

Bridging the gap

Peter Berrill shares the methodology and outcomes of *Bridges in Social Understanding* – a curriculum for building social skills in children with autism

ILLUSTRATION BY Christine Rösch

Research has shown that most autistic adults face significant challenges in gaining and maintaining employment, despite academic achievement.

They experience persistent social and communication problems regardless of intervention, with research highlighting poor generalisation and maintenance of social skills training (Howlin, 2014).

In 2016, I attended a Bridges in Social Understanding training session (Pownall and Yong, 2016) and took away important points that would help me explain the need for a social curriculum to education professionals. One point was the comparison that, just as maths is a skill children learn intellectually (from basic concepts in primary to complex in secondary) and is not intuitive, social understanding for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is cognitively acquired and is not intuitive. It cannot, therefore, be learnt through short-term 'blocks' of teaching, any more than maths can (Pownall and Yong, 2016).

Social understanding

Bridges is a dynamic platform that enables an evidence-based approach

to intervention. The online system establishes a record of each child's abilities before they begin their learning. It then generates ongoing outcome measurements for every module of learning to help evaluate how they are responding. The baseline measures and progress measures are completed online (see figure 1 overleaf), and in my school context they were completed in conjunction with the class teacher.

The majority of the resources for teaching each lesson are online and ready to use, which helps a great deal with the amount of preparation and planning that normally goes into social skills groups. The intermediate and advanced level curriculums span approximately three academic years. The overall objective is to develop a process of paced learning that builds a scaffold of social understanding and skills for able autistic students, and to integrate it into their school experience.

The training and presentation of the social curriculum makes clear that social understanding and social skills involve complex concepts and processes that develop at different levels of maturity, and these are reflected in the systematic and sequential curriculum levels—from knowing how to share your opinions (intermediate level), to learning to be assertive (advanced level).

Bigger picture

The curriculum has underpinnings based on difficulties with theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith, 1985), leading to an overt analysis to compensate for the difficulties in understanding how their behaviour affects others. The content works on the premise that there are intrinsic issues with the motivation to please others, so scenarios are broken down to make explicit the possible thoughts and feelings of others, and specific emphasis is placed on providing social information that encourages the child to 'buy in' to their own social learning.

The central coherence theory is addressed by considering the difficulties that children with ASD have in drawing together information and seeing it in a wider context. The bias towards detail-focused processing (Happé and Frith, 2006) is addressed in the curriculum as lessons build on one another and learning modules are interconnected, with explicit links made between concepts. This integrates individual aspects of social learning into the bigger picture of social functioning (in line with the notion of 'weak central coherence'); for example, building on taking turns in conversation, which is needed in order to compromise, which together work towards being assertive. By contrast, a discrete topic-based approach to social skills development in response to observed needs may, in fact, compound an ASD individual's inherent restrictions on seeing how each element of learning fits together. This may contribute to restricted generalisation and permanence of skills.

Curriculum outcomes

I feel that this social understanding curriculum is the most comprehensive in terms of being underpinned by cognitive theory, and is the first social curriculum that offers support with social understanding/skills and strategies progressively from the primary years to early adulthood with a very structured approach. The limitation is that it is a relatively new curriculum, so there is no long-term UK outcomes data to draw from yet, although the developers have used the curriculum successfully in Singapore over the longer term. I have found that there have been positive outcomes anecdotally in the shorter term for our more able students, but not all students will be able to access this curriculum; for example those with moderate-severe language difficulties or significant behavioural difficulties.

We found that pupils who started



accessing the social curriculum at Key Stage 3 accepted it and could ‘buy in’ to the curriculum more than the majority of those who we piloted it with starting in Key Stage 4. At this stage, for example, some pupils refused on the premise that they ‘know it all’ (even at the assertiveness level, when this was clearly not shown in their responses!). However, all students who went on to fully access the curriculum have made good progress across all modules completed so far. For instance, significant positive results were seen in the percentage of students using the targeted skills ‘some-most of the time’ post-training in a Key Stage 3 group for module 1 (see figure 1).

Curriculum delivery

Some Bridges classes have been delivered to a whole class (up to six students) where appropriate, others in smaller groups or pairs, and occasionally there are one-to-ones where there has not been an appropriate peer group. Where possible, class teachers were involved in jointly delivering and supporting the curriculum with the SLT. This was more common across Key Stage 3 classes, and the greatest examples of generalisation would happen here; for example, the teacher follows up key messages such as ‘think it in your head’.

