RaY

Research at the University of York St John

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School transitions for autistic young people in mainstream settings.

A research report

Executive Summary

Project summary

This report presents findings from a four-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of 15 autistic young people as they progressed from primary school through the first three years of mainstream secondary school (Year 6 to Year 9). The project was led by researchers at York St John University, in partnership with the Specialist Autism Teaching Team at City of York Council. The research was designed in response to the observation that many autistic young people manage the primary-to-secondary transition well, but post-transition outcomes are mixed with high rates of exclusion. The research aimed to uncover factors that promote, or act as barriers to, positive educational outcomes for autistic young people in mainstream schools. A key aim was to foreground the voices of autistic young people themselves throughout the study.

Background

Over 70% of autistic children and young people in England are educated in mainstream schools. However, rates of exclusion are disproportionately high in this group, and many autistic young people report being unhappy at school. Academic underachievement in relation to ability and poor mental health have also been identified as areas of concern. While schools have a duty to remove barriers to inclusion under equality legislation, many teachers and school staff receive limited training in autism and neurodiversity.

Method

Annual interviews with autistic young people, their parents and teachers focused on classroom learning, peer relationships at school, the physical school environment, leisure activities and wellbeing. Questionnaire measures indexed mental health, functional skills and socialisation (parent- and teacher-report) and experiences of bullying (child- and teacher-report).

Results

Young people's experiences of the primary-to-secondary transition were overwhelmingly positive, but post-transition outcomes were highly mixed. Two young people were excluded from their secondary school by the end of the study; others had periods when they felt unable to attend school. Many experienced bullying and poor mental health. The type and level of support that young people received in school varied widely.

Factors that impacted the young people's experiences and outcomes included:

- Sensory stress in busy school environments;
- Difficulty forming and maintaining friendships;
- Peer victimisation and negative perceptions of difference;
- Classroom practices that made learning harder to access;
- Being disciplined for behaviours that are characteristic of autism;
- Low expectations of ability from some teaching staff.

Negative experiences at school led the young people to "mask" their autism, for example by refusing support so as not to be singled out as different. Masking took a serious toll on mental health and meant that teachers were not always aware when young people were approaching crisis.

Recommendations

We provide practical recommendations to support autistic young people to thrive at school, relating to:

- Universal training for school staff;
- Education of the wider school community;
- Adjustments to the physical and sensory school environment;
- Regular review of school behavioural policies;
- Neurodiversity-inclusive teaching practices;
- Effective home-school communication;
- Individualised pastoral support.

Contents

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Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that is present from birth and throughout the lifespan. Autistic children and young people often experience challenges that can impact their experiences at school, for example in social communication, sensory processing, and "executive functions" affecting organisation and planning. Many also have co-occurring diagnoses of physical or developmental conditions, such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal issues, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or learning disability[1]. Autistic children also have unique strengths, which can include hyper-focus and attention to detail, a strong sense of fairness and the ability to think outside the box [2]. It is important to recognise that no two autistic children are the same; each has a unique profile of strengths and challenges that change and develop over time.

Most autistic children and young people in the UK are educated in mainstream settings [3]. Many, but not all, have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), which gives statutory entitlement to specialist support provision. Research indicates relatively poor outcomes for autistic children and young people at school, including high exclusion rates, academic under-achievement, and high rates of mental distress [4]. Points of transition, for example between school settings or school years, can be particularly challenging [5, 6].

The Specialist Autism Teaching Team at City of York Council can provide individualised support for autistic pupils and school staff to support the primary-to-secondary transition. The team identified that young people often manage the transition to secondary well, but outcomes for autistic pupils beyond Year 7 are mixed.

This report presents research examining the experiences of a group of autistic pupils over four years, from Year 6 to Year 9 of mainstream education. A key aim of the research was to foreground the voices of autistic young people in order to understand facilitators and barriers to successful transition into, and progress through, the early years of secondary school.

A note on terminology

Neurodiversity approaches understand autism to be part of natural human variation, coming with unique strengths and challenges for each individual. The research presented in this report is framed from a neurodiversity perspective. We avoid medicalised or potentially stigmatising terminology (e.g. disorder, high/low functioning) [7].

Throughout the report, we use identity-first language (e.g. autistic child) and not person-first language (e.g. child with autism), following the majority preference of the autism community [8].

Policy background

There are 166,041 autistic pupils in schools in England - an increase of 8% since 2020. More than 70% of these pupils are educated in mainstream schools [9].

Autistic young people where possible should be educated in mainstream settings and schools should remove barriers to learning [10, 11].

Less than 50% of autistic young people report being happy in school, and 6 in 10 report that the main thing that would improve school is teachers who understand autism. Less than 50% of teachers feel confident about supporting autistic pupils [12].

School exclusions for autistic young people are three times higher than for their neurotypical peers [13].

The 2021 National Autism Strategy includes children for the first time, committing funding to training for school staff and national anti-bullying measures [14].

