

Introduction

The inclusion of disabled¹ children in all aspects of education is acknowledged by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) as a fundamental human right (Article 3). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) has also identified inclusive education as an approach to address the learning needs of young children, particularly those who are vulnerable to marginalization. In the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children affirm that 'early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child ... to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities and society' (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

Disability scholars argue that the practice of inclusive education, despite its robust rhetoric, often falls short of its promise because it tends to be conceived as simply positioning disabled children alongside non-disabled peers (Slee, 2011). For early childhood inclusive education to be truly transformative, a fundamental shift in the understanding of disability must occur (Acedo & Nusbaum, 2020; Mackenzie, Cologon, & Fenech, 2016). Whereas disabilities are traditionally regarded as biopsychological deficits that require fixing, disability scholars and advocates have instead focused on dismantling the societal, institutional, attitudinal, and environmental barriers that prevent individuals from full participation (Burchardt, 2004; Tregaskis, 2004). They reframe disability as not only a biopsychological phenomenon but also a sociological and experiential one (World Health Organization, 2002). A shift towards a socially minded understanding of disability does not necessarily render individual interventions irrelevant, but foregrounds the removal of participatory barriers as the overarching goal.

¹ We adopt the terms *autistic*, *disabled*, or *on the autism spectrum*, consistent with the preferences of many disability and autistic advocates for identity-first language over person-first language (Brown, 2011).

Within the autistic community, the neurodiversity movement pushes for a similarly transformative understanding with regard to brain functioning and questions the very notions of normality and disability. Like biodiversity, which is seen as critical to the sustenance and health of ecosystems, neurodiversity asserts the value of neurological variation, promoting the recognition of different forms of brain wiring, which manifest in different ways of perceiving the world and others, none intrinsically defective or inferior (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2013; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2012). All forms of neurological diversity are understood as natural states of variation. Differences are not posited as good or bad, especially not in reference to neurotypicality as the ideal. Conceptualizations of difference are offered that foreground lived experiences and embrace intersectionality and fluidity (Broderick & Ne'Eman, 2008; Brown, Ashkenazy, & Onaiwu, 2017; Milton, 2014a, 2014b). From this perspective, autism is regarded as both a difference and a disability, with disability being a function of the limitations caused by the lack of attention and accommodation to the needs of autistic persons (den Houting, 2018; Kapp, 2020).

The neurodiversity framework has brought about shifts in discourses and initiatives around autism that depart markedly from those of traditional clinical and educational practices. These include the endorsement of identity-first language (e.g. autistic person) over person-first terminology (e.g. person with autism) (Brown, 2011). Also included is the rejection of labels like 'high-functioning' versus 'low-functioning' autism because of the judgmental valences inherent in those labels and the ways in which they negate strengths and obscure challenges (Sequenzia, 2013). Neurodiversity advocates support educational and therapeutic programmes that affirm autistic identities and experiences and object to interventions designed to eliminate and mask autistic traits (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Devita-Raeburn, 2016).

Although references to neurodiversity are rare in the early childhood education literature, there are natural alignments between the goals of inclusive education and the neurodiversity approach. Neurodiversity affirms the value of autism, promotes the achievement of self-directed goals, centers quality of life, and prioritizes the experiences and views of autistic individuals. Similarly, the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (2018) identifies as essential inclusive practices: building on children's strengths, promoting interest-based learning within naturally occurring, meaningful routines, reducing barriers to participation and learning, and responding to families' priorities. These practices are promoted by the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center as *authentic child assessments*

(2020a), *building on child strengths* (2020b) and *identifying child strengths* (2020c). Teachers usually rely on their own observations, as well as parent reports and developmental checklists as sources of information, but lack the tools and methods for systematically analysing and documenting displays of interests and strengths as they occur within naturally occurring interactions.

Contributions of Conversation Analysis to Inclusive and Neurodiversity-Affirming Education

The methods of conversation analysis (CA) contribute to the shared commitments of inclusive education and neurodiversity by: (1) surfacing dimensions of communicative competence in autistic children that were previously undocumented and largely unrecognized, and (2) identifying interactional processes that foster or constrain children's participation in communication exchanges. In this chapter, we demonstrate the ways in which CA methodology is uniquely suited for these aims and we review findings from CA studies illustrating this point. We will then offer examples of how early childhood educators might use insights from CA to identify autistic children's communicative competencies within everyday interactions, and to understand how interactions can be mediated to support their efforts of promoting inclusion and neurodiversity.

