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Abstract

Despite extensive interest in the needs of autistic pupils in education, there seems to date to have been no focus on the needs or attitudes of teachers who are autistic. This paper reports on the case study of an autistic trainee teacher during his Initial Teacher Education (ITE) year undertaking a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at Secondary level. 'Greg' (a pseudonym) took part in an unstructured interview with the researcher, his contributions were recorded and his responses transcribed and coded. Coding was conducted co-operatively between Greg and the researcher, leading to co-created data. Greg's attitudes towards his own autism and its role in his teaching are discussed here, together with his understanding of the needs of autistic pupils. Limitations of the study and the potential for future research are suggested, together with recommendations for the inclusion of the position of autistic teacher in ITE concerning autism.

[NB In line with recommendations by the National Autistic Society and with current research (Kenny et al., 2016), the term 'autistic' is used in preference to 'person with autism'.]

Key words

Teacher; education; autistic; autism; SEND.

Introduction

In the extensive literature on provision for autistic people within education one voice remains silent: there seems to be no research to be found on the perspective of teachers who are autistic. This paper reports on the case study of an autistic trainee teacher in England during his Initial Teacher Education (ITE) year undertaking a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at Secondary level. As such, it seeks to articulate the voice of an autistic trainee teacher and of his understanding on how his autism may impact his teaching of both of autistic and neuro-typical pupils. The research was co-created by the trainee and a Senior Lecturer in Education on the trainee's course. The lecturer has specific research interest in autism and 'lived experience' of autism as the parent of an autistic child. The trainee approached the lecturer after delivery of an ITE session on autism to self-disclose as autistic, and to discuss the position of the autistic teacher. As this 'voice' is one largely missing from the literature, the current research project was agreed.

It may be argued that any attempt to articulate an 'autistic voice' is a flawed undertaking due to the intensely heterogenic nature of autism; any comment made by one autistic teacher will only represent the views of that one individual. Yet, despite this difficulty, both the researcher and the trainee who took part in this study believe strongly that seeking articulation of the voice of autistic teachers remains a valid research ideal. Each autistic teacher can give interesting insight into his or her own challenges and strengths and may additionally be ideally placed to provide reflection on the challenges and strengths of autistic pupils in schools.

Citation

Review of the literature

Autism is, according to the most recent diagnostic criteria, persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication together with a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests (ICD-11, World Health Organisation, 2018). The use of the language of diagnosis, and that of 'deficits', 'restricted, 'repetitive' and 'inflexible' positions autism negatively. The literature discussing provision for autistic people in schools focusses similarly on amelioration and support. Research has positioned autism as a 'special educational need' that presents in pupils, where this 'need' is likely be met by the intervention of (non-autistic) adults. To date, no research has been found that positions autism as present in the classroom in a capacity incidental to the identified needs of such pupils – as being present through the teacher. As such, this research challenges the 'othering' of autism that assumes a non-autistic norm and investigates to what extent the concept of the autistic teacher challenges society's positioning of autism.

Autistic people appear to be under-represented in the teaching profession. MacCleod and Cebula (2009) undertook an investigation into the experiences of disabled students in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). They noted that although 18% of their respondents self-identified as 'disabled', none of these was autistic. This may be because many autistic individuals self-identify as different rather than 'disabled', or it may be because autistic individuals who have been successful to post-graduate level in education may not have sought a diagnosis. It is also possible that autistic people are under-represented in teaching due to the nature of either the profession or the condition or both, or that autistic trainee teachers are uncomfortable with disclosing their autism for fear of discrimination. In the absence of research literature, the voice of the autistic teacher must be sought in other forums, one source of which is the on-line forum or Weblog (Blog). One teacher, Gottateach (2016), suggests on-line that 'the stigmatisation of autism has many still hiding behind a neurotypical façade' (26th August, 2016), an issue similarly expressed by the unnamed autistic teacher interviewed by Arianezurcher (2013). This teacher indicates that she would be worried about her employer learning about her autism diagnosis, identifying her fear that the school would respond negatively to the disclosure, even though she is a 'good teacher getting excellent results' (4th February, 2013).