What we did
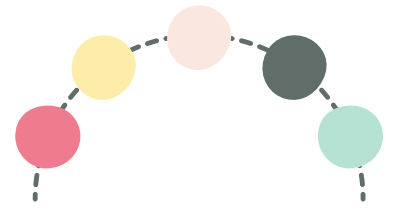
We recruited 15 autistic young people and their families via the Specialist Autism Teaching Team at City of York Council.

They all attended mainstream schools in York. The majority joined the project when the young person was in Year 6; a few had just started Year 7.

Parents provided informed consent for their own and their child's participation. Information on the study was also provided in age-appropriate written form and young people gave their verbal agreement to participate.

Parents and young people jointly identified a teacher who had worked closely with the young person in that academic year. The teacher provided their own consent to take part.

Interviews:
Each young person, their parent and a familiar teacher were interviewed annually from Year 6 to Year 9. In total we carried out 43 interviews with 13 young people, 49 interviews with 13 mothers and 2 fathers and 36 interviews with 31 teachers.

Young people were given the option to have a familiar adult present. Young people and their parents were interviewed at home, at school, or at York St John University according to their preference. All teachers were interviewed in school.

Measures:
Each year we also collected a set of questionnaires that measured wellbeing, functional and social skills, and bullying.

Analysis:
We transcribed the interviews so that we could identify commonly occurring themes in the young people's experiences.

We evaluated the quantitative measures to identify change in wellbeing, skills and bullying over time.

We sought feedback on the findings from the participating families and incorporated it into this report.

Participant demographics
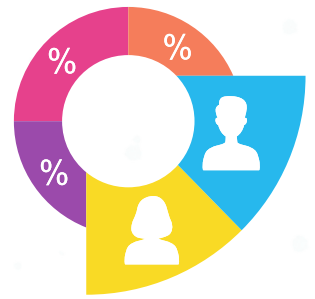
The group of young people included 14 boys and 1 girl when they were recruited to the study. Research indicates that autistic girls are more likely to receive a diagnosis later in adolescence or adulthood in comparison with boys [15]. Formal diagnosis of autism by Year 6 was an inclusion criterion for this study; therefore autistic girls are likely to be under-represented.

Some young people underwent changes in their gender identity or expression during the course of the study.

All of the young people and families involved in the study identified as White British.

The families represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Parental occupation ranged from L3 (higher professional occupations) to L14.2 (long-term unemployed), using the Office for National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification [16],

Some young people had co-occurring diagnoses of developmental, mental health and/or chronic physical health conditions.

All of the young people had been formally diagnosed with autism while at primary school.

We asked parents to complete the Social Communication Scale (SCQ) [17] at the start of the study as an indicator of level of social communication support need. The SCQ has a maximum score of 39, with scores of 11 and above indicating possible autism.

Scores on the SCQ for this group of young people ranged from 7 to 37 (mean = 22.38) . This suggests a wide range of support need within the group.

Young people attended 12 primary schools and 5 secondary schools across the City of York Council district.

Data were collected between 2017 and 2021. The final data collection point fell during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted online during periods of lockdown restriction.

Interviews were conducted at every time point for 10/15 young people, with at least two years of longitudinal data available for 13/15.

What we found: Key outcomes

2 out of 15 young people were moved to a special school provision following periods of exclusion

10 out of 15 reported being bullied at school

3 out of 10 reported that they were punished for retaliating to bullies

For 8 out of 15, difficulties were managed by reducing their timetable (doing fewer subjects)

6 out of 15 had periods where they felt unable to go to school

12 out of 15 reported the development of mental health difficulties/ emotional distress

The type and amount of school support that young people received varied widely. Some were taught in inclusion spaces most of the time, accessing a few mainstream lessons. Others learned in mainstream lessons with varying levels of teaching assistant support. Others were fully integrated into mainstream school lessons with only universal support, or none at all.

Transition to secondary

The transition from Year 6 to 7 was described as overwhelmingly positive. Almost all the young people were optimistic about starting secondary school and remained positive about the transition in Year 7.

There were examples of good practice to support Year 7 transition (although these were not implemented universally):

- Additional transition visits;
- Events in the summer to meet other children who would access inclusion spaces;
- Identifying smaller, and therefore quieter, forms;
- Universal autism training for staff and implementation of autism champions;
- Autism awareness assemblies to help to educate peers;
- A link person for parents to liaise with;
- Support to do homework at school;
- Provision of mentors;
- Provision of photographs or films of the new school environment;
- Provision of their Year 7 timetable in advance.

Similarly, young people did not report concerns about the transition into Year 8 or 9 or the change of timetable/teachers at points of transition.

He had an advanced copy of his timetable and mum had it up on the fridge, so he knew what was happening, he knew which members of staff he would have with him, and he was just comfortable and relaxed. [Parent]

So on your timetable, it has teachers' initials, which isn't really helpful at all, cos some have the same initials and you can't work it out. But then when they give you like first or last name you can. [Young Person]

Some additional things identified that would further support transition into Year 7 included:

A floor map of the school and the timetable for at least the first week provided in advance with teachers' full names shown;

The web pages relating to Year 7 being up to date over the summer;

Information about what help would be available in the first few days of Year 7 in order to find classes etc.;

Information about what universal support was available and how to access it.

