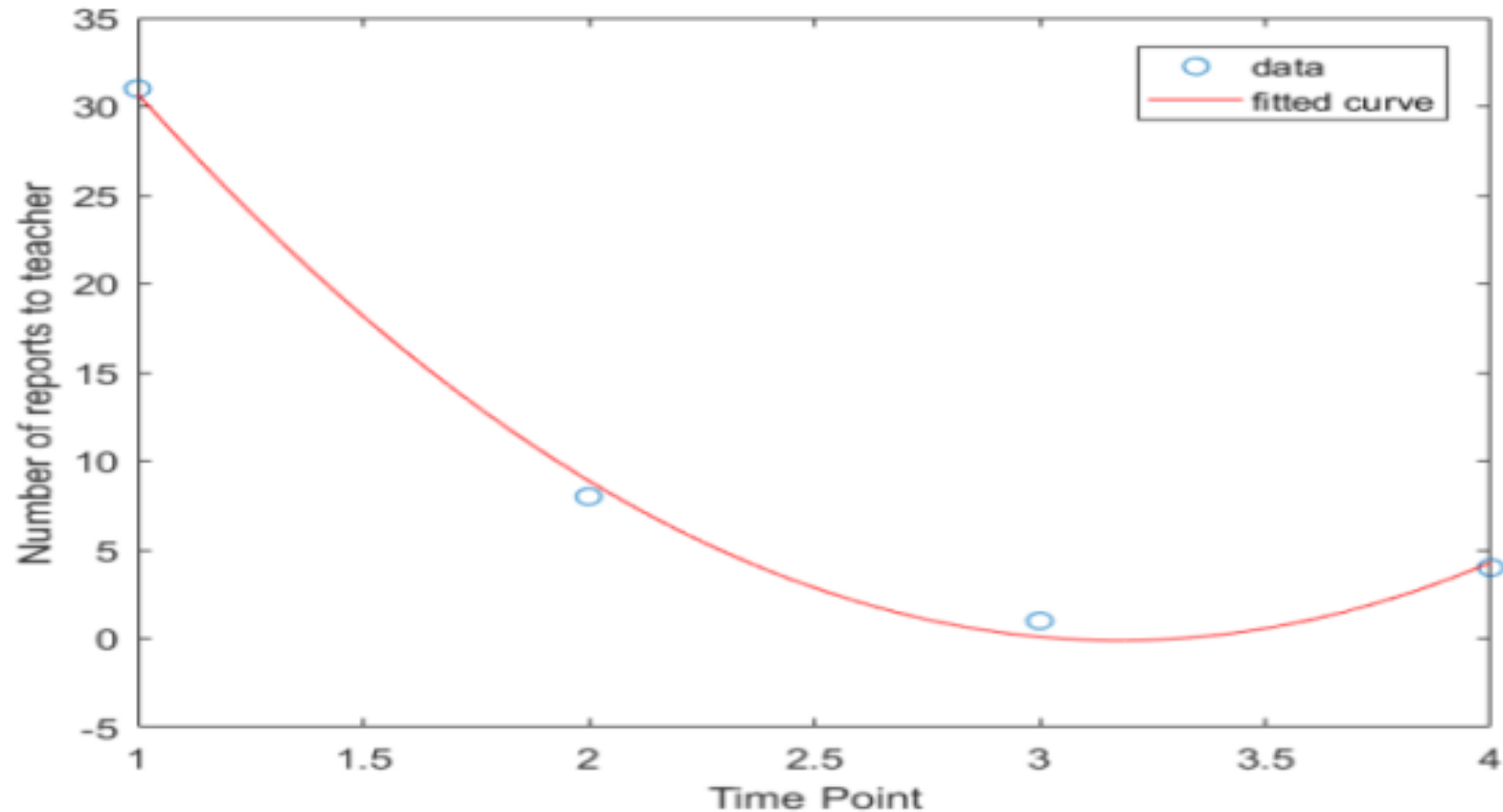
Results – Negative Verbal Behaviour



Results – Negative Physical Behaviour



Results – Reports to Teacher



Interview with Educators

- The stories were engaging & interesting
- Children participated well & demonstrated empathy, critical thinking, & problem solving
- Observed children referencing the stories during free play e.g. “s/he is still learning how to play with others”
- Saw children explaining concepts to new children
- Observed reduced frustration & increased patience
- Children with autism seen to have an increased friendship circle, especially among the older children
- Children asked for the stories to be read again after study ended
- Some parents sought the stories as a way to talk with their child who had autism



Early Years Learning Framework & UOP

UOP compliments the EYLF

- **Belonging:** In particular for the child with Autism
- **Being:** In the present, how to build relationships with others, no matter what their difference, and engage in the complexities of everyday life
- **Becoming:** Growth and participation, not only for the child with autism, but also for the typically developing peers



EYLF Principles & UOP

As such, it also aligns with the **principles** that guide practice:

1. **Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships**

Supports children to have knowledge and confidence in their ability to form relationships with all children and to acquire the skills to do this in ways that are respectful and positive.

2. **Partnerships**

Opportunities to engage and support all families with potential to extend learning into the home and community environment.

EYLF Principles & UOP

3. High expectations and equity

Provides opportunities to address inequities and promote a culture of empathy, kindness and inclusiveness among children, educators, families and community.

Recognises children's agency and potential for advocacy.

4. Respect for diversity

Supports children to learn about similarities and difference and about interdependence and how we can learn to live together.

And specifically... *Learning Outcomes*

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- *Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation*

UOP books support outcomes by:

- Providing children with simple explanations for peer behaviours
- Models appropriate and respectful language
- Models to children how to solve social problems like sharing during cooperative play.

National Quality Standards & UOP

QA5: *Relationships with Children*

5.2 – Relationships between children

“Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships”

5.2.1 – Collaborative learning

“Children are supported to collaborate, learn from and help each other”

5.2.2 – Self-regulation

“Each child is supported to regulate their own behavior, respond appropriately to the behavior of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts”

Conclusions & Next Steps

- Easily disseminated naturalistic low cost intervention that appears to enhance the educational experience of children with autism in conventional settings
- May work best with older children (4 to 5 years)
- Does it increase assessment ratings of ECEC centres?
- Does it ameliorate discrimination of other populations?
- Trial within early primary (Kindergarten and year 1)
- Current international research with Gary O'Reilly and Sonia Morris at University College Dublin combined with Pablo

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