

# How do we create ASD-friendly schools? A dilemma of placement

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Scope exists within the Northern Ireland (NI) education system to transform mainstream schools into autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)-friendly environments. The efficacy of mainstream inclusion is discussed prior to discussing the creation of ASD-friendly schools. The transformation of mainstream school environments is underpinned by concepts such as inclusive pedagogical approach, universal design for learning and learning without limits. These are discussed alongside strategies to enact core inclusive principles of equity, participation and belonging. However, the need for ASD-specific approaches and schools is also recognised. Our perspectives as educators influence pedagogy, attitudes and approaches to educating autistic children. A social constructivist consciousness is fundamental to moving from deficit SEN rhetoric to creating enabling education for autistic young people. The question of how to achieve this is answered within this article. The use of identity-first language is preferred by a large proportion of the autism community; therefore the term 'autistic child', rather than 'child with autism', is adopted throughout.

**Key words:** Inclusion, autistic spectrum disorder, inclusive pedagogy.

## Introduction: defining inclusion

Warnock (2005) re-ignited the inclusive debate, with Ainscow (2005) suggesting inclusion is a major challenge for education systems worldwide. Disputes regarding terminology can be stagnant (Ainscow *et al.*, 2012), rendering the concept of inclusion vacuous, evacuated of meaning (Sikes *et al.*, 2007) and bewildering (Avramidis *et al.*, 2002). The ubiquitous use of the word ‘inclusion’, specifically ‘mainstream inclusion’, often describes pedagogy which in reality is exclusionary at worst, or at best assimilationist or integrationist (Slee, 2011).

Increasingly inclusion is a broadening agenda respecting diversity among all learners (UNESCO, 2001), reducing exclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) and ‘celebrating difference’ (Barton, 1997, p. 231). Importantly, inclusion must be recognised as a complex process and not a static state (Thomas and Loxley, 2001; Ainscow, 2005; Humphrey *et al.*, 2006; Booth and Ainscow, 2011). It is succinctly described as having all children together, irrespective of ability, with appropriate structures for support (Tilston and Rose, 2000; Artiles *et al.*, 2006) and providing for all children equally (Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2008).

‘Equal treatment is not the same as equal opportunity to learn’ (De Valenzuela, 2014, p. 310). Nevertheless, every child has the ‘possibility of an equality of outcomes’ (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 9). Therefore equity and inclusion involve more than physically integrating children in mainstream schools (De Valenzuela, 2014). They rely upon diversity being considered from the outset, rather than bolting on individually targeted strategies when difference occurs (Florian, 2010b). Equity in education is a promise to social justice, not to be denied because of disability (Rioux, 2014).

Inclusion involves transforming the classroom to meet the needs of the child (Andrews and Lupart, 2000) and not the child adapting to the environment – a mainstreaming ideology. Therefore inclusion is more than placement (Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Lynch and Irvine, 2009; Thomas, 2013). Unfortunately the inclusion model held by many teachers is closely aligned to integration, with barriers being identified at the micro school level as opposed to the macro system-wide level. Inclusion is justified as preparing children as influencers in a democratic society (Peterson, 2005), combating discrimination (UNESCO, 1994; Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Norwich, 2008). Inclusion refers to any learner that may be marginalised and is not solely confined to SEN (Ainscow, 2008).

Inclusion is how all children (Ainscow, 2014) are supported in achieving fully participating in learning and school life (DfES, 2004). Defined in this way, children are recognised collectively as belonging to a community (Thomas and Loxley, 2007) extending beyond each individual school to education as a whole (Ainscow, 2014). However, the social learning processes within a school community will be underpinned by the perspectives held by teachers on inclusion (Gibbs, 2007), ability and their roles as inclusive practitioners (Jordan *et al.*, 2010).

## The efficacy of mainstream inclusion for autistic children

Autistic children are increasingly being placed in mainstream schools (DfE, 2010; Keane *et al.*, 2012). Inevitably, mainstream teachers will teach autistic children (Ravet, 2011). The effectiveness of mainstream inclusion is questioned (Elder *et al.*, 2010), stemming from social and environmental barriers. This provides scope for transforming policy, practice and mindsets to create ASD-friendly schools that support autistic children and better educate all (Smith *et al.*, 2014). Florian (2014) recognizes that mainstream schools work for many, but not universally for all.

There is a misconception that because many autistic children are academically able, they can cope within the mainstream school environment (Moore, 2007; Morewood *et al.*, 2011). However, according to McGregor and Campbell (2001, p. 202),

‘the bustle and unpredictability of a mainstream class could be confusing or even distressing and the learning styles of those with autism could not easily be accommodated.’

This may result in challenging behaviour, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of mainstream school exclusions of autistic children, with them being eight (DfE, 2010) to 20 times (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a) more likely to be permanently excluded than pupils with no SEN and 21% of students with ASD excluded from school at least once (Barnard *et al.*, 2000; NAS, 2003). This negatively impacts on future life opportunities (Rioux, 2014).