The sensory environment

Young people identified the sensory nature of secondary school as difficult to manage. Several described school as looking messy and untidy, which could feel "toxic". School uniforms were described as uncomfortable and sweaty.

School corridors were described as "overwhelming" and "like a stampede". Young people found it difficult to learn within classrooms that were small, "stuffy", with closed doors (unlike the more open plan design of many primary schools), floor surfaces on which chairs scraped loudly, flickering or buzzing lights, or without opening windows for fresh air.

It's mainly the noise and also the fact there's so many people in the class. And sometimes it's to do with where everyone is, because there's one classroom and there's only three columns of tables, whereas in maths there's four and they're more spaced out. There's similar amounts of people but they're further away.
[Young Person]

When I feel overwhelmed I just kind of shut down, I just kind of stop what I'm doing. I feel like I can't function if I don't stop. Sometimes I get very tired, so I have fallen asleep often in lessons.
[Young Person]

Smells such as "sweaty children", perfume, fire or chemicals in science, and food in the dining hall were described as difficult to tolerate.

lessons were reported as being stressful, because of physical contact teachers shouting instructions, which reverberated in sports halls.

ability to tolerate sensory stimulation was described as changeable, pending on how many other stressors had occurred. Advanced warning of ensory-heavy lessons helped. The impact of being over-stimulated was not being able to concentrate on learning. Some young people felt too overwhelmed to eat.

Young people had a lot of extra thinking to do to work out ways to reduce sensory stimulation, and finding quiet spaces in school was difficult. Some inclusion spaces and designated "chill out rooms" were reported to be too noisy - one had a school bell on the outside. Some young people resorted to hiding in toilets at break times.

Some young people were allowed to work outside classrooms in open spaces, leave lessons early so they could move through quieter corridors, and access the lunch queue earlier than peers. Some identified these measures as helpful, but they could also have unintended consequences as they highlighted young people's difference.

The library is the only place where there isn't practically like a riot or an insurrection happening! It's a bit quieter, a bit less - I don't know if I'd go as far to say safer - that's generally how I feel about it.
[Young Person]

So you can either go round the long way [to avoid crowds] which will mean you'll be late, or you can get hustled and bustled through the corridor. So that's one of the hardest decisions.
[Young Person]

Peer relationships

Friendships were identified as a concern for many young people and their parents, and were described as impacting on young people's wellbeing and ability to learn.

Contrary to stereotypes, the majority of young people wanted friendships but identified difficulties in initiating them, maintaining them and negotiating how to continue them outside school.

Several young people joined extracurricular groups in Year 7 as a way to try to make meaningful friendships. By Year 8 some had stopped attending so many, as "my social battery ran out".

I'm not really worried about anything, apart from making friends. [Young Person]

I have got a few friends, but I don't engage in as much conversations or have as much friends as I want to. [Young Person]

I just feel embarrassed going up and saying, "Oh what's your name?" I wait for them to ask me. I'm terrible at purposefully making friends. [Young Person]

He was a bit upset. He said, "I don't really know how to talk to people". [Parent]

I've been interacting with people more, but the issue has been I haven't got the confidence to bring up the topic of getting each other's numbers or contact details. [Young Person]

I think [young person] to some extent prefers it that way. He seems to enjoy his own company. [Teacher]

Many teachers were unaware of whether the young person had made friends. Sometimes teachers assumed that young people who were spending a lot of time alone were happy with this, which contrasted to what the young person told us.

Problems with friendships were more evident towards the end of Year 7 and into Year 8. Some made more meaningful friendships later into their school journey by joining minority interest groups within school. For several young people these friends were also neurodivergent.

Some young people felt that revealing their diagnosis negatively impacted on friendships.

There were a few examples of young people being offered regular space to talk, e.g., a regular "walk and talk" session with a teacher or a sixth form mentor. This was considered useful in allowing space to unpack concerns about peer relationships. Reducing anxiety about friendships enabled the young person to concentrate on learning.

Negotiating difference, stigma and identity
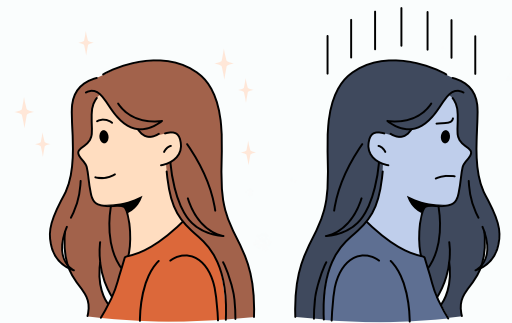
How the young people felt about being autistic changed as they got older and in response to experiences in the school environment, such as being bullied or infantilised by others ("They treat me like a cute cat!")

Some expressed a positive attitude to being different from their peers, although this often fluctuated over time.

Sometimes well intentioned attempts to help young people fit in - for example, by reducing their use of noise cancelling headphones or fidget toys - could give the message that being different is undesirable.

This could contribute to feelings of shame and embarrassment about being autistic.