If autistic teachers are either under-represented in the profession, or less visible, teachers who are autistic may give insight into why. Investigation into the views of autistic teachers may allow insight into questions such as whether supports could be put into place to better support autistic people who are training to become teachers, and whether being autistic poses specific challenges to teaching, and whether it may simultaneously carry strengths. One autistic teacher, Chris Bonnello, (2015) who writes the blog Autistic Not Weird makes the point that teaching is itself a challenge, to be considered separate to the challenges of autism, 'Teaching is difficult. I didn't find it difficult because of my [autism]. I found it difficult because it was difficult' (7th May 2015).' However, another blogger, E (2013), writes:

> I'm a good teacher BECAUSE I am autistic, not despite it. But that doesn't mean it came easy… I [have] spent much of my life … observing and learning about human behaviour and interactions by rote … Because of this, I can often imagine a number of ways of thinking about something. This means that when a student of mine is having trouble understanding a concept, I can often come up with several different ways to present the material and explain it … I am able to work with and help a wide variety of learners.

Another contributor to Wrong Planet, Kotshka (2013), suggests that she does well as a teacher because children find her funny and do not find any strangeness negative. She reports the challenges of teaching that she faces to be sensory issues and the noise level at school in particular. These issues

are highlighted also by Bubbles 137 (2013) who explains that she could not manage the noise and the 'chaotic atmosphere in the classroom' and therefore withdrew from her teacher training course. Gottateach (2016) struggled with her initial teacher training 'due to a single gaff I still can't figure out', but since then has been teaching for twenty years. She describes herself as a '"good teacher" whose students loved to learn'. However, she admits that her relationship with other staff and with parents can be challenging. She says that her passion is her pedagogy, and 'were I able to just close my door and teach, life would be easy. Like most people though, I have to wade through the social stuff'.

The Times Educational Supplement community pages provide a further source of report by autistic teachers. One, Gfrary (2012), shows self-awareness in his acceptance that, 'I am difficult to get on with, I am different and struggle when people borrow my room or change the normal timetable.' However, he is able to report good levels of support from his colleagues: 'Most of the staff I work with are great. They are teaching me sarcasm, humour and constantly testing me out!! It really is done in a nice way.' Support that is more formalised is reported by s249 (2012), who says that, 'If there is a fire alarm then my lesson is covered for the next hour, and I do parents evenings in a different room to others because I am not very good with new people and a lot of background noise.'

Fizzbobble (2014), a secondary physics teacher, expresses her opinion that her autism can be an asset:

> I find that it's an advantage sometimes - gossip and petty bureaucracy don't interest me and I can't engage with them, so I don't get as stressed about that side of the job. I don't receive any support and am not keen to get myself labelled. My department knows, and we get on fine, because they took the time to get to know me and how my brain is wired.

The 'invisibility' of autistic teachers may further be exacerbated by the fact that many may have qualified before autism that co-exists with high intelligence came to be understood. One such, Indiscreet (2011), reports on the ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) forum that she had 'been in the profession for many years' before eventually leaving, explain that 'I enjoyed teaching my subject (history) and I think I was quite good at it, but I couldn't cope with the personal, emotional, involvement.' Another, Canopus (2011), adds that she believes that autistic teachers 'are prone to bullying by other teachers although some are highly respected by kids'. This perspective is echoed by Butterfly 73 (2011) who describes a friend with autism who teaches: 'She's overly meticulous, which other teacher might find annoying, though they see how much impact her approach has on the whole class.'

In 2010, Hannah Frankel reported on autistic teachers on the TES News Open Box forum. She included feedback from an interview with 'Mr Murphy' (pseudonym), who had qualified in 1993. He was unaware of autism at the time, and was only aware that he struggled at interview:

> I avoided eye contact, gave very short, abrupt answers and appeared nervous and gauche. Everyone must have wondered how someone like me could ever survive in a classroom.

However, once he secured a job 'Mr Murphy' is reported to have thrived. Part of the reason, he believes, is that he treated 'everyone the same - child or adult - and the majority of children love that.' Both pupils and fellow teachers are reported to have appreciated his focus and dedication, and he also believes that the pupils 'recognised and warmed to his "child-like qualities"'.

A further example highlighted by Frankel (2010) is that of John Biddulph, now a high-profile autism speaker. Biddulph taught music for 30 years before his diagnosis, where he accepted that he was 'different' but felt that this difference was just part of the general perception of eccentricity in musicians in the 1970s. He reports,

> There was a stereotype of music teachers that they were the creative, slightly antisocial ones, working hard while tucked away in their department … That worked well for me because I didn't particularly like chatting in the staffroom - I'd rather run the choir or be doing music practice.

