Topic: The Pragmatic Aspect of Oral Language and the Implications for Teaching Children with Asperger's Syndrome

Children with Asperger's syndrome view the world around them in a different way to others. They are of normal intelligence and there is no delay in their language development. These children are unique and because of this can present with a variety of characteristics, however one area which they demonstrate a deficiency in is the development of the pragmatic aspect of oral language. As Kirby (2005) describes in children with Asperger's syndrome this is an area of great difficulty, their vocabularies may be extraordinarily rich with some children sounding like 'little professors'. However, persons with Asperger's syndrome can be extremely literal and have difficulty using language in a social context. It is my belief that with explicit teaching of the pragmatic aspect of oral language within the context of the classroom these children will be helped to learn through instruction what other children may learn naturally. This can only have a positive effect on their learning as the greater understanding of oral language and the ability to express and receive it effectively will enhance achievement in all areas of the curriculum.

The pragmatic aspect of oral language is concerned with the purpose of language and it's social nature. It takes into account the social context in which we are communicating and the audience receiving our message. It involves the many skills necessary to make a conversation successful such as turn taking, waiting, attention and concentration, body language and eye contact. It also involves learning the rules of social interaction and following them, being willing to share, problem solve and negotiate. C.M.J.Y. Tesink (2009, P1942) explains "Language comprehension in (verbal) social communication calls upon pragmatic language skills, since the listener is often required to work out the non-literal meaning of the speaker's message by using the context and his own knowledge of the world."

We use our oral language to communicate with others, and Munro (2009, P9) explains "children use their oral language to share ideas, negotiate, manage interactions (for example to initiate, maintain and conclude spoken exchanges for various purposes), learn how others communicate and to communicate feelings and intentions." Children learn very early that there is a need for language to be modified depending on the context in which it is being used. If a child is unhappy with another person he/she could choose to express this in a number of ways, using language that ranges from familiar to formal, depending on the relationship to the other person and the context in which the exchange is taking place. This demonstrates that children have reached a point in their development when they are learning both how some behaviours are appropriate in particular contexts and also how to transfer what they know to other situations (Munro, 2009, P 17).

It has often been taken for granted by many that the pragmatic aspect of oral language will develop naturally as a result of our immersion in a social community. Most children enter school with many skills and this is because their experience of using language to communicate at home has in most cases been

purposeful and effective. As Button & Millwards (2005) explain "when children talk at home they do so to get things done and they take responsibility for initiating topics and for developing these in ways which interest them. They come to school as experienced language users, used to talking and listening."

Children know many of the rules and organizational issues involved in participating in a conversation. They know that in most situations it is usually one person at a time talking and that their contributions will determine whether the exchange continues or is completed. They choose to stay on the topic or try to change it, and they choose the tone and prosody required to demonstrate the feeling and emotion related to their contribution. As a result of this the continuing development of these oral language skills has been seen to be an incidental by-product of many classrooms (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, P391).

The focus in most classrooms is clearly on the development of children's literacy skills. However if we, as teachers, can provide children with similar opportunities to use their oral language in an equally effective and purposeful manner to that which is provided at home, then this will contribute to the further development of both their oracy and literacy skills. As Button & Millwards (2005) state "we can help children to use language to express their interests and concerns and enable them to take a positive and constructive part in the presentation of classroom experience."

In Munro's (2009) ICPALER (Ideas, Conventions, Purpose, Ability to Learn, Expressive aspect, Receptive aspect) framework which analyses the development of oral language, the purpose explains the pragmatic aspect of language. The focus here is how young children :

- *manage and direct their language use,*
- *listen and speak 'between the lines',*
- *adjust to the context and the audience,*
- *use language for different goals or functions.*

When children are able to *manage and direct their language* effectively they will demonstrate their ability to 'initiate, maintain and terminate oral transactions, including conversations, take turns and share interactions, stay on the topic, extend, elaborate, question, and adjust what they say to fit the audience and the context, taking into account what the audience knows about the topic. Munro (2009, P71)

When children are able to *listen and speak between the lines* it is represented through their ability to read into a message to find the intended meaning or outcome, to use idioms and metaphors and to extend a language exchange in an abstract or imaginative way. Munro (2009, P76)

