

# Promoting multidisciplinary teamwork for autism: an English school experience

## Promuovere l'equipe multidisciplinare per l'autismo: l'esperienza di una scuola inglese

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This paper describes the positive and challenging aspects relating to the implementation of the SCERTS Model in an English residential school for children on the autism spectrum, with a specific focus on the professionals' involvement and on the process of enabling staff to improve the way they work as a team. The paper highlights how SCERTS can be used as a pedagogical framework for working with children on the autism spectrum in a multidisciplinary way, thus empowering the professionals and strengthening their ability to understand the perspective of the child with autism.

**Keywords:** autism, education, multidisciplinary teamwork, SCERTS model, assessment

abstract

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## 1. Introduction

An effective educational program for child with autism requires the expertise of a team of professionals working together in a careful, coordinated manner and in partnership with parents and family members. Multidisciplinary teamwork is crucial for understanding and designing a developmental life-long plan for children on the autism spectrum (Prizant et al., 2006). Believing in the importance of multidisciplinary teamwork for children with autism means developing strategies and research that investigates this aspect of educational work. This paper therefore aims to explore multidisciplinary teamwork in an English special school through the use of the SCERTS Model.

This is done by describing the experiences of an Italian PhD student in a residential school. The student undertook a research internship with the Autism Centre for Education and Research (). During this period, the researcher participated in a research project to observe and learn about the implementation of the SCERTS, with a particular focus on how it enabled practitioners to promote interdisciplinary work in mainstream classrooms.

The observations at the residential school and the strategies used to promote interdisciplinary teamwork is part of the student's PhD research project. This investigates school teamwork to promote inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in mainstream classrooms and focuses on current paradigms and gaps related to Italian approaches and interventions.

The Italian mainstream school setting is fundamentally different from the English residential school one, but the good practice experience is certainly important in terms of providing insights into what is needed to implement positive teamwork and knowledge exchange for supporting the child's development and growth in the classroom and society as a whole. The SCERTS Model, as one of the most recent models developed for children with autism, needs to be explored and investigated in different settings.

## 2. The SCERTS Model

The SCERTS Model is an innovative educational model for working with children on the autism spectrum and their families (Prizant et al., 2006). It provides specific guidelines for helping a child with autism becoming a competent and confident social communicator, while preventing problem behaviours that interfere with learning and the development of relationships. It also is designed to help families, educators and therapists to work cooperatively as a team, in a carefully coordinated manner, to maximize progress in supporting a child.

The acronym "SCERTS" underlies the focus on (Prizant et al., 2003):

- SC – Social Communication – the development of spontaneous, functional communication, emotional expression and secure and trusting relationships with children and adults;
- ER – Emotional Regulation – the development of the ability to maintain a well-regulated emotional state to cope with everyday stress and to be most available for learning and interacting;

- TS – Transactional Support – the development and implementation of supports to help partners respond to the child’s needs and interests, modify and adapt the environment, and provide tools to enhance learning (e.g., picture communication, written schedules, and sensory supports). Specific plans are also developed to provide educational and emotional support to families and to foster teamwork among professionals.

The above components are believed by the SCERTS Model to be the primary dimensions targeted in a program designed to support the development of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. The targeting is accomplished through family-professional partnerships (family-centred care), and by prioritising the abilities and supports that will lead to the most positive long-term outcomes as indicated by the National Research Council, US (2001). As such, it provides family members and educational teams with a plan for implementing a comprehensive and evidence-based program that will improve quality of life for children and families.

The SCERTS Model recognizes that most learning in childhood occurs in the social context of daily activities and experiences (Prizant et al., 2006). Therefore, efforts to support a child’s development occur with caregivers and familiar partners in everyday routines in a variety of social situations. When a child’s development in social communication and emotional regulation is supported, with the strategic implementation of transactional supports, there is a great potential for comprehensive, long term positive effects on a child’s development in educational environments and everyday activities.

The SCERTS Model is a lifespan model that can be used from initial diagnosis, throughout the school years, and beyond. It can be adapted to meet the unique demands of different social settings for younger and older individuals on the autism spectrum including home, school, community, and ultimately vocational settings (Withbread, 2007). In the SCERTS Model, learning is when the child is able to apply an acquired skill across people, places and circumstances in an appropriate manner. The ultimate goal for the child is to understand how and when to use an acquired skill and for them to apply these skills independently and consistently in a functional manner for meaningful activities.