I'd rather be different and have a reason for it than not be different. A lot of people say labels are a bad thing. But I like being autistic. Because it's the reason I am who I am. [Young Person]

Me and my friend we're quite different. We don't really like storybooks; we like fact books and statistics. We're really similar. We feel like we're outcasts in a way, but we also feel really good because we're different. [Young Person]

I think he's just struggling with the idea of having autism. He spoke to me last night saying how different he feels. I tried to reassure him. He said to me, "I wish you hadn't told me". [Parent]

When it comes to his friends he doesn't mention autism. In fact he says, 'I'll make new friends'. He's possibly going to school thinking no one will know. He gets really embarrassed about his autism. [Parent]

As their individual identities developed through adolescence, the young people had to negotiate:

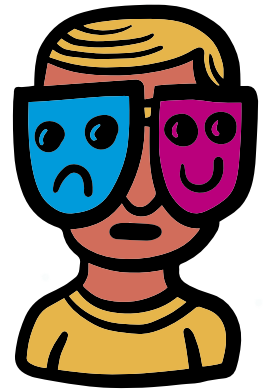If, when and how to disclose their diagnosis to school staff and peers;

Stereotypes of autism, which could impact how people at school expected them to behave;

Societal narratives of autism as a disorder vs narratives of autism as neurodiversity.

Masking

Young people wanted to fit in at school, and were worried about being marked out as different by "autistic behaviours". Sometimes they refused extra support at school to avoid seeming different from their peers.

Parents reported that the stress of trying to act "normal" at school (e.g., by inhibiting stimming or limiting talk about topics of focused interest) could take a severe toll on young people's wellbeing and behaviour at home.

Some young people were so adept at masking their autism that teachers were unaware that they were struggling until they reached a point of crisis.

He is storing it all up and he is controlling himself and managing himself. And by the time he gets home, his self-management is lost and the smallest thing, if something fell on the floor, that would be enough for a flying rage.
[Parent]

When I'm at home I am very, very crazy, but when I'm at school I'm just like a dead man walking the earth.
[Young Person]

I enjoy not having as much support, because I want to go [into school] like everybody else. I want the same worries and concerns as everybody else. [Young Person]

Case Study

"John" had shown signs of mental distress, including self-harm, in the early years of primary school. By the time he was preparing to move to secondary school, he seemed to be doing much better. He received enhanced transition support when he started at his new school.

During the first months of Year 7, John appeared to be thriving academically and socially. His teachers asked, "Are we even sure he's autistic?" But later that year, John was permanently excluded following a series of incidents of distressed behaviour at school. He had masked his difficulties so successfully up to that point that school staff had not realised he was approaching crisis.

Bullying

The autism people at school are a bit of a target to bullies. [Young Person]

The Schwartz Victimisation Scale [20] asks young people to report their experiences of physical, verbal and social bullying.

Bullying (child report)

14.00	
12.00	
10.00	
8.00	
6.00	
4.00	
2.00	
0.00	
	Y6 Y7 Y8

There was evidence of a "Year 7 respite" - i.e. young people's reports of bullying reduced in Year 7 as they transitioned to a new school environment. However, it tended to increase again from Year 8

Bullying was described as occurring because peers perceived autistic young people to be different, were aware of their diagnosis, or knew that they received support.

For most children bullying occurred in school, but for a few it spilled out into social media and their home neighbourhood.

People want to bully me for fun, because I can get really angry and they find it hilarious and they want to provoke that and accelerate it. [Young Person]

Bullying was described as negatively impacting on learning. Several young people described not engaging in class because they did not want to be noticed.

Parents described bullying as a significant contributory factor to poor mental health, and young people feeling unable to attend school.

When young people became outwardly distressed in school or retaliated, this was not always understood in the broader context of bullying. Sometimes it resulted in the autistic young person being excluded or otherwise punished, which led to perceptions that teachers did not understand and school was not safe.

It's awful. He was this happy smiley boy. And [now] he's soulless, he just doesn't care, he just wants to die. [Parent]

Some young people were described as actively seeking detentions or isolation to avoid bullying.

Young people and parents were disappointed when teachers responded to bullying by telling them to ignore it, suggested reducing useful supports in order to make their difference less visible, or when they were the ones taken out of classes or put into isolation to safeguard them.

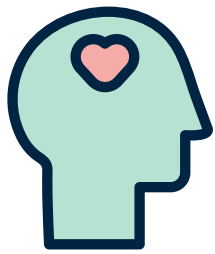🔴 Young people felt reassured when they saw teachers actively respond to bullying.

⚫ There were examples of whole school and smaller group education initiatives to increase awareness of autism, which were identified as good preventative strategies.

Mentxal health & wellbeing

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) [18] is a screening tool for mental health difficulties. We asked parents and teachers to assess young people's mental health with the SDQ each year (note: we do not report data from Year 9, because this data collection point fell during Covid-19 lockdown and may not be representative).