These snippets and anecdotes give an incomplete picture of something of the richness of experience that the perceptions of autistic teachers may give. This research project aims to capture the perspective of one autistic trainee-teacher in order to add to the narrative that is available on this subject.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that uses thematic analysis to generate knowledge that is grounded in specific human experience (Sandelowski, 2004). It takes the position of valuing the understanding of experiences, actions and events as they are interpreted by the participant (Henwood, 1996), and seeks to investigate how that individual makes sense of his own experiences, in this case being a trainee teacher who is autistic (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is a study of the 'real-life' or 'life-world' experiences of the participant, (Dowling, 2007), and aims to describe the phenomena of teaching and teacher education as they appear to the participant (Tuohy et al., 2013). It accepts that the participant is an 'expert[s] in [his] own experiences' (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005, p. 20) and seeks to reflect and record this experience in order that others may learn from it.

Method

Initial data from 'Greg' (pseudonym) was collected during a one-hour unstructured interview. This format was agreed as a democratic approach, where neither party was leading the content which was non-directed and flexible (Doody and Noonan, 2013). The transcript of this was returned to Greg for verification that it represented what he had said, and he was invited further to add comments and amendments if he felt that anything was unclear or to remove anything which he felt did not reflect his opinions. Greg indicated that the transcript was a true record of the interview and that it reflected his views.

The transcript was then coded thematically, using an open coding method. Initial, tentative coding of the transcript was returned to Greg for consideration, and for his comment and scrutiny. The process of coding and the emerging of themes was shared with Greg and his input encouraged. This co-creation of data allowed for confidence in the confirmability of the data (Tobin and Begley, 2004) and the credibility of the data was achieved through the recognition by both participant and researcher that the data was a 'fit' between what the participant expressed and how the researcher represented what was expressed (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The co-creation of the data used in this research means that it arrives without filter. There has been no attempt made to 'second guess' Greg's comments or opinions, but rather to respect the data was created as a valid reflection of his lived experiences. Each autistic teacher will be different, and will experience their own autism differently; this data is openly subjective and does not position itself as having intrinsic generalisability. However, five broad themes emerged and were agreed: positivity, the need for joined up practice around autism, the need for autistic pupils to be happy, the issue of time and ways to meet the challenges faced by autistic (trainee) teachers.

Findings

Theme one: Positivity

Greg feels that he was fortunate in his experience of school, saying, 'the teachers at the school I was at were incredibly understanding and incredibly supportive', which he realises is not the same for all pupils with autism. He also feels fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn through his experience as a Teaching Assistant (TA) and through attendance at autism training courses, which he feels has supplemented his personal experience and has led to a depth of understanding that he would

not otherwise have had. He says that he is, 'incredibly lucky … for the amount of courses I've been on, the certificates I've got and everything'. There is an element here that he feels that his own experience of autism is not enough in itself to enable him to be heard or respected, and a hope that the acquisition of his teaching qualification will make a difference: 'I do know what I'm talking about … and I've got this to prove to you that I know what I'm talking about, so sit up and listen'. He feels that this combination of personal and professional experience coupled with training puts him in a strong position to understand the needs of autistic pupils in the future.

Greg plans to disclose his autism when he works as a teacher, as he feels this will enable him to act as a role model for autistic pupils. He sees no reason not to do so (Why shouldn't I?') although he adds that he 'wouldn't disclose it on the first day of school'. He seems to be ambiguous about to what extent he sees being an "autistic teacher" to be a good thing: 'I don't feel like it defines me, but I'd like people to know'. Greg feels that his autism may be an asset in his teaching as it gives him an eye for detail and a clarity – a 'black or white' approach which does not lead to ambiguity. He believes that he will be sensitive to the needs of autistic pupils in his classes, although he will also be aware of the practical limits of potential differentiation. He believes that as well as being more sensitive to autistic pupils, he may also be more confident to be 'tough' with them. 'I think building resilience in students with ASD is a big, big part of it as well, because there isn't always going to be someone there to hold your hand.'

Theme two: The need for 'joined up' practice around autism
Greg feels strongly that the various professionals in school need to work together to meet the needs of pupils with autism, showing each other mutual respect. He feels that the insights that he gained through working as a TA (Teaching Assistant) have been invaluable, and laments that more trainees entering the profession do not have this wider, practical experience of working with pupils with SEN, which he feels to be just as valuable as academic knowledge:

> [When you are faced with] a student with Autistic Spectrum Disorder having a complete meltdown… no book in the world, no lecture that you sit in or record and make notes of can ever prepare you for that.