Surfacing Autistic Communicative Competence

Autism is defined diagnostically by difficulties in social interaction and communication, with a wide spectrum of linguistic competencies represented among autistic communicators, from non-verbal to highly verbal (American Psychological Association, 2013). While there is a growing body of studies examining strengths associated with autism across domains (Bar-on-Cohen, 2017; Remington & Fairnie, 2017; Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015), much of the current research and clinical literature about autistic interaction and communication reflects a deficit frame. The performance of autistic children is overwhelmingly measured against neurotypical norms and limited to clinical contexts; yet, the degree to which educators can understand autistic students through a strength-based lens is highly dependent on whether they are able to recognize the students' abilities in everyday contexts, especially when those abilities manifest in ways that are unconventional or unfamiliar (Vincent & Ralston, 2020).

Adopting a CA lens for observing autistic children's interaction and communication opens opportunities for discerning competencies that may be overlooked in traditional research and assessment methods. The observer/analyst, however, does not set out expressly to document moments of success. On the contrary, CA is a descriptive and not a prescriptive approach. In CA, what constitute moments of breakdown or progress are not determined by externally imposed concepts of 'inappropriate' or 'appropriate' behaviours, but are rather signalled by the participants themselves within the dynamics of the ongoing interaction. A breakdown, for example, might be made visible by a participant's initiation of a conversational repair (Geoffrey, Makoto, & Sidnell, 2013), where the speakers fix problems of (mis)understanding. Unconventional means of participation are not presumed to be problematic; nor are they ignored when they are referenced as sources of interactional trouble. By giving detailed attention to what autistic children actually do in interaction, CA studies can disrupt stereotypic understandings of autistic communication and suggest strategies for neurodiversity-affirming communication and teaching strategies.

Reframing Conversational Coherence

A common diagnostic trait and intervention target for autism is difficulties initiating and maintaining reciprocal interactions and conversations with others. These difficulties have been characterized in the clinical literature as difficulties staying on topic; difficulties providing novel, relevant information; perseveration; and decreased initiations and responses (Sng, Carter, & Stephenson, 2018). Correspondingly, most educational programmes targeting social and conversational skills have focused on lessening or eliminating these deficits in autistic students (Ke, Whalon, & Yun, 2017). One aspect that is rarely addressed in the intervention literature is how to facilitate change in the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the teachers and other social partners so that they are better able to recognize and foster unique interactional competences that autistic children already display.

Ochs and Solomon (2005) observed that when conversational topics are difficult to understand, the autistic children in their study consistently remained engaged, but did so through expressions that were 'not quite in synch with the focal concern' yet still connected to the unfolding conversation (p. 158). One way the children accomplished this was by making a conversational contribution that was relevant in some way to the immediately prior turn, even if it did not fit the overarching scope of the larger

conversation. Another strategy employed by some of the children for dealing with confusing personal statements shared by conversation partners was by invoking a piece of impersonal cultural knowledge that was topically related to the preceding personal statement. For example, one child responded to his mother's comment that it had been 'a long morning' by saying, 'In the summer, there's long days and short nights'. Whereas a traditional deficit-oriented perspective might have dismissed these types of utterances as incoherent, the authors showed that the children's contributions were proximally relevant and strategic. Though idiosyncratic from a neurotypical point of view, this conversation pattern reflects a capacity for details over the gestalt that autistic activist Phil Schwarz (2004) argues is intrinsically valuable.

In the excerpts below, we offer an example of repetitive language and delayed echolalia (also known as scripting), considered common symptoms of autism. The segments were extracted from video recordings of the everyday activities of an autistic child, Ben (pseudonym) and his family members (Sterponi's data corpus; more information can be found in Sterponi, deKirby, and Shankey, 2015). Diagnosed with autism at 3;6 years, Ben was 6;3 years old at the time of the video recording. His linguistic ability, as per the Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) measure (5.85), exceeded that of typically developing children of his age. The transcript was selected from bath time, a favourite moment of Ben's day. Throughout the duration of the bath, Ben was playing with his water toys and interacting with his mum, who was seated next to the bathtub.

Extract 17.1

- 1 Mum Ben the water is cold.
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 Mum ↑time to get out.
- 4 Ben I'm not cold. I wanna stay in.
- 5 Mum you'll get cold soon.
- 6 (3.0) ((mom gets up and looks for a towel under the sink))
- 7 Ben winter is coming.