"Externalising difficulties" include conduct problems and hyperactivity.
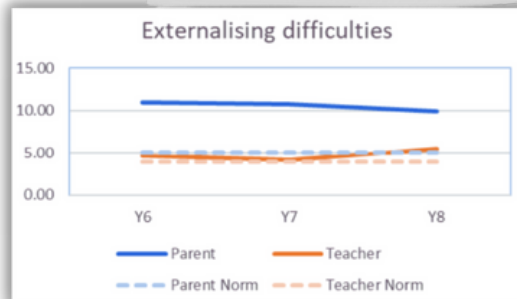
"Internalising difficulties" include symptoms of anxiety, depression and peer problems.
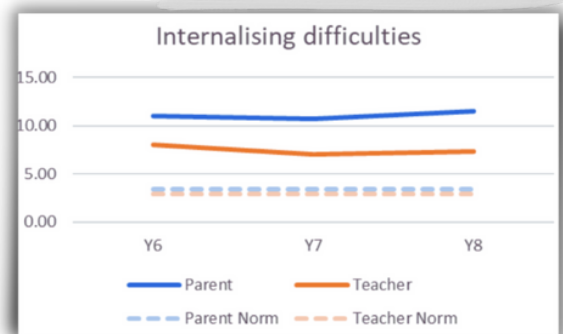
Young people's externalising and internalising difficulties were significantly higher than age norms in Years 6, 7 and 8.

Parents reported higher levels of difficulty than teachers. This could be because parents spend more time with young people and/or because young people mask their difficulties in school.

For several young people, parent-rated externalising difficulties reduced somewhat with age. However, internalising difficulties were maintained or increased as young people progressed through secondary school. Some parents described young people showing signs of intense anxiety at home.

Parents described how young people might not always communicate concerns about school straight away, but changes to wellbeing became evident at home.

Some schools provided ongoing and regular pastoral support, which provided young people with a space to explore feelings and was identified by families as good practice.

There were some examples given of teachers responding to a young person's emotional distress in ways that further escalated it.

Daily living skills & socialisation
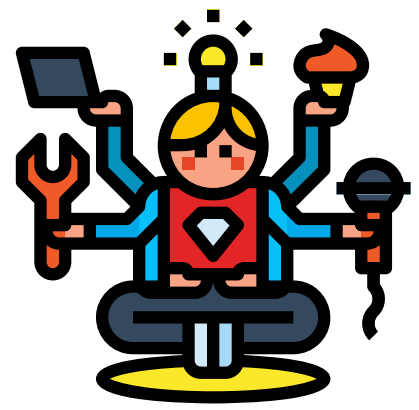
The Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales [19] measure personal and social skills in children and young people. We asked parents and teachers to evaluate young people's skills in two domains each year: Daily Living Skills & Socialisation (note: we do not report data from Year 9, because this fell during Covid-19 lockdown and may not be representative).
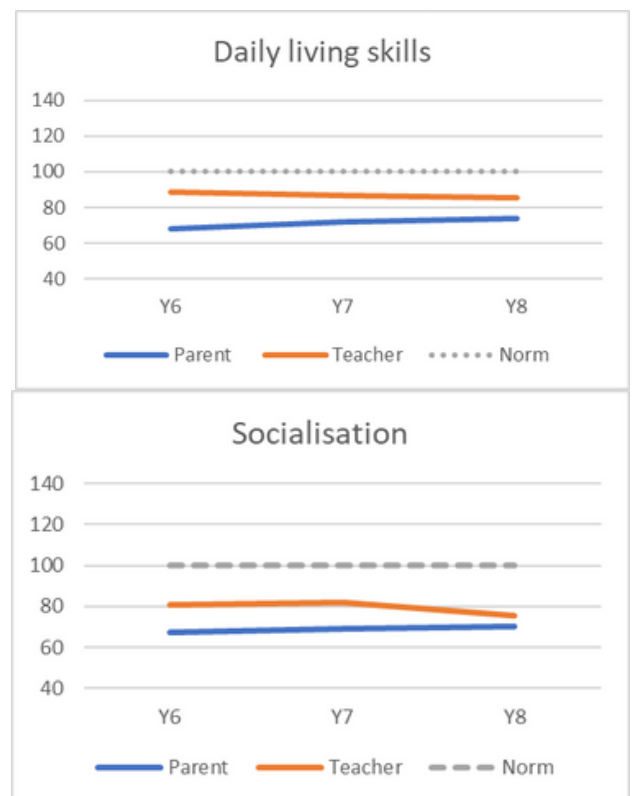
"Daily living skills" measures age-appropriate functional skills for self-care & navigating environments.

Daily living skills

"Socialisation" measures interpersonal relationships and coping skills.

Socialisation

Young people's daily living skills and socialisation were rated below age norms by parents and teachers in Years 6, 7 and 8.

In Year 6, parents reported more serious difficulties than did teachers.

By Year 8, parents' and teachers' reports of young people's difficulties were more similar. This could be because difficulties in daily living skills and socialisation became more apparent at school as young people got older; while parents were aware of difficulties from an earlier age.

Organisation and planning were identified as areas of challenge for several young people. Young people could be fearful of forgetting to bring books or equipment to school, or forgetting to complete homework. Visual timetables could be helpful.