When children are able to *adjust to the context and the audience* it is demonstrated by their ability to judge how much information to give at any given time, to judge what others might know during a conversation, select the most appropriate word, sentence meanings, conventions and intonation patterns to suit the audience and use the context to assist in understanding the intended meaning of the spoken language. Munro (2009, P71)

Finally, children's ability to use language for different goal or functions is demonstrated in their ability to identify their goals for oral communication and infer the goals of others for an oral communication. Munro (2009, P73)

If as educators we can develop our own knowledge and understanding of these skills, which are imperative to effective communication, then we can provide children with opportunities to participate in activities to enhance not only their language development but also their self worth. " Their self image and their self confidence is shaped in part through the quality of their social interactions with others, including siblings and peers. Their social interactions are influenced by their ability to use language to achieve various social purposes." (Munro 2009, P 9) We can use this knowledge to recognise the children within our classrooms that are having difficulties in these areas and provide extra clarification, explanation and scaffolding to support their individual needs.

Button & Millward, (2005) explain that as teachers we should develop the talk of young children across a range of situations and through a variety of different forms. We also need to help them to talk thoughtfully, and we should help them to attend to the language they use. We need to teach children to manipulate the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences and develop their ability to understand non-literal forms of language. (Roth, Speece & Cooper, 2002) This will assist them to greater understanding and comprehension of language exchanges they are participating in.

The pragmatic aspects of children's oral literacy skills can be developed through the opportunity to participate in activities that attend to the different aspects mentioned earlier in Munro's (2009) ICPALER model. Listed here are some examples of Munro's (2009) suggested activities:

- Children may be involved in role-play where they take on specific roles and where the conversation is planned with attention to body language and prosody.
- Students may listen to a story and suggest different outcomes if the events had occurred in different contexts.
- Children could be taught idioms, discussing what each one means, the picture it makes and opportunities where it could be used.
- Students could listen to a conversation which goes off the topic and decide where this happens and offer repair solutions.

Through providing activities such as those mentioned that attend to the development of children's oral literacy skills, and in particular the pragmatics of language, we will also further the develop children's skills across other areas of the curriculum. As stated by Button & Millward (2005) the written or printed text is a representation of the language we speak and there is a direct relationship between words which are spoken and heard and words which are written and read. Therefore developing stronger oral language skills can only contribute to the development of stronger literacy skills. Literacy is developed out of people's experience of interacting through oral language. It is not possible to attend to the children's reading and writing without attending to their talk.(Button & Millward, 2005)

As previously mentioned in children with Asperger's syndrome the most significant language difficulties are those concerning the pragmatics of language regardless of their varying levels of intelligence. 'Language comprehension is impaired because of the overly literal interpretation of utterances which causes problems in understanding humour, irony, and metaphors, as well as making inferences and comprehending indirect requests.' (Happe, 1993:Ozonoff & Miller, 1996 cited in Tesink, 2009, P1942)

In some aspects of oral language children with Asperger's syndrome display many skills. As Attwood (2007, P208) explains these children are able to formulate complex sentences in an impressive manner, often demonstrating an extensive vocabulary. However in contrast to evidence of linguistic ability there are specific errors in the ability to have a natural conversation. These children may not follow conventional conversational rules regarding how to initiate, maintain and end a conversation.

When asked to describe a picture or retell a story the child with Asperger's syndrome will refer to the objects and the actions and will be able to articulate what they saw and the events that happened however the emotional aspects such as the feelings and intentions being represented will often be overlooked.

Most children with Asperger's syndrome will have a particular area of interest that they can speak about in a very confident and impressive manner. They are often able to discuss their special interest using complex sentences and an impressive vocabulary. However rather than being part of a natural conversation which will take note of the interests of the audience, it is presented as a monologue or speech. Attwood (2007) explains that the child with Asperger's may have rehearsed this monologue and repeated it time and time again whenever an opportunity allowed. When presented the monologue will often continue regardless of the responses of the listener until it has been completed. Attwood (2007) describes that as a participant in such a conversation one has the impression that the child is talking but not listening and is unaware of the subtle non-verbal signals that should regulate the flow of conversation.