The SCERTS curriculum provides a systematic method that ensures that specific skills and appropriate supports, stated as educational objectives, are selected and applied in a consistent manner across a child’s day. This process allows families and educational teams to draw from a wide range of effective practices that are available and to build upon their current knowledge and abilities in providing an effective program. One of the most unique qualities of SCERTS is that it can incorporate practices from other approaches and models.

The SCERTS Model includes a well-coordinated assessment process that helps a team measure the child’s progress and determines the necessary supports that need to be used by the child’s social partners. The assessment is an important multidisciplinary teamwork tool that enables every partner to be part of the educational process of the child. The SCERTS Assessment Process (SAP) is designed to address core questions about social communication, emotional regulation, and transactional support, which are continually redefined on the basis of overall developmental level, functional needs, and preliminary assessment outcomes

(Prizant et al., 2006). These core assessment questions pertain not only to the Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support domains of the SCERTS Model but also to the interrelationship among these domains so that areas of greatest needs as well as strengths are identified in a comprehensive manner.

The assessment and projecting process can be divided in ten stages (Prizant et al., 2006):

1. Determine the child's communication stage.
2. Gather information on the child.
3. Identify assessment team members and plan the observation.
4. Complete the observation forms.
5. Conduct behaviour sampling.
6. Compile and integrate information with the Assessment Summary form.
7. Prioritize goals and objectives.
8. Recommend further assessment.
9. Design a SCERTS educational program.
10. Perform on-going tracking.

Following initial assessment and implementation of an educational program, the child's progress on Social Communication and Emotional Regulation objectives is tracked on daily logs, summarized on weekly logs and updated quarterly. This continuous monitoring of progress informs the team as to whether changes in programming are needed. Daily and weekly data collection ensures systematic application of the model and rigorous but nonintrusive data collection (Prizant et al., 2006).

### 3. The Team Around the Child

The SCERTS Model, to be appropriately implemented, must have a multi-disciplinary team approach that respects, draws from and infuses expertise from a variety of disciplines, addressing the major domains (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support) in an integrated and comprehensive manner across all settings and all partners (family, professionals, peers, community) (O'Neill et al., 2010). All the professionals belonging to the school must be involved in the design and implementation of the child's educational program.

To implement the model, it is important to define a multidisciplinary Team Around the Child (TAC) who aim to fully understand the child and are strongly committed to each other as a strong commitment between all the professionals and the family is fundamental for the implementation of SCERTS.

At the residential school which acts as the context for the research described here, the management department, composed by each headmaster, is what connected all employees and provided structured activities to allow everybody to work in harmony and efficiency. This defined who would be part of the Team Around the Child. Not all of the professionals involved in the Team had necessarily received training on the SCERTS Model because the team leader was able

to help them to learn. This is significant because the model can be used even without specific training but as a pedagogical framework for the team.

The Team Around the Child enables discussions about the child and is fundamental to set targets with all the key people working with or caring for each student with autism. If the team is well organised, there will be more professionals attending and participating in the discussions, proposing a multidisciplinary approach and sharing ideas and good practices related to each educational setting lived by the child. The organisation of each team is the management team responsibility because it has to find a specific dedicated time that allows all the professionals and parents involved to attend the meeting. In a residential special school this might be easier than in a mainstream school because most of professionals work at the same location and for the same agency, so it is simpler to organise the shift schedules in relation to the SCERTS assessment and implementation. In a mainstream school it could be challenging to find designated time agreed by all professionals working for different institutions (school, health, social services, care and family).

The family should be involved to ensure the parents have the opportunity to contribute. They are supposed to attend the assessment meetings giving their precious perspective on the child. To uphold the professionals' assessment process, the parents can do an initial home assessment based on specific forms defined by the SCERTS Model. The family perspective is very important because behaviours and traits are often not transferred from the home environment if the child has autism. Parents can attend the specific meetings allowing professionals to ask their opinions and views on issues and behaviours that the child may display through the questionnaires. In relation to this research, one of the professionals said: *"I think the family should be involved but this is not always feasible. It is unlikely that families will be able to attend scoring meetings, and if they did, partners may not feel they can score so honestly about the student. I would be useful to hold an independent meeting with families, if the families are available."* This means that involving the family is not always simple for the professionals and the responsibility of the team leader in managing the Team Around the Child and the family is fundamental for the positive quality of interdisciplinary teamwork and the assessment.