However, he also accepts that theoretical knowledge can help with understanding and with strategies: 'it'll give you the things to fall back on'. He is particularly passionate about the need for whole school understanding of, and knowledge about, autism, and the way that – in his experience – this understanding is not always a priority for senior management. He fears that this results in a lack of 'joined up' care for pupils with autism in schools, and a difficulty for autistic pupils to access the help that they need.

He is confident that he understands how important it is to involve TAs in autistic pupils teaching and learning. He believes that a TA who supports a child can give that child consistency and provide valuable insight into that child's needs and behaviours. At very least, he stresses the importance of appreciating the work that TAs do, of listening to their input and of thanking them for their work.

One element of 'joined up' care of autistic pupils that Greg feels is especially important is the involvement of parents. He stresses the extent to which behaviour seen in school may have its origins outside school, giving as an example an autistic pupil whose father died suddenly and who was unable to access the bereavement support offered to the rest of his family. Understanding of the pupils' wider life influences is, Greg believes, essential and he stresses that the school needs to see the wider picture in so much of the behaviour that an autistic child may display.

Greg is also aware, though, that parents do not always understand how schools work, and their input can sometimes appear hostile or unhelpful. He stresses the importance of treating parents with

understanding, and of keeping lines of communication with them open, about the good things that happen at school as well as the negative.

Theme three: The need for autistic pupils to be happy
Perhaps surprisingly, Greg's top priority regarding autistic pupils is that they be happy. His emphasis is less on academic learning per se, and more on supporting confidence and self-esteem in autistic pupils. He believes that autistic pupils need to learn holistically, and that their ideas and views should be heard within their own educational context. He believes that schools should 'stop worrying about results' and instead 'make [the autistic pupils'] experience at school as pleasant and holistic and enjoyable as possible; … there's a lot swimming around in those minds'. He is aware of the negative effects that unhappiness, stress, fear and frustration can have on autistic pupils, and is keen that schools be aware of the need to provide a happy learning environment for these pupils. Part of an autistic pupil's education, Greg feels, is for that pupil to learn to understand and manage their own autism.

Behind this priority is Greg's impression of the low status that autistic pupils have in some schools. He feels that members of senior leadership teams can sometimes fail to listen to TAs and parents as they advocate for autistic pupils as they may feel that they 'know better'. He feels there may be low interest in outcomes for SEN (Special Educational Needs) pupils, and a feeling that, since they are a minority, they do not carry much weight in the policy priorities of some schools: 'One Teacher was heard to say … at GCSE, "Oh it doesn't really matter about them, it's only six students"'. He is angry that autistic pupils are frequently placed in lower sets, not realistically as based on their abilities but because of their diagnosis. He sees the root of the problem as being that schools' primary focus is on results and feels that through this focus the wider needs of autistic pupils' well-being are frequently missed. He is positive about the prospect that he will provide autism understanding into schools when he is a teacher but is also keen that schools should not just rely on his understanding, or just have one 'autism expert'; rather, he says, all teachers should as a matter of course have autism awareness and a degree of autism understanding.

Theme four: Issues of time
Greg is very clear that he feels that one of the biggest challenges in meeting autism needs in both teacher education and in schools is that of time. He is aware of the content demands on the PGCE course and the lack of time to spare to spend on specific subjects such as autism. He is aware of the pressures on schools and how this can impact on being able to meet individuals' needs as they arise: 'If the student says "oh I'd like to see so-and-so now" some of them can't because they're in their lesson, and you'll have to come back at lunchtime, at which point something else might have happened…'

From his own experience he believes that two weeks spent in school to prepare for the course is itself too little and does not allow for trainees to gain full understanding of individual challenges and needs. He is especially aware that for autism support in school to work there needs to be time to work with pupils as and when they need the support, and to work simultaneously with parents. These are seldom possible within the realities of the busy school day and week.

Theme five: Meeting the challenges faced by autistic (trainee) teachers
Greg was able to give some clear indications of the challenges that he faced in training to be a teacher. He believes that he would have benefitted from some support with time-management. He indicates that the sheer volume of the course content was overwhelming, especially at the beginning of the course, and he would have appreciated greater support with prioritising what he needed to do and understanding the different time-scales of the demands made on him as trainee. A further challenge that he identified was that of having to move placements. Having to change schools, to learn new

routines and rules and to 'start again' was a challenge for him. He states that he enjoys routines and is aware that it takes some time in a new placement for these routines to become established.