There are many issues that influence inclusion, with conflict between the right to inclusion and the right to the appropriate educational provision (McGregor and

Campbell, 2001). Moreover, and of fundamental consideration, a lack of opportunity to learn can be far more debilitating to a child than any innate biological characteristics (De Valenzuela, 2014). This exemplifies why the efficacy of mainstream inclusion for autistic children is a complex debate. It is complex because every autistic child is unique, despite sharing commonalities (Guldberg, 2010). Inclusive education for autistic children is poorly understood, as there is a paucity of research comparing outcomes for special education placements as opposed to mainstream (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a; Smith, 2012). There is no clear ‘outcomes’ evidence of better educational achievement between segregated and non-segregated settings (Lindsay, 2003).

Undoubtedly, mainstream inclusion can be enabling and beneficial to autistic children and their peers (Smith, 2012). It affords autistic children the opportunities to learn from their peers (Crisman, 2008). Benefits include displaying more social behaviour, having more advanced education goals (Elder *et al.*, 2010; Lindsay *et al.*, 2013) and increased social skills (Reiter and Vitani, 2007). Interestingly, other studies have found that in the presence of mainstream children, autistic children displayed less ‘autistic’ behaviour (Garrison-Harrell and Kamps, 1997) and developed coping strategies for times of transition and change (Elder *et al.*, 2010).

Conversely, the difficulties experienced by those with ASD in relation to social skills can result in them being bullied or cause emotional distress. The NISARC (2015) survey of 317 parents (discussed in Goodall, 2015a) and the NAS NI study (2012) support this. These surveys indicate that many autistic children are falling through cracks in the system, particularly as the NISARC survey indicates that from a period of 60 school days, 9% of children missed 6–10 school days and a further 5% missed 20 days or more due to difficulties interacting with the social and sensory environment. ‘Children with ASD provide an excellent example of where significant cracks exist in the system, to detriment of those who fall between them’ (House of Commons, Education and Skills Committee, 2006, p. 18).

Perhaps this is why Howlin (2005) highlights that academic outcomes for autistic children are below their intellectual functioning. As a result of non-enabling practice, many parents choose to home-school their children (Attwood, 2007; Kidd and Kaczmarek, 2010; McDonald and Lopes, 2014). Preventing students with autism from dropping out of mainstream education is a worldwide concern (Probst and Leppert, 2008; Mavropoulou and Avramidis, 2012). Some schools are

failing to address the mismatch between practice and enabling education for autistic children. It is evident from several years of professional experience in an alternative education provision (AEP) that many incredibly able children who have been excluded from mainstream education arrive disaffected, switched off and anxious about education due to previous mainstream experiences. Some have been absent from school for several terms and lack confidence (as found in Poon *et al.*, 2014) or drive to reengage with education. Those who do engage in the AEP express teacher understanding, acceptance and flexibility as core enablers.

Barriers to inclusion stem from intrinsic within-child factors and environmental aspects (Eldar *et al.*, 2010; Keane *et al.*, 2012). A growing amount of research indicates a disconnect between mainstream school environments, practice and autistic children (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a, 2008b; Humphrey and Symes, 2010). When inclusion is appropriate and truly premised on inclusive pedagogical practices, children with disabilities and their peers can benefit from being together (Dybvik, 2004). However, Locke *et al.* (2010) propose that mere physical proximity to mainstream peers does not enhance their social experiences; many become isolated (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2007). As stated by Ochs *et al.* (2001, p. 400) and echoed widely (Keane *et al.*, 2012), ‘physical placement of children [on the autistic spectrum] . . . in inclusive educational settings alone is not sufficient’. Moore (2007) suggests that ‘normality’ will not simply ‘rub off’ on autistic children from proximity to mainstream peers, especially as many experience difficulties in learning through imitation. Mainstream peers will of course gain a wide perspective of SEN and disability, widening disability beyond images of wheelchairs or hearing aids (Hesmodhalgh and Breakey, 2006).

If children are not having their potential realised within a school permeated by an inclusive ethos, with inclusion-orientated practitioners, then ASD-specific provision could be justified. Ainscow (2008) and Booth (2011) propose separate and specialist provision is advocated for by some disability-centred organization, particularly the autism community (Iovannone *et al.*, 2003) and many parents (Goodall, 2015b). I also advocate for this. However, ASD-specific schools could be viewed as a means of absolving mainstream teachers of the responsibility for teaching and meeting the needs of pupils with ASD (Ravet, 2011). Nonetheless, Lynch and Irvine (2009) suggest that those advocating for ‘specific ASD schools’ and those supporting the ‘transformation of mainstream schools’ are fighting the same battle.

## Creating ASD-friendly schools

Morewood *et al.* (2011) support a model of ASD saturation underpinned by staff training, peer awareness education, school environment modification, flexible provision, a positive ethos of autism acceptance and suitable policy. Lipsky and Gartner's (1997) inclusion model emphasises visionary leadership, effective parental involvement, staff and pupil support, a flexible curriculum and effective instructional practices. These are explored alongside several perspectives for developing inclusive pedagogy.

