Besieged by behavior analysis for autism spectrum disorder: a treatise for comprehensive educational approaches

Nick Hodge

To cite this article: Nick Hodge (2016) Besieged by behavior analysis for autism spectrum disorder: a treatise for comprehensive educational approaches, Disability & Society, 31:4, 582-583, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2016.1152016

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1152016

Published online: 11 Apr 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 609

View related articles

View Crossmark data
powerful theoretical exploration of intersectionality, disability and mobility in higher education. Lastly, it is a subtle, elegantly written and powerful testimony of the usefulness and impact of student-centered, ethnographic methods in higher education research.

References


Frederic Fovet  
*La Trobe University*  
ffovet@students.latrobe.edu.au  
© 2016 Frederic Fovet  
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10.1080/09687599.2016.1152015


The categorisation of *Besieged by Behavior Analysis for Autism Spectrum Disorder* as a ‘treatise’ perfectly describes its nature: a thoroughly researched and highly informed critical analysis of the principles and practices of applied behaviour analysis (ABA). This is a brave text because it recognises the hegemony of ABA within autism teaching approaches and yet still dares to challenge it. The author, Dr Eric Shyman, is Assistant Professor of Child Study at St Joseph’s College, New York, USA and prior to this position was an education practitioner working in schools. Shyman makes it clear from the outset that he is not against ABA as a practice. Indeed he argues that behaviour analysis will and should be a component of most educational experiences for children, including those with a diagnosis of autism. However, what Shyman is seeking to challenge through this book is the packaging and selling of ABA as the only teaching approach for autism that has value because, so its supporters claim, it is the only ‘intervention’ to have the support of scientific evidence.

In his critique, Shyman takes by turn each of the claims made by proponents of ABA and offers a convincing challenge. For Shyman what is critical in educational practice is the recognition and valuing of a learner’s personhood. This is his strongest critique of ABA; that it responds to the label of autism rather than the person. ABA is fundamentally focused on changing the nature of the person, ‘restoring’ children and young people to as close to ‘normal’ as possible, rather than valuing them for who and how they are. Shyman uses the concepts of Normalcy and Ableism to expose the fundamental flaws in this approach and to illustrate its disabling impact. ABA with its focus on behaviour alone neglects the meanings that the behaviour has for the individual.
who is doing it. For Shyman it is critical that learning evolves from intrinsic motivation; it has to make sense to the learner and be of interest to him or her. The skill of the teacher is in knowing the pupil and then adapting the curriculum to generate that interest. Shyman therefore argues for a constructionist framework of education that ‘allows inclusion of multiple perspectives and interpretations’ (186) which can respond to the heterogeneity of learners. All approaches will of course need to be carefully considered and based on high-quality research and theory but they will also be mediated through the knowledge and skill of the teacher. Teachers will therefore need an awareness of a wide range of approaches so that they can draw upon those that they feel will most enable the particular learner.

This book makes an important contribution to the developing but still emergent body of work that conceptualises autism as a social construct. As Shyman states, this is not to say that the behaviours we associate with the label of autism might not stem from biology but how we think, talk about and respond to particular manifestations of being is embedded within the social. Considering the clear and definite positioning of the text by Shyman in this way there are some arguments presented that for me are inconsistent with its main message. These were mainly consolidated in the short section sub-headed, ‘neurological evidence for comprehensive educational approaches in ASD’. For a text that is focused on challenging Normalcy and Ableism and the ways in which proponents of autism methodologies bamboozle educators with dodgy science to convince them of their cause, it seems out of place, then, to claim that science evidences that children with autism have ‘atypically’ structured and functioning brains to (presumably) the typical child. Thirty years ago when I first started teaching children with autism I used to pay close attention to new theories that emerged as to what was ‘wrong’ with the brains of people with autism. I would memorise the terms because I thought using them aligned me with the medics who were somewhat higher within the social hierarchy than the special needs teacher. However, as one theory was discouraged and another took its place before then in turn being itself usurped, I began to lose faith in the promise of medicine to offer a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of autism. It seems to me that although the equipment for examining brains has become more sophisticated and the language of neurons appeals as a more sexy science, none of the resultant information really helps the educator who is trying to work out how best to enable the pupil. Regardless of how their brain might be constructed, high-quality teaching still comes down to knowing who the learner is as a person and how you need to present materials to make them accessible and interesting. My main concern with brain or other biologically based theories is that they give the teacher, who is already feeling out of her or his comfort zone from having to engage with this mysterious medical concept called autism, the excuse to think ‘well there is nothing I can do really to teach this child as it is a brain problem and I’m not qualified to repair malfunctioning mirror neurons’.

These concerns over one short section of Besieged by Behavior Analysis for Autism Spectrum Disorder certainly should not deter the reader from engaging with the book. I will certainly recommend it as a key text in my own teaching with MA and doctoral students. I would like everyone involved in the teaching of children and young people with autism to read this book, but I suspect that the academic appearance and style of the text will mean that it appeals mainly to the academic community. But as one of the significant texts that is heralding a new era of more enabling ways of thinking about autism, I am sure that the messages of this important work will be widely disseminated.

Nick Hodge

The Autism Centre, Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

n.s.hodge@shu.ac.uk

© 2016 Nick Hodge

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1152016