

Abstract

This qualitative teacher action research study investigated the experiences of incorporating structured play and priming in the natural learning environment to enhance social skills in children identified as having autism spectrum disorder. Three fourth grade students, one female and two males, participated in the study conducted in a suburban elementary school containing approximately 592 students in the northeastern United States. Methods of gathering data included teacher observation, duration recording, event recording, reflective sheets, and rubrics. Methods of analysis included review of student work, the creating of analytic memos, coding, and construction of theme statements. Students were taught age appropriate games in the natural learning environment free of peers and then played in the natural learning environment with peers. Within the natural learning environment with peers, the teacher used peers and natural social situations to enhance students' social skills at their individual level. Findings suggest that social skills can be increased when social skills instruction is carried out in the natural play environment. Furthermore, instruction in the natural learning environment at a student's instructional level allows students identified as having autism spectrum disorder to begin to develop higher-level thinking skills.