Book review: Collaborative Approaches to Learning for Pupils with PDA: Strategies for Education Professionals

Authors: Ruth Fidler and Phil Christie.

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> *"Exactly who has a 'pathological' need to control whom?"* (Milton, 2017: p. 35).

The above is a question asked of those utilising PDA theory. This book by PDA's leading advocates goes far towards answering Milton's query.

Superficially, this book is a welcome addition to the PDA literature, providing the latest thoughts and working practices to educational professionals, as advised by two experienced and knowledgeable clinicians. There are detailed, clear and coherent strategies, including downloadable resources.

At the heart of a "collaborative approach to learning" is an emphasis on the transactional nature of interactions and on the often negative consequences for those working with certain pupils. Suggested strategies include working together with all stakeholders to work with the strengths of students, enabling them to access education by reducing their anxiety. Particularly, placing the student central in decision-making is suggested: this is not to say the learner is in charge, as the authors supply many subtle methods of controlling the child. Additionally, there is a strong focus on the emotional resilience and wellbeing of pupils, and inventive solutions to the challenges that pupils can often present.

A weakness is a lack of contextualising of their strategies within wider education and autism strategies discourses, for instance, see Milton (2017) and Woods (2018; 2019). This was an opportunity to compare PDA strategies with comparable practices, like the SPELL (Structure, Positive, Empathy, Low Arousal and Links) Framework (Milton, 2014), or with inquiry-based learning, which is more frequently practiced with all types of students. More crucially, the authors could have contrasted PDA strategies against those advocated by its critics: for appropriate examples see Murray (2016) and McDonnell and Milton (2014).

Fidler and Christie justify not engaging with critiques by stating that the book is not a place for discussing PDA controversies, directing readers to references in the first chapter. Conversely, there are no critical texts cited, or even a modern overview of PDA presented (see Woods, 2019). Furthermore, suitable literature discussing PDA strategies is also omitted (for example, Carlisle, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Jones, 2005; Russell, 2018). However, insisting that a broader debate is a distraction from diagnosing PDA is highly concerning due to the implications of this stance: parents are using PDA as a proxy for requesting strategies (Green *et al*., 2018) and potentially non-autistic persons are being diagnosed as autistic due to primary reliance on questionnaires and non-specific caregiver reports (Lord *et al*., 2018).

A major anxiety relates the language used to distinguish autism from PDA, with autism being termed "more straightforward." What exactly is "straightforward" autism? What exactly is "complex" autism? Pertinently, at the time of their writing, the author's positions are increasingly tenuous (Green *et al*., 2018; Milton, 2017; Woods, 2018). This may be an attempt to erase divergent perspectives from the PDA discourse, lending credence to critical scholarship (Milton, 2017; Woods, 2017; Woods; 2018).

Responding to the initial question, the book indicates a certain viewpoint: the strategies described are applicable to other persons.

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