### ***Universal Design for Learning (UDL), socio-cultural theory and flexible provision***

UDL is a pedagogical model enabling curriculum access for all children through flexible accessible learning environments (Dyson, 2001a; Rose *et al.*, 2014). From this non-individualistic perspective disability does not reside within the individual, but in a curriculum which is unsupportive of, and inflexible to, a diverse range of abilities (Rose and Gravel, 2010; Rose and Vue, 2010).

Building on strengths and eradicating difficulties requires an accessible pedagogical approach (Rose *et al.*, 2014). A range of needs can be supported within the diverse classroom (Meyer and Rose, 2000) when practice is premised on the UDL principles of multiple means of representation (what we learn), expression (how we learn) and engagement (why we learn). Providing greater support ensures high standards are preserved (Minow, 2009) whereby difference is not denied, but is rejected as 'an excuse for inaction or exclusion' (Rioux, 2014, p. 143).

This underpins creating ASD-friendly schools by recognising that children respond differently to the general curriculum depending on the social and sensory environment at the time. From experience, many autistic children have unusual sleep patterns and benefit from starting school later in the day. Educational curriculums must be flexible (Marshall and Goodall, 2015). This flexibility is not always evident in mainstream 'one-size-fits-all' settings whereby developments towards inclusion are confined by inflexible staffing, timetabling and pedagogy and normalising mindsets.

Morewood *et al.* (2011) discuss placing autistic children in groups based on personal needs, not ability. The use of ability grouping confines practice, teaching

and learning (Hart and Drummond, 2014) and underpins segregation (Thomas, 2013, p. 481). Planning requires a needs-based focus or inclusion becomes another empty label, with children continuing ‘to experience exclusion’ (Lynch and Irvine, 2009, p. 846). When describing ‘authentic inclusion’, Ferguson (1995) supports a needs-based focus, yet suggests all children should be active in the school community through effective teaching and support.

Direct support and intervention aids mainstream inclusion (Morewood *et al.*, 2011). However, individual or small-group support should not be mistaken for a medicalised ‘need to fix’ approach. Such interventions aim to support children in understanding their personal needs and skills (Morewood *et al.*, 2011), building on strengths from a socio-cultural perspective. Socio-cultural theory refocused education on strength rather than attempts to ‘cure’ children’s deficits (De Valenzuela, 2014). Aligning to a socio-cultural perspective locates ‘learning problems in the context of human relations and activity’ (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p.482). As such, the individual’s experiences, whether they have SEN or not, exist within interchanges with others, with education practices being manifestations of organisational cultures (Angelides and Ainscow, 2000). For Florian and Kershner (2009), the socio-cultural view of learning is central to developing inclusive pedagogy. Teachers must view difference as encompassed within human development (Alexander, 2004; Florian, 2007).

Differences should be valued as enriching learning opportunities (Booth and Ainscow, 2011) rather than as insurmountable obstacles, beyond the expertise of classroom teachers. Therefore inclusive pedagogy does not deny variance among children (Florian and Kershner, 2009) and does not propose treating all children in the same way (OFSTED, 2001); rather, it challenges ‘differentiation according to individual need’ (Florian, 2010b, p. 62). This should redirect practice from reductionist instructional models founded on a positivistic epistemology of knowledge, informed by norm-referenced assessment instruments (De Valenzuela, 2014).

Norwich (2002, p. 7) suggests that we only focus additional individualised strategies on a minority of children who ‘need provision that is additional to or different from what an enhanced mainstream can provide on a group basis’. However, when differences are seen as arising from a child’s inadequacies, a ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ stance prevails (Florian, 2010a). It is argued that having special teachers in special contexts (Florian, 2007) reinforces exclusionary practices (Ravet, 2011). Thus inclusion is concerned with removing focus from

what is ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’ the pedagogy available (Florian, 2007, 2010b; Florian and Kershner, 2009), ensuring that children with SEN or disability are not deemed to be a disconnected group (Hart and Drummond, 2014) who must be marginalised to be educated (Rioux, 2014) by expert teachers (Avramidis *et al.*, 2002).

Therefore, different learning requirements should be underpinned by a continuum of teaching approaches (Lewis and Norwich, 2005), such as providing the same content but offering access for all through enacting UDL principles. For instance, Polychronis *et al.* (2004) found autistic children responded better to short periods of highly structured learning rather than longer periods. Autistic children are described as having difficulties with executive functioning (Pellicano, 2012). Enacting guideline six of UDL (Rose *et al.*, 2014, p. 483) – ‘providing options for executive functions’ – increases capacity through scaffolding lower and higher level executive skills (such as turn-taking, planning, organisation and progress monitoring). This is required to develop autonomous learners (Rose *et al.*, 2014). Admittedly, this is not unique to autistic children.

Likewise guideline seven, providing ‘options for recruiting interests’ (Rose *et al.*, 2014, p. 484), is applicable to all children (Hodge and Chantler, 2010), but ensuring the curriculum links into the special interest of an autistic child makes new and prerequisite information, or skills, easier to access (Rose *et al.*, 2014). Highly flexible strategies, materials and goals (Rose *et al.*, 2014) improve the ASD-friendliness and inclusivity of mainstream schools by reducing learning barriers. The ‘what’ and ‘how’ of learning supersede the importance of SEN labels (Florian and Rouse, 2009).