Some young people had difficulty identifying bodily sensations, such as hunger or need to use the toilet. Parents described strategies they used at home to help; however, these issues could cause anxiety and embarrassment at school.

Teachers

Young people, parents and teaching assistants reported that subject teachers had varying levels of autism awareness and willingness to make reasonable adjustments to teaching. Examples of good practice were often related to individual teachers.

Parents acknowledged that it is difficult for teachers to have in-depth knowledge of every child, and were aware that teachers were often working with several young people with varying, and sometimes competing, needs.

Some young people felt that teachers' expectations of them were too low.

Young people found some specific teaching techniques difficult, such as frequent repetition of material, lots of verbal instructions all at once, and the need to explain reasoning despite having the correct answer. They also found it difficult when no timescales were given for tasks.

No one understands me. They know I have autism but they're never understanding and I just feel like they haven't done enough research of autism.
[Young Person]

She'd tell you what to do like all at once and it'd confuse me, I remember what the title was but what's the rest of it again?
[Young Person]

I did mention [to the teacher] he wouldn't be able to do it that way, but they insisted he do it that way.
[Parent]

They label me as a weird kid and they do treat me differently for it, I can get away with not doing any work because the teacher thinks that I have some kind of issue, [Young Person]

I think I felt quite well prepared and, if there are children who have some quite severe needs, we get proper training on that - about an hour. [Teacher].

Teachers felt that they had good autism awareness, although some acknowledged that whilst this provided them with general strategies, these were not effective for every young person. Some teachers were unaware of learning support plans, or had not looked at them since the beginning of term.

With some notable exceptions, teachers tended to view autistic young people's differences as deficits, and did not often identify relative strengths.

The provision of autism training, or training related to an individual's specifics needs, was highly variable. Some teachers reported that they had received no training, while some schools had trained all staff. Despite every school having an Autism Champion trained by the Specialist Autism Teaching Team, not all families and teachers were aware of who this was.

School support

Many young people were offered universal support outside the classroom, which included:

- Access to inclusion spaces at different times of the day;
- The option to leave lessons a few minutes before the end;
- Early access to the dining hall.

Some young people found these supports helpful, while others did not want to utilise them in order to avoid being identified as different.

Some young people said they had not been given enough information about universal support.

I know who to speak to, I know where to go, but I don't sort of know what time it would be appropriate.
[Young Person]

There was an option to have a locker [in the inclusion unit] but he very quickly decided he didn't want that. He didn't want to be different. [Parent]

[The TA is] nice but they don't truly help. That's all they're there for - to be nice to people with special needs- and that's not what they should be doing.
[Young Person]

More flexibility would help- for the teachers to let us know what's going on, so we can prepare the kids. And them having more of an understanding of autism.
[Teaching Assistant]

We don't get told everything. So we get told what they think we need to know. I'm sure the Senior Leadership Team know.
[Teaching Assistant]

Others had Teaching Assistant (TA) support in the classroom. Some found this valuable, particularly where there was consistency in staffing. TAs were noted to be helpful in relaying the teacher's instructions in a "more autism friendly way" or in prompting young people to maintain concentration. Several were not keen to have TA support, because it identified them as different. A small number felt support was unhelpful or condescending.

TAs reported receiving minimal or no training in autism. Some did not have access to learning support plans or information about changes to pupils' wellbeing. TAs said they would be better able to support the young person if they were made aware in advance of any changes to lessons, or if lessons were going to be sensory in nature.

There were examples of school plans to reduce support when the young person was doing well. Parents and Specialist Autism Teachers did not always agree that this was a good idea based on historical knowledge of the young person. Input from the specialist teaching team was identified as helpful.

Adjustments to curriculum

Over half of the young people had a reduced timetable in Key Stage 3. Often these arrangements were discussed and agreed with families on the basis of the individual pupil's strengths and difficulties, and could be helpful in managing school-related stress.

Parents expressed concerns when subjects were removed from timetables without prior discussion, perceiving these changes to be made on the basis of young people's behaviours rather than academic ability. Parents and teaching assistants judged that young people were sometimes placed in sets below their ability level for core subjects.

Occasionally teachers judged particular subjects (e.g., modern foreign languages, religious education) to be unsuitable for autistic pupils in general. Given the wide variation in strengths and difficulties in autism, this approach risked young people missing out on gaining skills and knowledge that might be areas of strength.

The school are talking about reducing his lessons from four to five a day, which I'm a bit concerned about because I didn't think there was that much of a problem at primary. [At primary] because he sat next to the teacher she could keep him in check a bit more. [Parent]

I think historically there was a decision that PE wouldn't be a good lesson for [pupils in autism unit]. I disagree with that strongly. However now all of them go to PE and are enjoying it. [Teacher]

He was in the bottom set for science, which I don't think he should have been at all. And he was getting really upset every lesson. Then one lesson when they got literally no work done he just stormed out at the end and was like, "I'm not going to get my grade. I hate this class. It's not fair. Why am I here?" I think the only reason he was in the bottom set was because of his handwriting. [Teaching Assistant]

Small, ad-hoc adjustments to class activities made by teachers to accommodate individual needs were highly appreciated by the young people. Examples included:

A young person who was squeamish about internal organs was enabled instead to draw a diagram of a machine in a Science class;

A young person who was anxious about acting scenes in a group in Drama instead made models for the set;

An exercise group set up for pupils who found contact sports in PE stressful.