Through working in an interdisciplinary way, it is possible to understand the relationship between the child and his team through an analysis of all actions and perspectives in daily practice, collecting information on attitudes, activities and methods of each participant.

## 4. The child's assessment through the SCERT model

During the research at the residential school, the researcher was able to be part of three assessments and understand how the Team Around the Child worked through the use of SCERTS in this particular context. The children chosen for the observation were on three different stages of communication as defined by SCERTS (O'Neill et al., 2010). These stages included the Social Partner stage (where a child is using fewer than three words or phrases referentially, regularly and with communicative intent; the Language Partner stage (where a child uses

more than three but less than 100 words or phrases, regularly and with communicative intent) and the Conversational Partner stage (where a child uses more than 100 words or phrases referentially, regularly and with communicative intent and can use at least 20 different word combinations that are creative) (Prizant et al., 2006).

One formal meeting for each Team Around the Child was organised before starting the assessment and on that occasion the professionals that would be part of each Team were defined and the researcher was introduced to all team members. Observing team dynamics and practice during these meetings helped the researcher to understand how the residential school promotes multidisciplinary teamwork and how the SCERTS Model supports their daily practice.

The researcher had an active part in the assessment process, interacting and asking professionals' opinion to gather information on the use of SCERTS as interdisciplinary model. The three assessments observed had been organised and managed differently, with different results and feedback from the professionals involved. The assessment meetings are briefly described below to give the reader an example on how it could be effective. It also illustrates the challenges in planning and managing interdisciplinary team meetings.

- *Assessment 1* (16-year-old girl / Social partner stage): the assessment was done in two different days (4 hours in total) and eight professionals attended the meetings, from each department involved (education, care, therapy, family): the Team Around the Child was defined to be representative of the child's professionals involved and everybody invited could attend the assessment meeting. The meeting room was very quiet and comfortable, with a round table and a computer for watching the video footage (important during the child's assessment). One of the department managers chaired the first session and his deputy chaired the second session, each professional had the full assessment form and one of them, from the psychology department, owned the SCERTS manual. The Team leader read aloud the sentences for scoring and his deputy gave description of it to the whole team. The Team watched the video footage before starting the Transactional Support session. The conversation on the child was very honest and relaxed. All the people in the Team appeared satisfied of the assessment done because they felt they worked together well. During the assessment meeting there was enough time for discussion and scoring, allowing people to compare each experience on the child and exchange good practice through different settings. In the second meeting, there were different professionals attending and the school department could not attend.
- *Assessment 2* (14-year-old boy / Language partner stage): the assessment was done in two different days (2 hours in total). The Team Around the Child designated to do the assessment was selected in advance but only three professionals attended the first meeting and two professionals attended the second meeting. The room for the assessment was very quiet and comfortable, with a round table and a computer for watching the video footage. Each professional had the full assessment form and the chairman had the SCERTS manual. The scoring went very fast and the re-

searcher had the impression the professionals might not have had enough time to score properly.

- *Assessment 3* (17-year-old boy / Conversational partner stage): the assessment was done in three different meetings (6 hours in total). Three professionals attended the meeting, and included one from each department; the room for the assessment was very quiet and comfortable, with a round table and a computer for watching the video footage; the professionals did not have the full assessment form during the first meeting but they did have it during the following meetings. The team leader owned the SCERTS manual but she did not read it aloud during the first meeting. In the following meetings, a person read aloud the definitions of each sentence to score the child's assessment. The professionals involved knew the child for a long time and the scoring took a long time because of discussions over the child's development.

The three assessments were a good way for the researcher to collect information on the Team Around the Child to help identify the main aspects needed to enable good teamwork through the implementation of SCERTS.

The following aspects identify the key findings that highlight the key points to enable multidisciplinary teamwork when using the SCERTS Model:

1. *Team Management*

The Heads of the Departments committee have to define the leader of each Team Around the Child. The chairman's role is fundamental for the team's success because he would be in charge of planning and chairing each meeting, supervising the teamwork, guiding the group through SCERTS, giving explanation when necessary, taking notes of people's comments during the whole assessment to define the child's targets, and keeping everybody aware of the timing. The committee is the place where the Team leaders have room to face their doubts and their struggles in running the Team. The management group is fundamental for the implementation of SCERTS in a balanced way and to keep the quality level under control.

