

Teacher-Facilitated Group Cognitive Behaviour Therapy involving Autistic Adolescents: A Case Study of an Irish Post-Primary School

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Abstract

Despite the growing research base substantiating Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) as a promising psychotherapeutic approach to enhance the emotional competence of autistic young people, there remains a gap between clinical- and community-based CBT research. Indeed, there is a dearth of evidence-based practice of differentiated CBT programmes delivered in real-world naturalistic environments such as the school setting. Whilst the school setting offers ideal conditions for the implementation of psychoeducational CBT support programmes, to date very few studies have conducted school-based investigations, and even fewer have involved trained educators in the facilitation of CBT. The purpose of this study is to extend the emerging evidence base exploring whether school-based group CBT as a psychosocial support is beneficial in developing autistic adolescents' emotional competence. The research design takes the form of a single case study to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions of CBT as a psychoeducational programme implemented in a mainstream co-educational post-primary school within the Republic of Ireland. The research design adopts a participatory action research model because of it being an interpretivist/constructivist methodology which offers all 8 participants equal opportunity to become involved in the action research project. This research examines the outcomes of a differentiated version of the 'My FRIENDS Youth' CBT programme (Barrett 2012); firstly, through the eyes of those being studied (autistic students aged 13-15 years), and secondly through those facilitating the programme and generalising the skills (educators and parents/guardians) over a 20-week period. Qualitative data includes data gathered sequentially in the form of interview and focus group meetings pre, midway and post programme and concurrently in the form of reflective journals. Datasets are analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis framework. The findings establish that autistic adolescents without an intellectual disability can acquire both somatic and cognitive re-structuring skills and can generalise

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their use into real-life situations. The autistic students' capacity to generalise CBT skills was found to be positively influenced by having extensive weekly tuition time (2-3 group sessions) with their familiar special education teacher. This study contributes to literature in three fundamental ways: its appreciation of the autistic child's voice in educational research; its implementation of group CBT in the students' naturalistic school environment; and its involvement of educators as core facilitators in collaboration with parents/guardians. It also provides educators with informed awareness of the adapted skills needed by some autistic students and promotes self-coping strategies to nurture their personal wellbeing and happiness.

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