[In RE] he was getting on fine but the teachers were just too strict. So he hasn't done that. French is another one he doesn't do although he's very good at it apparently. [Parent]
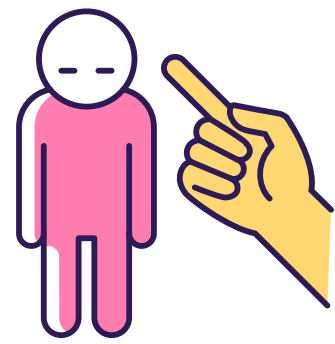
Being punished for "being autistic"

Group things he struggles with and he was always the last one to get changed. [He] got in trouble even though I'd told [the teacher] what was going on. I was just so sick and tired of it. I'm like, "Do they not understand that you're autistic?" So I told pastoral care that he is not doing PE. I'm not letting him go through all that trauma of being shouted at because of something he struggles with. [Parent]

Once when I was a bit afraid to do a contact sport, I got a bit upset and I couldn't do much. [The teacher] gave me a red comment. He's a little bit stern. Is that supposed to be the way you treat a kid with autism? He should understand that kids with autism sometimes have trouble with contact sports. [Young Person]

Teachers disciplined me for not listening, said I should listen better. But that's not my fault. [Young Person]

The young people tended to be highly aware of school rules and keen to follow them. They could become anxious when they observed peers breaking rules.

Nonetheless, several young people often found themselves disciplined at school. Young people and their parents reported that sanctions were sometimes administered in response to behaviours that were characteristic of autism. Common examples included anxiety about contact sports, retaliation to bullies, difficulties with organisation and attention, or using a direct tone when talking to school staff.

In primary school I used to cry. But now when the teacher shouts at me I always question them. I say, "Why are you shouting at me?" and then they're like, "Don't answer back". Then I say, "I just want to know" and then I always get sent out. I always end up being the bad kid of the school, which I really don't want to be. [Young Person]

Anxiety about doing the wrong thing at school and the perception of having been unfairly punished contributed to distressed behaviours at school for some young people. Teaching assistants reported that further sanctions administered following "meltdowns" could be unhelpful and lead to an escalating cycle of distress.

Recommendations

There are many examples of good practice throughout this report. In making further recommendations, we are mindful that these are at the general level and may not be helpful for every young person; demands on school are perennially high; and feasibility for individual schools will differ. Where possible, universal support strategies - which are aimed at autistic young people but avoid singling them out and may also help other pupils - are the most desirable approach. It is also important that all school staff are aware of the tendency for autistic pupils to mask their differences and difficulties, so that staff are enabled to identify young people who are struggling before they reach a point of crisis.

This study has demonstrated that, if trusting relationships are built, autistic young people can clearly articulate what they are finding hard and what might help. Capturing pupil voice effectively can facilitate small changes that have the potential to improve school experience and support better attainment for autistic pupils. When young people feel positive about school, this is likely to improve attendance, reduce exclusion rates and support good mental health.

Teacher training

Ensure that all staff are aware of who is the Autism Champion within the school. Universal autism training for school staff should aim to:
- Raise awareness of masking, so that pupils who "look fine" but are struggling are identified before crises occur;
- Raise awareness of common strengths and challenges in autism, so that associated behaviours are not responded to punitively;
- Encourage staff to consider how to talk about autism, for example: Why deficit-based language and labels like "high and low functioning" are unhelpful; how focussing on everyone's "difference" and "needs" could support better identity development and wellbeing for autistic pupils;
- Provide strategies to reduce bullying and facilitate positive peer relationships and friendships;
- Provide guidance on ways to respond empathetically to autistic "meltdowns".

Peers and the wider school community

Consider ways in which understanding of autism, and acceptance of difference, might be increased throughout the wider school community. This could be facilitated through:
- Assemblies;
- Form time or PHSE teaching;
- Events e.g., during Autism Acceptance week.

There are links to helpful materials, many of which are free to download, on the Additional Resources page.

Recommendations

Neurodiversity-inclusive teaching practice

Where possible strategies should be universally provided to all children, so that the autistic young person is not specifically identified. Many adjustments and supports can be helpful for all pupils. Techniques might include:

- Chunking complex tasks into smaller parts;
- Supporting verbal instructions with written ones that are visible to everyone;
- Where there are several tasks to complete, providing approximate timescales for each component. (However, be aware that some might find time pressure stressful.);
- Giving homework instructions in written form to everyone. Providing opportunities for pupils to do homework in school;
- When verbal instructions are given in class, ensuring that the autistic young person has had adequate time to "refocus" back to the teacher;
- Where autistic young people struggle to maintain concentration, considering whether they can do a classroom task that will provide a small movement break, e.g., collecting books.