### ***Inclusive pedagogical approach and learning without limits: celebrating difference***

The inclusive pedagogical approach does not necessarily reject the requirement for specialist teachers (Florian, 2010b), with Riddell *et al.* (2006) advocating that distinctive approaches benefit autistic children. There is concern regarding dependence on generalist teaching approaches (Ravet, 2011). However, some autistic children will need specialist support to enable inclusion and combat exclusion (Jordan, 2005). Warnock (2005) questioned inclusion perpetuated as ‘all children in the same classroom’, suggesting that some children may require separate specialist support in different settings (Anastasiou and Kauffman, 2012). Inclu-



sion is not just a matter of ‘access’ to education as a statutory right for children with autism, but is central in improving the quality of life for individuals throughout their life. Importantly, ‘getting it right for autistic children can be a way of getting it right for everyone’ (Jordan, 2008, p. 14).

The inclusive pedagogical approach is premised on teachers believing they are capable of teaching a diverse range of children, through creatively adapting practice to support the learning of all, with difference being viewed as a fundamental aspect of development (Florian, 2014). Due to the ‘variation within and between any identified groups’, the educational relevance of labels is questionable (Florian, 2014, p. 11). However, by avoiding labelling and by recognising ‘commonality’ within groups of children, individualism may be supported (Kershner, 2014). Nonetheless, we are left in a quandary, a dilemma of difference (Norwich, 2008) – do we ‘ignore differences or stigmatise those who are considered different’ (Ho, 2004, p. 90)?

Smith (2012) describes autistic children as more alike than unlike their peers, while acknowledging that, due to distinctive characteristics, they may benefit from instructional practices and ASD-focused pedagogy. Mirroring Lewis and Norwich’s (1999) conceptualisation of pupil learning needs is Jordan’s (2005) suggestion that autistic children have needs common to all children, needs unique to the individual child and also needs that are related to the ASD community (Jordan, 2005).

Despite great variation between individuals, ‘judgements are often made about learners based on assumptions that they possess all the characteristics to the same degree’ (Florian, 2010b, p. 65). ASD teaching approaches and strategies are often incorrectly advocated on a ‘one-size-fits-all’ premise (Ruble *et al.*, 2010) which, from experience, frustrates parents and stifles progress. Learning is limited (for all) if approaches remain non-flexible and deterministic (Hart *et al.*, 2004). As Rioux (2014, p. 134) discusses, the ‘onus is often on the individual to fit within the system, not on the system to fit the individual’. This is antithetical to the inclusive pedagogical approach, with Friere (2000, p. 74) calling for the transformation of educational structures so that children can become ‘beings for themselves’. Inclusive pedagogy is defined not by the choice of teaching strategies, but by how they are used (Florian, 2010b).

‘Learning without Limits’ begins from a position of teachers not having pre-determined views of the ability of children in their class (Hart *et al.*, 2004).

Ability is deemed transformable (Hart *et al.*, 2004; Hart and Drummond, 2014), with scaffolding and assistance (Vygotsky, 1978) creating an open-ended potential for learning. The ASD-friendly teacher will develop an understanding of autism while aligning to the social constructivist paradigm, exercising the principles of ‘learning without limits’ from an inclusive pedagogical perspective. They will make accommodations, but this does not constitute a distinctive pedagogy (Florian, 2010b). Policy needs to work symbiotically with practice, however. Dyson (2001b) highlights fundamental contradictions, with tension between effectively treating all children as the same or treating them all as different.

### ***Three waves of intervention: creating structure***

The three waves model of intervention moves through a graduated process, with wave one pertaining to high-quality, flexible, enabling inclusive practice for all. Wave one for autistic children, but benefiting all, will involve visual cueing, routine, parental participation and structured classroom environments (Friedlander, 2009) with flexible use of space and multi-sensory teaching, allowing for various means of responding.

Using the TEACCH approach can improve self-help, social and communication skills, reduce inappropriate behaviours and lower parental stress (Van Bourgondien *et al.*, 2003). TEACCH can be delivered in special and inclusive mainstream settings (Panerai *et al.*, 2009). Teaching is carried out in functional, clearly organised structured areas with the use of natural reinforcements and an emphasis on visual learning. For instance, Roberts and Joiner (2007) found a concept-mapping approach yielded a threefold increase in information retention. The use of comic-strip cartoons (used to visually discuss their own and others’ thoughts and actions after incidents of challenging behaviour to explore cause-and-effect relationships) and social stories in developing prosocial behaviour are widely supported (Crozier and Tincani, 2007). The intention of TEACCH is to ‘create a sense of routine, organisation and predictability . . . helping pupils feel less bewildered’ (Tutt *et al.*, 2006, p. 76).