After approximately 15 minutes in the bath, Mum prompted Ben to get out of the bathtub (line 3), prefacing the directive with an account of the water getting cold (line 1). Albeit noncompliant, Ben's reply was highly resonant (Du Bois, Hobson, & Hobson, 2014) with Mum's preceding turn. He constructs his utterances ('I'm not cold. I wanna stay in') with parallel

syntactic structure and repetition of words from her utterances ('the water is cold. time to get out'). Mum's next move (line 5) similarly mirrors Ben's turn in line 4. After a three-second pause, wherein both Ben and Mum seem to hold their respective preferred course of action – Ben extending the bath and Mum preparing for his exit from it – Ben utters the statement, 'winter is coming' (line 7). The utterance is consistent with what Ochs and Solomon (2005) referred to as *proximally relevant*. As discussed earlier, while this contribution is not on topic with the ongoing conversation in the conventional sense, the linkage of 'cold' and 'winter' demonstrates a sense of local coherence between conversational turns. Attention to this type of conversational composition enables us to notice how *parallelism and repetition across utterances and speakers* can be an alternate means of establishing conversational coherence and enabling speakers to make sense of one another.

Reframing Repetitive Speech

Extract 17.2 below is a continuation of the transcript (picking up from line 7) and illustrates the strategic and creative use of delayed echolalia, or scripted speech (the repetition of previously heard passages of talk, sometimes from movies and tv shows). Echolalia is another conversational feature that is widely cast as a pathological trait of autism in the clinical literature (Stiegler, 2015). Within autistic communities, however, echolalia is seen positively as a means of navigating conversational demands, conveying complex thoughts and emotions, communicating in times of stress, and providing comfort and pleasure (Arnold, 2019; Nolan & McBride, 2015; Yergeau, 2018). In the following excerpt, we highlight the ways in which *variation on repeated phrases* can be employed as an interactional resource.

Extract 17.2

- 7 Ben winter is coming.
8 Mum it is winter already Ben.
9 (1.0)
10 Ben winter is ↑comi::n':.
11 Mum come on Ben. here's the towel.
12 Ben you do not know cold.
13 Mum are you thinking about game of thrones?
14 Ben yeah ((giggling))

As discussed earlier, Ben's utterance in line 7 represents a proximally relevant contribution to the ongoing conversation and the utterance is taken up by Mum who engages by correcting the truth value of his statement (line 8). Ben then repeats his utterance with more emphasis placed on the last segment (line 10), with no indication that he intends to exit the bathtub. Mum delivers another prompt to end the bath, offering Ben a towel (line 11). Ben continues to stay put in the bath and utters another proximally relevant statement (line 12), 'you do not know cold'. At this point, Mum attributes the television show *Game of Thrones* as the potential source of Ben's scripted speech in the last few turns (line 13). In line 14, Ben both confirms and shows pleasure at her recognition.

The excerpt above demonstrates that echolalic speech should not be dismissed for being 'merely' repetitive. Repetitive speech at different points of an interactional flow can in fact serve as a means of creativity and renewal. Ben utters the quote 'winter is coming' from *Game of Thrones* twice (lines 7 and 10) but the second time in a perceptibly different way. In this case, the persistent use of echolalic utterances as a response to Mum's command to get out of the bathtub functions as a strategic move to side-step noncompliance and direct conflict. Attention to utterance position and timing surfaces the ways in which scripted strips of speech can be creatively altered across turns and used strategically in interaction. These findings are consistent with Sterponi and Shankey's (2014) conclusions that far from being non-functional or arbitrary, echolalic speech can be a powerful and flexible resource to mark moment-by-moment affiliation or disaffiliation with other speakers.

The two examples offered highlight the importance of seeing children as competent communicators and understanding that competencies may not always manifest in ways that conform to neurotypical norms. Muskett (2017) suggested that adopting a CA frame of mind shifts the inquiry from '*Why do autistic children do X?*' to '*Why did this child just do X, and what did it mean for them?*' (p. 118). When competencies are redefined as an interactional accomplishment, shaped by what came before, and projecting what will follow, we create opportunities for children's efforts at communication to be recognized on their own terms.

Interactional Processes that Foster/Constrain Participation

Conversational analysis is built on the premise that interactions and conversations are co-constructed. Interactional outcomes are regarded as a shared responsibility and a collaborative phenomenon. Participants in an

interaction actively and jointly construct and negotiate meaning as the conversation proceeds. This sense of shared effort at successful interaction is often missing from traditional special education programmes, where intervention goals specify only what new social skills the child is supposed to acquire, without accounting adequately for the contexts in which those skills are meant to be displayed, their interlocutor's contributions, or whether expectations for those skills are reasonable to begin with (Roberts, 2020). As a result, children's communicative performances are often judged as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' against normative standards and in the absence of context.