Teaching assistant support

- Providing consistency of support where possible;
- Ensuring TAs have access to the learning support plans or Education Health and Care Plans for each child and are made aware of changes to wellbeing;
- TAs to talk to young people about how they would like to be supported/what would help.

School behavioural policies

Review school behaviour policies for equality, diversity and inclusion, with specific consideration of autistic pupils.

While there may be autistic pupils who are able to comply with school rules but choose not to, in many cases "behaviours that challenge" are linked to autistic traits, or are a result of extreme anxiety or distress. It is important that all school staff are aware of their duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils under equality legislation, and that policies allow sufficient flexibility to ensure that autistic pupils are not unfairly punished.

Effective partnership working with parents, provision of pastoral support, and adjustments to learning and teaching are likely to be more effective in reducing distressed behaviour than zero-tolerance approaches to discipline.

Recommendations

Pastoral support

Offer all autistic young people some form of pastoral support, whether or not they have an Education Health and Care Plan, and ensure that they understand how to access it. This might take the form of:
- Regular check-ins with a trusted adult in the school community, e.g. a designated teacher;
- Pairing with a mentor from a higher year group;
- Asking young people what helpful pastoral support would look like for them.

Communication between home and school

Identify the best ways to work in partnership with parents, who have a wealth of knowledge about their child and often spot signs of difficulties earlier than school staff. This can be helpful in:
- Sharing useful strategies - what works and does not work for the young person;
- Sharing concerns about wellbeing, so that issues can be dealt with in a timely way at home and/or at school;
- Maintaining a consistent approach and shared expectations;
- Supporting families to feel less stressed and isolated.

This might take the form of regular meetings, email contact or more formal reviews.

Sensory environment

Consider where autistic young people are seated in the classrooms to reduce sensory over-stimulation. The young person will likely be able to tell you what they think would help. Considerations might include:
- Avoiding being seated next to loud/disruptive pupils;
- Avoiding positions in the classroom where there is a lot of movement/visual traffic or where they may be brushed against;
- Avoiding positions that are warmer or have limited fresh air.

Forewarn autistic young people (and their teaching assistants) when lessons will include high levels of sensory stimulation, so that this is not unexpected and they can prepare or minimise stimulation before the lesson.

Consider the availability of quiet spaces for lunch and break times, outside of designated inclusion provision.

Next steps
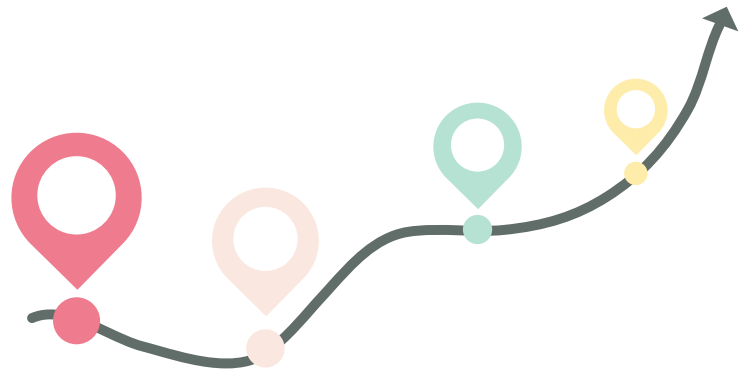
We have two further projects at York St John University related to schooling for neurodivergent pupils:

1

AIMSS Project: Autism Inclusive Mainstream Secondary Schooling

Sue Mesa, Dr Lorna Hamilton and Dr Trish Hobman are extending this Autism School Transitions project by working in partnership with a small group of the young people involved in this study to devise an intervention to support schools to become more inclusive.

2

STEPS project: School Transition Experiences for Pupils with SEN

Kathryn Lewis, Dr Lorna Hamilton, & Dr Jonathan Vincent, in collaboration with City Of York Council, are investigating ways to make the primary-to-secondary school transition successful for young people with a range of educational needs. This project is funded by Sir Halley Stewart Trust,

Further information about these projects can be found on the York St John Webpages:

https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice/research-themes/neurodiversity-and-learning-disabilities/schools-and-young-people-with-sens/

Additional Resources

Learning about Neurodiversity at School (LEANS): Free classroom resources for educating primary-aged pupils about neurodiversity
https://www.ed.ac.uk/salvesen-research/our-projects/learning-about-neurodiversity-at-school

Free training tool for school staff on 'Triple A' (attention, anxiety and arousal) in the classroom
https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/neurodiversity-development/research/triple-a/

Good Autism Practice Report, produced by the Autism Education Trust
https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/GAP_report%20-%20mainReport_I-S.pdf

Neurobears: Explaining autism in accessible and child-friendly language
https://www.pandasonline.org/

Information on supporting autistic girls at school, written by autistic girls (FIZZACC)
https://acorns-soton.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Information-for-staff.pdf

Immie's signs of autism - video by Immie Swain on autistic masking in school, in collaboration with the National Autistic Society and Autism Education Trust
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=677703866812670

Practical tips on designing classroom learning for inclusion of neurodivergent pupils
Honeybourne, V. (2018). The neurodiverse classroom: A teacher's guide to individual learning needs and how to meet them. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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