Wave two involves implementing additional small-group interventions such as social skill groups, additional social skills acquisition training and peer mentoring. Taylor and DeQuinzio (2012) indicate social skills development as a necessity for inclusion. Wave three interventions are targeted specifically at those

children who may benefit from additional individualised support (Norwich, 2008). This may involve withdrawal or use evidence-based intensive approaches such as applied behavioural analysis (ABA) (Dillenburger, 2011). Pupils with SEN do not completely oppose withdrawal help (Norwich and Narcie, 2004). However, prior to implementing three tiers of intervention, teachers must fundamentally understand ‘children, learning, teaching and curriculum which enable teaching to happen, and the school and policy contexts which formalise and legitimise it’ (Florian and Kershner, 2009, p. 174).

### ***Positive school ethos: leadership, parental involvement and the voice of the child***

Autistic children face a multitude of attitudinal and environmental barriers restricting access to appropriate and meaningful mainstream education. Crosland and Dunlap (2012) promote setting the tone of a school culture that focuses on equality, democracy and appreciating difference. Enshrining an all-encompassing positive school ethos challenges stereotypes, disconnects the stigma concerned with individual need (Wedell, 2003) and raises expectations both of autistic children (Humphrey, 2008) and of all children.

Ethos cascades downwards from leadership, shaping teacher beliefs and transforming inclusive practice (Graydon, 2006). Leadership must empower staff to ensure they have the confidence to be inclusive practitioners working with a diverse range of children (Ainscow, 2014). Clarity of vision, understanding and expectations of inclusion must be shared among all staff (Elder *et al.*, 2010). This ensures children are not perceived as problems and challenges existing practice. Rioux (2014) proposes that labelling children as less able evidences teacher capacity and not children’s ability.

Ho (2004, p. 89) discusses the need to recognise, and not ignore, that by labelling we are ‘pathologising difference’ and positing SEN as synonymous with inferiority. Labels are often based on what someone is unable to do and facilitate educators in ascribing any difficulties in learning to the learner (Hodge and Chantler, 2010). Hart (1996) and Lewis and Norwich (2005) have concerns over individualised categorisation and labelling, particularly where conceptions of fixed ability (Hart and Drummond, 2014) and unjustifiable education exclusion result (Rioux, 2014). Diagnostic labels are not value-free, nor are they objective truths void of judgement (Gillman *et al.*, 2000).

Norwich (2008, 2013) discusses three dilemmas of difference pertaining to inclusion that stem from the legal work of Minow (1985): the identification dilemma (whether to identify and label children as having a SEN or not); the curriculum dilemma (should children with and without SEN learn the same curriculum content); and the placement dilemma (whether children with SEN and disabilities should learn in the mainstream classroom with peers or in separate provision). Dilemma refers to an unenviable situation where the options available are unfavourable (Judge, 1981) and ‘represent a particular decision-oriented view about hard choices’ (Norwich, 2008, p. 7). Within the dilemma of placement it is assumed that, as with international inclusive trends, those children described as having moderate SEN or disabilities will be in the mainstream classroom (Norwich, 2008).

Schools with an inclusive pedagogical approach and ‘education for all’ ethos have leadership committed to inclusive practice (Dyson *et al.*, 2004). Leadership should be free from determinist beliefs about ability (Hart and Drummond, 2014) while not being naïve regarding the challenges (and benefits) of learner diversity. ‘Education for all is not education for some children some of the time’ (Rioux, 2014, p. 143). However, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) contest that teachers’ efforts to achieve inclusion are confined by the education system. Nonetheless, teachers must accept responsibility in developing inclusive schools promoting belonging for all (Rouse, 2008).

The effectiveness of mainstream inclusion is succinctly summarised by a person with Asperger syndrome who states: ‘when the person with AS and the environment match, the problems go away and we even thrive. When they don’t match, we seem disabled’ (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 180). There is a need to be empathetic with, and attempt to see the school environment from, the individual’s perspective (Hodge and Chantler, 2010). Successful mainstream inclusion for autistic children may depend on accessing this knowledge (Emam and Farrell, 2009; Smith, 2012; Conn, 2014) by welcoming the voices of children themselves in decision-making (Smith and Barr, 2008).

Autistic voice research is lacking (Parsons *et al.*, 2011). However it is widely considered that supporting their individual perspectives is one tenet of successful inclusive education (Welfendale, 2000; DfES, 2001). It should be obligatory that educators acknowledge the child’s voice prior to deciding on where they are educated (Lansdown, 2011). Benefits of affording participatory rights, by acknowledging children’s voices – as enshrined in article 12 of the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) – extend beyond the individual child into legislative development (Lundy and Stalford, 2013). Children develop their capacity and competence, acquiring skills and building confidence, autonomy and agency (Lansdown, 2005, 2011), resulting in the creation of a ‘virtuous circle’. Successful inclusion allows children to realise other rights (Lundy and Stalford, 2013) *through* education (Lansdown, 2011).