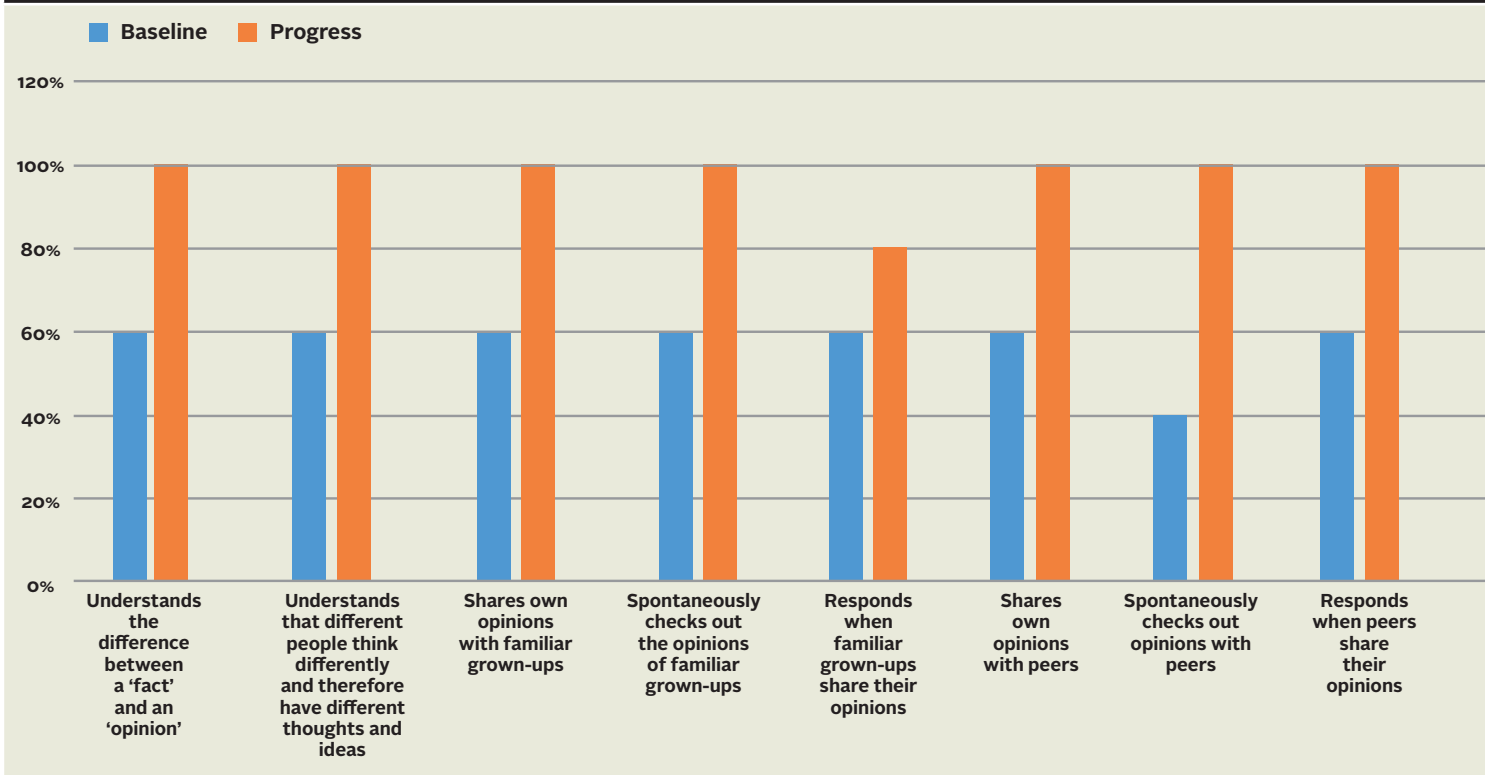
“Bridges is a dynamic platform that enables an evidence-based approach to intervention”

We found it logistically harder in Key Stage 4 classes, where the class teachers were subject leads and had to teach subjects during our sessions. However, enthusiastic and skilled learning support assistants have been able to support the follow up of session content; for example reinforcing that it is okay if someone else disagrees or has a different opinion. The greatest challenge, therefore, is ensuring that generalisation is happening, but the curriculum content reinforces this point throughout and sets up ‘challenges’ to help make this best practice. For example, after creating a ‘people sketch’ about a friend in one session (facts about them, interests, etc.) it is their challenge to

invite that friend to do an activity with them that is relevant to their friend’s interest (e.g. going to the cinema).

At Eagle House School we have the benefit of close multidisciplinary working and the SLTs have also been able to deliver some Bridges classes with occupational therapists (OTs) or assistant psychologists, which has led to a more rounded perspective with particular areas of session content. For example, in the ‘how people see me’ module, the OT was able to draw out information from the pupils about their life skills and help discuss and set relevant independence targets based on their assessments and knowledge of the pupils’ skills. Eagle House

Figure 1: Eagle House School (Sutton) – Opinions (how people think)



School Mitcham (the primary school) has also started using the Bridges curriculum with some Key Stage 2 pupils during the past two years, so it will be interesting to see the longer-term impact of those transitioning to our secondary school who continue to access a curriculum that builds on what has been learnt already. ■

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References & resources

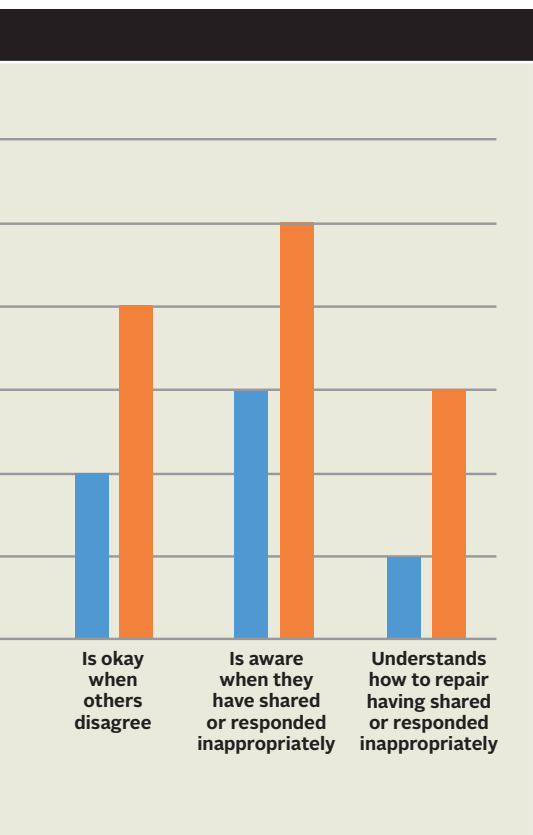
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