Children with Asperger's syndrome are often very aware of the fact that they see things differently from those around them and can be very self-conscience of this fact. Therefore the chance to speak about their special interest provides an opportunity to speak in a confident and relaxed manner and they will do this with great enthusiasm. They know their topic very well and are not being challenged to try to think of responses about something which they can't make sense of. The inflexible nature of the Asperger's child only contributes to the need for the conversation to stay on his/her chosen topic regardless of the efforts of the other people involved. On an occasion where a topic has been changed by another person the Asperger's child will often abruptly change it back to his chosen subject with no regard to the current topic or theme.

When not interested in the topic of conversation the child with Asperger's syndrome may see no sense in trying to maintain or participate in the conversation. Attwood (2007, P208) explains that many people with Asperger's syndrome "consider a conversation to be primarily an opportunity to exchange information, to learn or inform, and if there is no practical information to exchange, why waste time talking?" The following example of discourse between a myself and a young child with Asperger's syndrome demonstrates this beautifully.

"I told child A that I watched the Essendon game. He didn't ask any questions. When I asked him why, he told me that he didn't ask questions because he already knew about the game." (Anonymous (child) 2009, pers comm., 14 September)

It is clear through this example that for the child involved there was no logic in finding out about something if the answer was already known, therefore nothing was said and the conversation came to an abrupt end.   Gutstein (2002, P 165) explains that when children with Asperger syndrome initiate interactions with peers, the function is mostly about giving information, in contrast to normally progressing children whose interactions are related to inviting others to play and seeking personal information.

The acquisition of knowledge in a classroom requires considerable social and linguistic skills. The difficulties experienced in these areas by children with Asperger's syndrome can impede the understanding of academic concepts. (Attwood, 2007) Therefore it is of great importance that children with Asperger's syndrome be given explicit instruction in how to use oral language in order to participate in fully in a classroom. They need to be taught how to express language in an appropriate manner showing consideration for other members of the class and the context of the situation. They also need to be taught how to receive language, how to look for not only the verbal but also non-verbal cues and to seek clarification when there is a loss of understanding or meaning. Most people gain extra understanding when listening to another person by looking at their facial expressions and in particular their eyes. However looking for non-verbal cues such as this can be an area of great difficulty for these children because, as with most children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, they try to avoid making eye contact. It is thought that people with Asperger's syndrome focus more on the mouth and as Attwood (2007) explains by looking at someone's mouth, the person may help process linguistic communication and when they do look at the person's eyes for information regarding social/emotional communication they are not very good at reading them. When asked about this avoidance of eye contact a young child with Asperger's syndrome explained it as follows

"I know I don't like to look at you when you talk to me because I would like to look at something interesting. It doesn't mean I'm not listening." (Anonymous (child) 2009, pers comm., 14 September)

As teachers we need to be aware of the difficulties that these children have understanding the pragmatics of language. We need to understand that some children don't learn through immersion and will need explicit instruction. We should not punish them when they have behaved in an inapropriate manner or misread a situation but use these moments as teaching opportunities where we can explain what has happened and how they have been misinterpreted . As mentioned earlier all children will benefit from opportunities to use their oral language skills in authentic purposeful situations. Children should be encouraged to participate in class discussions, to express their ideas and thoughts and to use their oral language exchanges to enhance their learning experiences. With students who have Aspergers syndrome we should be working towards achieving the same goals however we need to understand that the opportunity to be a participant in these oral language experiences is not going to enhance their learning unless we can provide them with prior explicit instruction of how the exchanges are constructed in the first place and the steps necessary for successful participation.

Children with Asperger's syndrome need to be taught how to use expressive and receptive language in order to participate effectively in classroom exchanges. They need to be taught to use inclusive comments, for example 'How do you think they will go?" or "This happened to me, has it ever happened to you?" They also need to be taught to wait if someone else is speaking and not just speak over them, and that for a conversation to be successful we need to take turns. They need to learn to take the time to listen to what the other person has said and try to make links from this and then formulate a related comment so the conversation will be extended successfully.