### ***Teacher training, experience and attitudes***

Mainstream provision must provide the level of support and expertise to be truly inclusive, as opposed to offering nothing more than physical integration (Byrne, 2012) Jordan (2008) suggests that inclusion needs trained teachers, although it is unrealistic for all to be experts in the field (DHSSPSNI, 2008). Having expert teachers for every diagnosis perpetuates division and opposes inclusive schools (Troyna and Vincent, 1996). Rix and Sheehy (2014, p. 471) suggest effective pedagogy does not rely on ‘extensive training or deep knowledge of individual impairment characteristics’. Nonetheless, lacking training, time and resources places pressure on teachers (Barnard *et al.*, 2002; Batten, 2005), increasing their anxiety (Sinz, 2004) and escalating burnout (Jennett *et al.*, 2003). Keane *et al.* (2012) and Smith (2012) contend that ASD knowledge underpins successful inclusion, with Leblanc *et al.* (2009) indicating that a small amount of training increases teacher confidence (Allen and Cowdery, 2005; Warnock, 2005), improving understanding of, and outcomes for, autistic children (Tobias, 2009).

Ravet (2011) discussed two often opposing approaches to inclusion: the rights-based and the needs-based perspectives. The former opposes educational segregation and the latter advocates a tiered system of support (ranging from mainstream to specialised provision). From these apparently contradictory approaches, Ravet (2011) suggests an integrative approach focusing the spotlight on teacher training. From this perspective all practitioners within a mainstream school, and any attached unit, should embark on continued training to ensure that the environment is ASD-friendly. They should develop pedagogy that supports autistic children, yet benefits all learners. In order to offer a range of strategies, practitioners must engage in ongoing professional development (Hughes and Dexter, 2011; Streiker *et al.*, 2012) as no single intervention encapsulates the myriad of strengths and weakness of all children (Ruble *et al.*, 2012), autistic or not.

The integrative approach circumvents the ‘one size fits all’ approach that has failed to include many children in mainstream schools. The term ‘distinct pedagogies’ is preferential to ‘special pedagogies’ (Jones *et al.*, 2008). For Ravet (2011, p. 678) this ‘preserves the central idea that autism specific approaches are different [and not intuitive], but does not imply that they are just for children with special needs’. Nonetheless, autistic children may require an ASD-specialised pedagogy (Parsons *et al.*, 2011) that is unfamiliar to mainstream teachers (Leach and Duffy, 2009).

As educators we should be guided by the daily experiences of autistic children and not by our ideological position (Wing, 2007). Experience facilitates the accommodation of pupils with Asperger’s syndrome in mainstream schools (Linton *et al.*, 2015). Teachers ( $n = 8$ ) unanimously stated that hands-on experience, rather than training, enabled them to teach autistic children (McGillicuddy and O’Donnell, 2014). However, experience is not an elixir guaranteeing successful inclusion or evoking positive expectations. Undoubtedly experiences impact on beliefs, future expectations and social representations of autistic children and their inclusion in mainstream schools (Linton *et al.*, 2015). Attitudes towards inclusion are complex and impact teacher confidence in providing inclusive pedagogy (Arthur-Kelly *et al.*, 2013).

Booth *et al.* (2000, p. 6) state that in order to make schools more inclusive, staff will be embroiled ‘in a painful process of challenging their own discriminatory practices and attitudes’. Effective training and knowledge should be a foundation on which to build successful practice (Hart, 1996). Teachers, being pivotal to influencing inclusion, must have the confidence in their capability to teach all learners (Florian, 2007). However, uncertainty about supporting learner diversity (Florian, 2009) may stem from the initial teacher training they receive. Florian and Rouse (2009) argue that stand-alone SEN modules reinforce the ideology that special children require specialist teachers, excusing all others from this role. Teaching methodologies and pedagogy should extend beyond ‘centrally mandated practices’ (Ainscow *et al.*, 2007).

Developing inclusive practice (for autistic children) goes beyond training and knowledge; it permeates our beliefs as teachers and our attitudes towards children with a wide range of abilities and how this impacts on our pedagogy: it is about ‘knowing’, ‘doing’ and ‘believing’ (Rouse, 2007). O’Connor (2007) posits that inclusive strategies have been reflected in educational, anti-discrimination and equality legislation. Furthermore, many policies instruct that inclusion is

envisaged as more than placement (OFSTED, 2001; DfES, 2004). McGillicuddy and O'Donnell (2014) found that teachers endorsed mainstream education despite recognising the social exclusion and unhappiness experienced by many autistic learners.

### ***Peer support and developing relationships***

Friendship is important for all children (Amos, 2004). A lack of friendship reduces peer support, leading to fewer pro-social behaviours and increased emotional distress (Barry and Wentzel, 2006). Further research is required to better understand the quality and extent of peer relationships formed by autistic pupils in mainstream classrooms (Locke *et al.*, 2010), with Ochs *et al.* (2001) arguing that successful inclusion rests with peers and not teachers.

