



Autism and Bilingualism: A Thematic Analysis of Practitioner Perspectives and Experiences



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Introduction

- Around 25% of autistic children worldwide have the opportunity to learn multiple languages and benefit from the plethora of cultural, familial and community connections that come with this. 1,2,3
- Despite the opportunities that can arise from dual-language environments, parents remain concerned about the potentially harmful effects of bilingualism, and many autistic children are being denied the option to access additional languages in and outside of the home.²
- There is currently no research addressing the perspectives of practitioners, who are crucial in supporting parents to make informed choices about bilingualism with their children.

Aims

- To understand the experiences of practitioners who work with autistic bilingual children and their families.
- In particular, we focused on better understanding the barriers and potential facilitators to best practice.

Methods

- Twelve UK-based speech and language practitioners with significant experience working with autistic bilingual children were recruited.
- All participants had gained experience working with bilingual autistic children and their families in clinical and/ or school settings in the UK for at least two years.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted and focused on attitudes and beliefs of practitioners regarding family bilingual experiences, the effect of socio-cultural factors of practice and subsequent recommendations to parents.
- The interview questions were written with our steering group who were autistic bilingual adults, a parent of an autistic bilingual child, and practitioners.

Professionals' experience with parents Parental concerns Familial expectations Practitioners identified two parental concerns Some parent's beliefs about autism are framed that arose most frequently: by what they see in their own home context. (I) Whether bilingualism was detrimental to For example, where parents had only heard of development autistic people who also have an intellectual (2) Parents who were less proficient or confident disability, parents struggled to recognise their speaking English were concerned about the own child was autistic if they did not present in impact they may have on their child's learning. the same way. Cultural factors in practice Cultural/religious Cultural participation Resources Interpreters expectations Participants discussed Practitioners were not Some strategies are not **Practitioners** a lack of cultural always confident that culturally appropriate emphasised that a large diversity within the information was for all families – e.g., part of their role was profession & lack of accurately conveyed to differences in parentto support children and emphasis on cultural families, & translators child interactions. encourage them to factors during their sometimes added limited options for grow up bilingually, and training period as a personal input rather resources available in not to dismiss that fact. challenge than exact translations. other languages. Views on autism & bilingualism Sources of information Support Maintenance of bilingualism Overwhelming support was Shared uncertainties as to Additionally, practitioners expressed for maintaining a whether practitioners they agreed that when working bilingual environment. No with children, a priority is to are providing the right advice. participant generally advised Many felt there were fewer provide a holistic and against using or maintaining supportive role, & to promote opportunities than they multiple languages, though would like to keep up-toparticipation and inclusion in still went on a case-by-case

Results

- Inductive thematic analysis⁴ was selected as the framework for all data analyses.
- 20% of first level codes were checked for consistency by a second coder; a list of codes randomly selected codes and quotes were provided for the second coder, who was instructed to match the codes to the corresponding cluster.
- Three central themes arose from the interviews. These were: (I) professionals' experience with parents, (2) cultural factors in practice (3) beliefs on bilingualism and autism. Please see the figure for more detailed results.

Conclusions

- This is the first study to understand the perspectives of speech and language practitioners working with autistic bilingual children in the UK and identifies a number of key difficulties in supporting access to language learning.
- This study highlights the need for culturally relevant resources for use in clinical sessions & diagnostic environments.
- Practitioners should be be provided with opportunities to receive up-to-date training and access to key findings from relevant research.
- It also highlights the importance of making accessible resources and information about autism and bilingualism for parents who don't have English as their first language.

More information:

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Please follow this link for co-produced & translated resources for families: https://autism-

bilingualism.github.io/resources/

basis.

1. Grosjean, F., Bilingual: Life and reality. 2010: Harvard University Press.

2. Davis, R., Fletcher-Watson, S., & Digard, B. G. (2021). Autistic People's Access to Bilingualism & Additional Language Learning: Identifying Barriers and Facilitators for Equal Opportunities. Frontiers in Psychology, 4074. 3. Rubio-Fernández, P. and S. Glucksberg, Reasoning about other people's beliefs: Bilinguals have an advantage. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 2012. 38(1): p. 211.

date with new research

society, rather than a focus on

'treating' autism.

4. Clarke, V., Braun, V., & Hayfield, N. (2015). Thematic analysis. Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods, 222, 248.

findings.