2. *Team composition*

The Team Around the Child is the core of all the SCERTS implementation: it is crucial to successful assessment and to set goals for supporting the child. The Team should be composed by four to six people, from each department (Education, Care, Therapy, Management and Family) in a very balanced way that allows everybody to participate positively and exchange good practices and perspectives on the child based on the experience done in different settings. It is fundamental that each professional involved in the Team Around the Child attends the meetings.

3. *Team supervision*

The SCERTS manual is kept by one person who is very confident in using the model, so the definitions can be explained reading them aloud and keeping every body else attentive on the contents and not on the reading.

The leader should be supervising the TAC and taking notes about the different personalities in the team, to drive them to work well together and to understand the main difficulties of communication and exchange. The team supervision can be efficient through the use of SCERTS because the assessment and targeting focus not only on the child's development but on the Transactional Support as well, In this way it is possible to understand the resources and struggles of the partners involved and to support positive teamwork. The chairman must provide everybody with all the forms necessary at the beginning of the assessment. The forms provided are the ones included in the manual (Prizant et al., 2006).

#### 4. *Organization of the assessment*

Once the Team Around the Child is designed, the assessment should follow the steps explained in the manual and in the handbook (Prizant et al, 2006). Each step is important for the quality of the assessment. The video footage has to be well organised, the Team should meet at the beginning of the scholastic year to define the communication stage of the child and to select what must be observed and included in the final footage. Due to the importance of having each child's life setting analysed and kept in consideration, the video footage could become a very challenging and time-consuming step of the SCERTS implementation. The Team should underline what are the core aspects of the observation based on the child communication stage and the assessment form. For the organisation of the Team, the schedule of each meeting is important: it is responsibility of the Team leader to keep the right timing for each score and properly follow the assessment effectiveness. An assessment meeting which is too long will bring disappointment and frustration to the team.

#### 5. *Family involvement*

The family must be involved in the assessment process through report forms, meetings and interviews, even if the child is in residential provision. The family can be involved ensuring they have the opportunity to contribute, maybe even attend the assessment meetings can give their feelings and evidence. They can do an initial home assessment as behaviours and traits are often not transferred from the home environment, asking their opinions and views on issues and behaviours that the child may display through the questionnaires and possibly some meetings.

It is important to take into consideration these key aspects when undertaking the child assessment and when the school wants to promote interdisciplinary teamwork for planning the educational project of a child with autism. The Team Around the Child is the main tool for ensuring inclusion and good practice exchange when working with children with autism.



## 5. Improving interdisciplinary teamwork: the positive aspects of the SCERTS Model

A key difficulty in learning, for persons on the autistic spectrum, is the lack of ability to “generalise” new knowledge. The practical process of carrying out a SCERTS assessment addresses this common problem. For any student to be judged to have either mastered or be “emerging” a new skill depends on either first hand feedback and/or video evidence across the partners who comprise the inter-disciplinary team. One of the key findings was the openness and honesty required by the partners, particularly in reference to the Transactional Support component of the assessment process. This sharing of direct work with the student with autism across Care, Education and therapeutic settings became a catalyst for reflective practice.

The interdisciplinary approach through the organisation of the Team Around the Child is an innovative element of the SCERTS model and is an important element of working with children on the autism spectrum as a team. Experiencing the Team Around the Child in a more functional way, organising it better and tying it in with assessment and future targeting, made the professionals involved in the research very satisfied about their work as a team and as an individual, making them feel part of the same group of people being considered equally important. They felt their experience with the child was fundamental and unique for developing the life-plan, without counting how many hours they spent with the child.

The Team Around the Child can be demanding and can take a lot of energy and time but most of the professionals agreed that is fundamental for the SCERTS assessment. It is a place where they could learn how to work together, it is a good way to exchange daily practice and it is a way to be organised for the children they serve.

What makes the SCERTS process different is that the assessment meeting is conducted in an informal and relaxed manner. Before scoring the checklists, fellow professionals can take time to review video evidence and share positive and negative anecdotes regarding the student’s progress. Sometimes, these anecdotes can be light hearted and humorous.