Humphrey (2008) advocates developing social skills. Bock (2007) demonstrated the use of social scripts to support four autistic boys in developing social skills. These provide children with ready-made, practised phrases to use at their control in a range of social situations. This reduces the pressure of knowing what to say. Over time confidence hopefully grows with more successful social interactions. Using scripts in conjunction with pre-identified mentors in mainstream settings affords children support from within their peer group, removing reliance on additional adults or withdrawal strategies. Zhang and Wheeler (2011) suggest there are benefits in using peer-mediated interventions such as peer 'facilitators' or mentors in mainstream schools.

Morewood *et al.* (2011) advocate raising awareness amongst peers as a proactive strategy for eradicating ignorance, which often fuels teasing and bullying of autistic children (Attwood, 2007) – again enhancing the inclusivity and 'ASD-friendliness' of schools. Lindsay *et al.* (2013) report that ten teachers in their qualitative study ( $n = 13$ ) expressed challenges in developing an ethos of understanding and peer acceptance. Bullying is three times more likely to be experienced by autistic children (Symes and Humphreys, 2012) than other groups of children (NAS, 2006). This figure serves to explain greater school dissatisfaction among parents of autistic children (Batten *et al.*, 2006; Whitaker, 2007). Parents become less satisfied as children grow older (Kasari *et al.*, 1999), perhaps due to the increasingly complex social world in the teenage years, within the (more) unpredictable secondary school environment. Raising awareness is therefore fundamental for inclusion: as Reiter and Vitani (2007, p. 323) report, 'pupils

with autism are not accepted and given support as a matter of course; they may be ignored, rejected or even nagged by some’.

Striving for peer understanding and acceptance may surround these often isolated children with inclusive mindsets, evoking change in the school culture. Dillenburger *et al.* (2015) report that 45% of 11-year-olds ( $n = 2319$ ) and 77% of 16-year-olds ( $n = 1034$ ) are comfortable with autistic children being in their school or class. Both groups indicated greater support for the delivery of additional classroom strategies for autistic children (81% and 90%).

Difficulty with empathy is frequently associated with being autistic (Hughes, 2007). Ironically, a major barrier to inclusion in mainstream schools and society is a lack of empathy from staff, peers and the education system (Hodge and Chantler, 2010). Collaboration and commonality of perspective is required between all stakeholders (Morewood *et al.*, 2011) to promote inclusive practice. Parental and community involvement are necessary components of educational success (Lynch and Irvine, 2009) and inclusion for autistic children (Ryan, 2003). ‘Professionals need to talk to parents’ (Autism NI, 2010, p. 22). No one person alone can create an inclusive system (Smith, 2012). Autism acceptance must emerge from awareness; identity-first language signifies this drive (Kenny *et al.*, 2015). The entire debate is summarised by Silberman (2015), stemming from the work of Asperger (1944):

‘[Seventy] years later, we’re still catching up to Asperger, who believed that the “cure” for the most disabling aspects of autism is found in understanding teachers, accommodating employers, supportive communities, and parents who have faith in their children’s potential.’

## Reducing anxiety within the school environment

‘Imagine if we were able to exclude fear from school, rather than excluding children.’ (Jordan, 2008, p. 13)

Despite various enabling pedagogical and organisational factors, we must recognise how the school environment may enable or disable learning. Learner motivation can be enhanced or confined by the school environment (Hodge and Chantler, 2010). Many autistic children have difficulties processing sensory input



from their environment, including fluorescent lighting, loud or multiple sounds, fluctuations in temperature and unpredictable touch and texture (Hammond *et al.*, 2013). One parent quoted in a small-scale qualitative study by Goodall (2015a) states: ‘my son punched himself in the head and face for two years because he couldn’t cope with the noise and the smells’. Another describes the mainstream environment as akin to her child being educated at the side of a busy motorway.

Placing an autistic child in a mainstream school, with noisy bustling corridors and an atmosphere of unpredictability, can lead to anxiety (Wing, 2007; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a). As demonstrated in the NISARC (2015) parental survey (n = 317), reported in Goodall (2015a), 44% of children have consulted a doctor regarding anxiety. Anxiety is the most common difficulty co-occurring with ASD (Simonoff *et al.*, 2008) experienced by 65% of adolescents (Attwood, 2004), and is a significant barrier to inclusion for autistic children (Morewood *et al.*, 2011). This is despite attempts at facilitating participation and learning (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008b; Lynch and Irvine, 2009).

Undoubtedly, the school environment is a source of anxiety (Kidd and Kaczmarek, 2010). Children without ASD also experience anxiety; thus, extending mutual understanding and acceptance of difference is vital to enable inclusion for all children. Anxiety causes a child’s world to shrink to the size of their bedroom; we must strive to reduce as many triggers for anxiety as possible to develop more ASD-friendly environments. Expecting children to simply cope with social interaction in an unpredictable sensory environment and manage unexpected changes in routine without support is akin to asking wheelchair-bound children to walk to school.