The problematic nature of decontextualized teaching was illustrated by Fasulo and Fiore (2007) in a CA study of therapist-child interactions in a social skills treatment centre. They found that therapists often insisted that their autistic students perform in ways deemed to be socially and linguistically appropriate even when those ways of interaction lacked fundamental characteristics of everyday conversational exchanges. For example, the children were expected to contribute to conversations around generic topics (e.g. 'What is a family?'), even though generic topics inherently lack *tellability*, or newsworthiness that would warrant conversation. The nature of the conversation prompt also signalled that the therapist was enacting a didactic interactional frame in which there were expected answers, thus raising the stakes of the conversation. Fasulo and Fiore described these dynamics as a violation of the trust that we all count on and offer each other in genuine conversations. The children in Fasulo and Fiore's study displayed frustration, resistance, and withdrawal in response to these demands.

Fasulo and Fiore's study is a reminder that while interlocutors can scaffold each other's interactions, they can also introduce obstacles and constraints (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). Therefore, great caution is needed to avoid interpreting the quality of an interaction solely in terms of the child's perceived 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' social skills without regard for the specific contingencies of interaction in which they are embedded (Gardner, 2009; Gardner & Forrester, 2010). To illustrate this point, we offer a CA analysis of a moment of breakdown in an interaction between a 6-year-old autistic child, Adam, and his parents.

The excerpt below was transcribed from a video recording taken originally as part of an initial assessment for speech and language therapy services offered by a local university in families' homes. At that time, Adam's parents described him as a mostly non-verbal communicator who made his needs known primarily through gestures, vocalization, body language, and some sign language. His speech was frequently echolalic. Adam's reliance on

repetitive speech and non-verbal communication led his mother (Mummy) to characterize him as being ‘able to speak, but not speaking’. In this recording, Adam and his parents were visiting a playground near their house that was part of Adam and his father’s (Papi) weekday afternoon routine. In the moments prior, Adam was playing with an electronic flashcard reader while his parents watched.

Extract 17.3

- 1 Mommy you wanna read [a book, [Adam? yes or no?
- 2 Adam ((looks at mommy. Shakes head. Turns away forcefully.))
- 3 Papi [it's ok
- 4 Mommy no?
- 5 Papi you don't want to read the book?
- 6 Adam ((points at Mommy and then in opposite direction))
- 7 Mommy mommy go?
- 8 Adam hhhh ((Grimace. Breathing hard. Palm open and up towards mom. Kicking.))
- 9 Mommy say, mommy go
- 10 Adam ((Body relaxing)) mommy go=
- 11 Mommy =ok ((Leaves table))

In line 1, Mommy asked Adam if he wanted to read a book, initiating a question that he answered decisively, albeit wordlessly, with a shaking of his head and a forceful turn away (line 2). The timing of his response occurred at a *transition-relevant place* (a point where one person could plausibly complete their turn), indicating that he not only understood her but could anticipate what she was asking him even before she finished her sentence. Papi’s attempt to calm Adam (line 3) demonstrated a recognition of Adam’s stance and affective intensity, even as Mommy pressed on with tags of ‘Yes or no?’ (line 1) and ‘No?’ (line 4). In line 5, Papi aligns with Mommy by elaborating on her question, ‘You don’t want to read the book?’ Their continued request for clarification about Adam’s stance, which he had already made quite clear, suggests that they were not actually in pursuit of information, but rather seeking a more satisfactory response (Keel, 2015). In line 6, in response to his parents’ questions, Adam offered a repair. He elaborated on his initial response by using his finger to specify his mother as the subject, and then drawing a trajectory from her current position to a spot away from the table. As before, rather than responding to Adam’s rather unambiguous nonverbal directive, Mommy continued her request for clarification (line 7). At this

point, Adam became quite frustrated (line 8), which led Mommy to abandon her indirect prompts and to state explicitly, 'Say, mommy go' (line 9). Adam complied, relaxing visibly, and his mother reciprocated by leaving.