The opportunities provided to exchange experience and perspectives between professionals cannot be over emphasised. There is a tendency in residential schools for a competitive element to arise between the Care and Education settings, as to progress being made. SCERTS displaces this possible rivalry with collaborative problem solving and true reflective practice. The same tendency can also be found in mainstream Italian schools, and the experience of teamwork activities observed in residential schools can be a good example for good practice in other educational settings. The focus on interdisciplinary teamwork takes away discussions from the child’s pathology and associated behaviour problems to become more concentrated on the long term potential of the student and consideration of his future quality of life.

To be successful within a large organisation, any new initiative requires active commitment from all levels of management, especially those in positions of leadership. The residential school key staff members across the student-focused de-

partments have been released to attend training and awareness sessions on the SCERTS Model. In turn, this has led to a confidence, wherein staff teams have felt more empowered to work constructively in teams and people have certainly become equal in status, sharing real knowledge about the students.

The researcher, during her experience at this residential school, noticed a genuine team enthusiasm for the SCERTS Model. This enthusiasm is not restricted to how it is currently operating but it's potential to influence future innovative practice is truly welcomed. The real meaning of Transactional Support is enabling staff teams to have the self-confidence to be reflective practitioners and openly admit that there are areas of development in their professional practice, and this is what was observed during the Team Around the Child meetings.

## 6. The challenging aspects of the SCERTS Model

Some specific challenges exist which are a threat to the long-term success of SCERTS within the organisation. These challenges relate to staff availability and long term commitment. The school management has a pivotal role in maintaining the enthusiasm and commitment to the model but it takes time to get used to SCERTS because it is not a model that can be implemented in a short-time period. The SCERTS Model can be considered as a mind-set that needs to be encouraged over time and across the whole centre. One of the therapists said *"I feel comfortable using SCERTS and attending the assessment meetings, however I still think we have a long way to go until SCERTS is understood and accepted fully across the school: as I do not work hands on with the students daily I am not able to apply this with the students, I can only work with staff to set targets for them to work on"*.

It is clear that encouraging the right commitment between professionals from different backgrounds and families can be challenging because the communication style is often different and misunderstood. If professionals are not able to commit and trust each other, the implementation process will stop. Many teachers and social workers are used to working through specific models already in use and it could be hard to start using the new SCERTS curriculum as a multidisciplinary model to follow.

The training of all professionals on the use of the SCERTS Model will take time and it could be expensive. In relation to the forms provided during the assessment, many professionals believed that the published SCERTS Manuals, highly informative and comprehensive, do not lend themselves to easy reading by care and education professionals. Rather, the presentation is academic in style and is, as might be expected, littered with American terminology. To address this downside, representatives of the Team Around the Child have collaborated with the researcher to produce a SCERTS Handbook for internal use. This will be distributed to care and education teams early in 2013 and the strategies for helping the TAC during the assessment and the implementation of SCERTS will be included in the handbook.

## 7. Concluding comments

The SCERTS model seems to be very efficient in supporting team work and the family in each step of the child's educational life plan. The model provides professionals with a useful approach for working together for the child's development and growth. It can be an educational model for supporting teamwork and teachers when working with children on the autism spectrum. The interdisciplinary approach is fundamental to understanding a condition like the autism spectrum. The SCERTS model provides professionals with a useful approach for working together for promoting the child's development and growth because it helps to organise the team and analyse the challenges in an efficient and proactive way.

The interdisciplinary perspective of the model does not cut off the professionals' experience and creativity but enables every point of view on the child to be seen as a fundamental resource of information and equally important.

These first observations are the starting point for designing a research project on the use of the SCERTS model as support for knowledge and training of teachers and professionals who are working for including pupils with autism in other centres. The link between culturally and systemically different educational systems can be possible thanks to the positive exchange of good practice that can be found in using a model as SCERTS, that is not prescriptive and it does not need a specific framework to be used properly. These observations on interdisciplinary practice will be taken as an example for an Italian case study and active research on inclusion in mainstream classrooms of student with autism, considering the positive and challenging aspects experienced in the English school.

The Italian mainstream school is fundamentally different from a residential school but the good experience and positive team attitude observed during the children's assessment in England can be inspirational in developing new interdisciplinary teamwork strategies in mainstream schools and educational services serving children on the autism spectrum in Italy.

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