Individual support work may enable children to explore how being autistic impacts on their interaction with the world around them and how the world interacts with them, giving them personal tools and social skills to ensure belonging rather than a feeling of not fitting in anywhere (Morewood *et al.*, 2011). The author uses various strategies for supporting children with anxiety issues, exploring emotions, offering aids for communicating feelings and providing short ‘autism and me’ training programmes to demystify their label, as many have negative thoughts regarding their ability. Unstructured and uncertain social periods such as break-times can be difficult for autistic children. Providing activities, structure and a safe place to relax will reduce anxiety, helping the child to access learning throughout the day (Safran, 2002; Humphrey and Symes, 2010)

and engage positively at home. ‘Many pupils have learnt to develop a superficial veneer of coping’ (NAS, 2006, p. 6) and their true emotional despair is revealed when they return home.

School geography and architecture need careful consideration. Beaver (2010) suggests autistic children benefit from: room to move around within well-ventilated classrooms, lit by natural light; quiet spaces to go to when stressed to reduce over-stimulation (such as small seating areas set into classroom or corridor recesses); surfaces having simple colour palettes with matt finishes and the use of curved walls. Any areas of support, such as ‘quiet refuges’ (Parsons *et al.*, 2011, p. 58) or ‘safe havens’ (Safran, 2002, p. 62), need to be positioned for easy access, negating the need to navigate complex busy corridors. Clear visual signposting to such areas will enhance the friendliness of the environment, aligned to the TEACCH approach noted above. All teachers need to be cognisant of the signs that the individual child may be becoming distressed (for example, pacing). A wellbeing centre within one special school in NI enhances ‘self-awareness, self-regulation and emotional intelligence’, giving ‘them the vocabulary to talk about their feelings’ (Autism Eye, 2015, p. 22).

Enabling environments for autistic children must involve parents, focus on social and communication skills, adapt the physical environment and provide structure (Guldberg, 2010). The physical set-up and busy classroom environments adorned with a plethora of displays and noises can distract (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008a). Offering the child a position close to the door may reduce the overwhelming visual environment and also make it easier for the child to access their seat and remove themselves from the classroom (using a predetermined indication) if stressed.

Teacher language within the classroom needs careful consideration to ensure access to the curriculum for autistic children. As Wing (2007) describes, an autistic child may be physically present but, due to the use of ambiguous abstract language and complex instructions, the lesson may be inaccessible due to processing difficulties. Teachers could visually represent and ‘chunk’ instructions. Name-checking the autistic child and several others helps ensure they realise that the lesson does include them, without singling them out.

Feeling valued and part of the learning community within a school is abundantly beneficial for the child (Watkins, 2005; McLean, 2009). Conversely, being on the periphery, effectively ‘excluded by inclusion’, can result when what is being

described as inclusion is no more than physical proximity to other children (Goodall, 2015c). Belongingness, as one hallmark of a community (Watkins, 2004), depends on many environmental and social factors, such as teachers and pupils developing trusting relationships whereby they are engaged in ‘joint enterprise’, working together in ‘co-agency’ (Hart *et al.*, 2004; Hart and Drummond, 2014) with peer support (Smith and Barr, 2008). Teachers must have a proactive adaptive attitude in order to create autism-friendly mainstream schools (Jordan, 2005) and accommodate autistic children in busy classrooms (Engstrand and Roll-Peterson, 2012). We must remember that every autistic child will become an autistic adult, and we must provide them with the best possible education.

## Conclusion

Inclusion is not a state; it is a complex process (Ainscow, 2005; Humphrey *et al.*, 2006) concerned with breaking down learning barriers based on outmoded ways of thinking (Ainscow, 2005). Florian (2014) proposes that moving beyond traditional ‘deficit’ SEN rhetoric to inclusive pedagogy is dependent on shifts in thinking about SEN, SNE and inclusion. Adjusting policy lexicon does impact on attitudes; however, it is insufficient in changing practice (Florian, 2014). It is premised on the multiple daily decisions made by practitioners and aligned to their perspectives, principles, values (Florian and Kershner, 2009) and daily enactments (Sikes *et al.*, 2007). Inclusion of autistic children is not based on a set recipe (Ravet, 2011). For effective mainstream inclusion we must recognise their uniqueness and appreciate that a myriad of flexible approaches will be required (Hammond *et al.*, 2013).

Inclusion has been a mixed blessing for many autistic children (Ravet, 2011): they are either included or not; there is no continuum (Lynch and Irvine, 2009). Education should enable all children to fulfil their potential (Rioux, 2014), but this is not possible if the school environment, ethos and culture are not ASD-friendly. An inclusive school is one that is on the move (Ainscow, 2014), underpinned by core values of belonging, equity and participation (Thomas, 2013). Some children may require the option of a wider range of educational provision, such as ASD-specific schools (Goodall, 2015a; Jones *et al.*, 2008; Lynch and Irvine, 2009; Ravet *et al.*, 2007). Nonetheless we must pause and consider current practice in order to provide the necessary enabling environment for autistic children (ranging from physical design to pedagogical approach), rather than attempting to bring

them to a 'normalised' state through the indiscriminate eulogising of misguided deficit concepts of inclusion. Inclusion is not something you do: it is something you believe (Dieker, 2006).

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A selection of references are provided. The author can be contacted directly for a full reference list [cgoodall01@qub.ac.uk](mailto:cgoodall01@qub.ac.uk)

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