The excerpt above illustrates the contrast between 'talking correctly' and communicating successfully. Although Adam spoke little throughout the exchange, he showed himself to be a capable and collaborative interlocutor, employing timely turn-taking, contributing relevant and helpful responses, and offering clarifications and repairs. By contrast, in the context of this interaction, his parents were the ones violating pragmatic expectations. Whereas Adam was engaged in a good faith exchange about his preference for book reading, his parents were enacting a didactic exchange aimed at eliciting verbal utterances from him. The two objectives were at odds with each other, which ultimately resulted in a less than optimal interaction. These observations are consistent with Fasulo & Fiore's (2007) findings that adults' preoccupation with children's linguistic appropriateness often create barriers for the achievement of mutually enjoyable exchange and compromises interactional trust.

Focusing on Communicative Abilities

Whether as an analytic tool or simply as a way of seeing, CA has the potential to facilitate early childhood educators' engagement with neurodiversity-affirming and strength-based teaching. If verbal communication is understood as an accomplishment that is interactionally achieved, then efforts to support language development must focus on the interplay between the child, the people in their lives, and the environment in which they are all embedded. Rather than evaluating children's interactional, communication or language skills in isolation and as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate', it is more informative to see whether there was a good *interactional fit* between the communicative partners, the environment, and the child. The educator can assist *both* the child and their partners in interaction and arrange a social and physical environment that is maximally supportive of communication. An example is in the area of peer relationships and inclusion. Whereas a child who has been identified with a disability is traditionally identified as the sole target of social skills intervention, educators can often make more of an impact by coaching neurotypical peers how to be a responsive friend and by bridging any interactional misalignments between peers. Peers can be taught, for example, to recognize and respond to less conventional means of expression, like 'stimming' or echolalia. This type of teaching approach

affirms that successful interactions are not contingent upon children's ability to communicate in normative ways can be very effective in eliminating social and attitudinal barriers for children's participation.

In considering language as social action, teachers can offer children supportive interactions that align with their communicative intent, regardless of the form through which the intent is expressed. By attending to the contextual significance of children's vocalizations and actions within unfolding interactional sequences, teachers can become skilful in discerning the communicative functions of their students' contributions. By valuing function over form, teachers can convey that they prioritize what children are trying to share over how they do so. This opens the possibilities for more expanded interaction and joint attention. Autistic children who have more successful experiences with shared attention show the largest gains in both language and social development over time.

The notion of communication as more than spoken language directs educators' attention to the rich array of means through which children might make themselves known. It contrasts with the emphasis of most intervention programmes on the use of words and conventional written and picture symbols. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) has been found to be an effective support for many neurodivergent communicators. AAC refers to communication modalities that are used as an alternative to or as augmentation of an individual's speech (e.g. gestures, sign language, speech generation devices). A commonly expressed concern about AAC is that it would discourage learners from speaking. The research shows that children who experience success in communication as a result of having AAC supports tend to show an increase in both the amount and quality of speech they produce overall (Millar et al. 2006; Schlosser and Wendt, 2008). It is also important to emphasize that many speaking autistic people prefer to use AAC and advocate for the right to not speak (Donaldson, corbin, & McCoy, 2021).

Recommendations for Practice

In this chapter we have promoted a neurodiversity-affirming view of autism and leveraged insights from CA to unearth communicative resources and interactional dynamics that remain largely unacknowledged in most clinical studies. We have argued that CA complements the overlapping goals of early childhood special education and neurodiversity advocacy by offering an empirical method for examining naturally occurring interactions that is

finely attuned to interactional phenomena that constitute communicative competence-in-interaction. Suggestions for how teachers can embed findings from this research into their practice include:

- Presume competence on part of the child and regard their actions as functional and meaningful. Explore the scope of young children's communicative attempts by paying attention to *when they happen*. Consider their contextual significance within interactional sequences.
- Support learners on the autism spectrum by observing, listening, and trying to understand their point of view. Listen beyond the words and consider their intent. For children who use many unconventional forms of communication, try to 'learn their language'. This may require talking with those close to the children to acquaint yourself with the unique meanings represented by the children's words and/or actions.
- Embrace and join in with students' unconventional forms of communication when you sense that they may be vehicles for connection. Often professionals are afraid to encourage 'problem behaviours' like echolalia or stimming, and as a consequence choose to ignore or actively extinguish them. By joining in, you may transform a solitary activity into an interactive one.
- Align the criteria for measuring students' progress with authentic and functional outcomes. A common measurement of progress in special education is for children to perform a social skill with 80 per cent accuracy. This implies there is an inherently correct way to display social competence irrespective of context, but that's not what happens in authentic interactions. Social communication is dynamic rather than mechanical and often better defined in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Consider defining progress in terms of increased frequency and duration of successful participation in naturally occurring activities that are meaningful to the children and the people in their lives.

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