He identifies that the beginning of the course was particularly difficult.   There was a great deal of information to take in at the beginning of what is an intensive course (the sheer amount of information at the outset was described as 'overwhelming'). Greg found it difficult to prioritise and to understand which tasks - for example, the first assignment - could be left for later in the term, and which - for example, the Safeguarding forms - needed to be completed straight away.   Greater clarity about the various elements of the course and the order in which each needed to be completed would have helped him with what was a stressful time.

One way that Greg identifies as a coping strategy throughout the course has been to keep home and school separate. This is something that he tried to do when he was a pupil, completing as much homework as possible during lunchtime to prevent school from 'invading' his home life too much. As a trainee teacher, he is able to stay on at school until he feels prepared for the next day, and to minimise the work he needs to take home. This element may become more difficult as his workload increases as a qualified teacher, and this is something that he knows he needs to be aware of and to prepare for.

Discussion

This study addresses something of the concept of 'otherness' in autism as it is perceived in education. Autism is positioned in ITE as being a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND). As such, teachers are encouraged to explore ways to differentiate for the learning needs of these pupils and to ensure that their autism is not a barrier to their learning. This positioning of autistic pupils as having 'special' needs, although valid, positions these pupils as different. It is assumed that the majority of the class, including the teacher, will not be autistic. Greg's disclosure of his autism changes the dynamics of this. It is interesting that he sees his autism as an asset to his teaching generally just as much as to the autistic pupils in his classes. His positivity towards autism positions autism as acceptable and in some ways useful. His ownership of his own autism means not being autistic is no longer the default position in his lessons.

Greg has wide experience of autism in education, both through his own schooling and through working with autistic pupils. His understanding of autism is both personal and acquired, and he is conscious of the extent to which he has been able to learn about his own condition through attending courses and through observing others. Greg's comments raise the question of how much autism understanding should be incorporated into the curriculum of autistic – and all – pupils.

Greg is also sensitive to the need for those around autistic pupils to work together, and to communicate effectively to overcome the communicative challenges of autism. Greg does not articulate how he plans to overcome the potential issue that his own autism may create communicative barriers. Nor does he indicate how he will manage his potentially reduced empathy and remain aware of the emotional issues in his pupils, both neurotypical and autistic.

Greg's over-arching concern that autistic pupils should be happy at school shows awareness of the degree of unhappiness experienced by many autistic pupils (APPGA, 2018). He is sensitive to the degree of bullying and social exclusion experienced by many autistic pupils. His comment regarding his own autistic disclosure ('Why shouldn't I?') suggests that he is not apprehensive about the potential for workplace bullying to mirror something of the autistic pupil's experience (Richards, 2012), despite his lack of confidence in the autism understanding of some senior management teams.

The demands on time during his PGCE have made Greg sensitive to the issue of time pressures in school. He shows awareness of his own time-management needs, although his resolve not to take work home may be impractical as his workload increases after his training year. His self-awareness

may enable him to request the reasonable adjustments that are his entitlement and enable him to negotiate his way through what is likely to be a demanding beginning to his teaching career.

Conclusion

Greg's comments, opinions and observations remain entirely personal. He does not and cannot 'represent' autistic teachers, nor does he or the research seek for him to do so. However, this articulation of Greg's voice invites a fundamental reconsideration of attitudes to autism education research. It opens up the field to do more than merely include an additional, previously silenced, voice. It shifts the focus from being on the autistic pupil as being an 'issue' in education and instead positions autism as being merely present in the classroom. It allows that autism is not automatically 'other', but rather that it may be present in any members of the classroom community – teachers, parents, support staff and pupils. As such it seeks a fundamental refocussing on autism within schools, within ITE and within society.

Recommendations

Including the position of the autistic teacher as an element of ITE around autism is likely to enrich trainee teachers' sensitivity to and understanding of the additional needs of their autistic pupils, as well as their understanding of autistic colleagues, parents and in wider society. Ideally, autistic trainees will feel confident to disclose their autism and input their experiences and understanding into discussions. Ensuring that input into autism training sessions is delivered by those with autism 'lived experience' is likely to deepen the learning experience of trainee teachers and reduce 'othering' of autistic individuals in education.

Limitations and further research

This is a single case-study, using co-created data to reflect a single perspective from an autistic trainee teacher. Follow-up research charting Greg's Newly Qualified Teacher year and beyond would yield interesting data. Wider research involving greater numbers of autistic teachers, both trainee and experienced is also needed.

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