Children with Asperger's syndrome need to learn that if they watch the speakers' face or body, as they are speaking, they can get clues about how the person is feeling about what is being said. However, it should be noted here that these children should not be forced to make eye contact because, as mentioned previously, it can interfere with their ability to understand what is being said to them. Learning to look for the non-verbal cues will help to gain greater understanding and comprehension. These children also need to be taught idioms and how they are used to create a connection between what is happening and another point of reference. It needs to be explained that language cannot always be interpreted literally. Eg. 'Get over it' or 'We're all in the same boat'

If a young child is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, early intervention designed to improve social abilities in primary school and continued up to the end of high school can achieve remarkable success. (Attwood, T. 2007) Children with Asperger's syndrome are often participating in speech therapy outside of school in order to help the development of their pragmatic skills and schools should be encouraged to establish links with their therapists as a means to enhancing this skill development. As teachers we should make the most of the expertise of the language specialists involved as they can provide great insight into the areas of pragmatics being worked on in therapy sessions and we can then transfer this skill development to the context of the classroom setting. Although skills are developing at speech therapy sessions they may not be

transferred to the school environment without follow up teaching in the context of the school.

Many speech therapy sessions will involve children participating in a technique developed by Carol Gray (1994) called 'Comic Strip Conversation' which involves children creating a representation of an exchange in a comic strip using stick figures and speech bubbles. Attwood (1998) explains that this technique can be applied to a wide range of problems with conversation and social skills. The speech bubbles can be drawn in a variety of ways to convey emotion, and different colours can be used for the statements inside the speech bubbles such as red for angry or blue for sad. Speech bubbles can also be drawn in different ways to represent the different parts of conversations such as one person talking or everyone talking at once, interrupting or listening and soft words or loud words. As children's skills develop they will create a dictionary of symbols to represent different elements of conversation. These can then be translated into relevant aspects of the person's tone of voice or body language. Gray (1994, P8) explains that Comic Strip Conversations begin with small talk, like the weather or the weekend and from this point progress to conversations about a given situation. In all cases children are encouraged to write, draw and talk. The student takes the lead and the therapist guides using questions and statements such as "Where were you?" or "Draw the people you were with."

Gray (1994, P9) states that the Goal for the parent or professional is to achieve a balance between gathering insights into the student's perspective, while sharing accurate social information.   As teachers it would be of benefit to learn how to participate in 'Comic Strip Conversations' and provide children with opportunities to work through situations effecting their participation in school activities. This could also be seen as a useful strategy for other children in the classroom as all children are faced with difficult social interactions at some point throughout their schooling.

 Another classroom activity mentioned by Attwood(1998, P73) which can be used to encourage conversation is to arrange the children in pairs and have each of them practice how to start a conversation with a stranger, this would occur after prior teaching about conversation starters. You could also use this method to teach students how to maintain a conversation with a friend. Prior teaching would involve children identifying and remembering information about the other person and also listing relevant questions. Children could also be involved in learning conversational scripts to deal with difficult situations such as how to deal with being teased, how to ask for help or how to deal with losing a game. An example of the need for this is demonstrated by the following comments given by a student when playing a game with his friends. On this occasion the child needed to be given a script for how to win a game.

"Oh you're hopeless at this. Yeah! I'm so good, I'm going to thrash you!"
(Anonymous (child) 2009, pers comm., 14 September)

This student was not aware of how to show his excitement at doing well at a game of chance whilst showing consideration for the other player. He needed to be told that his comments were hurtful and then given other statements to use like, 'Better luck next time." or "I'm having a really good game, but it might be your lucky turn next"

Attwood (1998, P87) lists the following strategies for children with Asperger's Syndrome to be of benefit to their pragmatic language skills:

* Learn appropriate opening comments,

* Seek clarification or assistance when confused,

* Encourage the confidence to admit "I don't know',

* Teach the cues of when to reply, interrupt or change the topic,

* Model sympathetic comments,

* Use speech, drama activities on the art of conversation.

The examples of activities mentioned throughout this essay related to the development of pragmatic skills in oral language for both normally progressing children and those with Asperger's syndrome could clearly be used to benefit all children within the classroom.

All examples provided can be entered into regardless of skill level and can cater to the varying needs of individual students within the class. For children with Asperger's syndrome there is a definite deficit in these skills, however this may also be the case for other children in the mainstream classroom. There is clear evidence to show that the development of these skills can only enhance student's learning, especially in their literacy skills. The development of these skills only contributes to greater understanding of oral language exchanges and greater social competence.

As teachers we need to educate ourselves in order to further develop our understanding of the language use of young children and how it is developed. As Munro (2009) states 'language and the ability to communicate effectively is a key foundation to students' capacity to learn in most general ways. A better developed knowledge of language and how it is used means a greater capacity to learn and to manage and direct one's activity as a learner.

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