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Abstract

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is a common childhood disability and is associated with significant challenges in relation to education and socialisation. In particular, there is ongoing debate with respect to the best setting for provision of education and to the benefits and problems associated with schooling in a mainstream environment. An understanding and appreciation of the issues involved in inclusive mainstream schooling of children with ASD will help carers and parents to choose the best setting for individual children, and practitioners to promote the provision of optimised educational and social support for autistic children. This needs to be underpinned by an understanding of the legislation and institutional guidelines that are in place for the support of inclusive, child-specific teaching methods, and by a real commitment by schools to provide the staff, space, material and time resources that are necessary. This paper reviews these issues, and makes conclusions in relation to an optimal path forward.

Inclusion in mainstream primary schools for Children with ASD

There are many variables in a child's day-to-day life that may effect their ability to thrive in the diverse society that we maintain in England. Through this report, I will cover the inclusion of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream primary schools. The NHS (2016) defines autism as "a range of similar conditions... that affect a person's social interaction, communication, interests and behaviour." This also includes Asperger Syndrome. It is important to understand how ASD varies from child to child: for some children a Special Educational Needs (SEN) School may be best suited but there are many factors as to why

children with ASD may be kept in a mainstream school. For example, one child compared to another may have a higher functioning level with an exceptionally high IQ, whereas another child may display more signs of a severe learning disability (NAS, 2018). The informed decision that will conclude whether a child attends a mainstream school, a mainstream school with specialist provision, a SEN school or is homeschooled comes primarily from the parents of the child, and many factors will be considered. Factors may include a family's financial situation, a family's work availability, a family's opinions, belief and culture. As Early Years Practitioners (EYPs), we must be in a steady position to be able to advise and guide the families to the best outcome for the child.

There is an increasing trend for the placement of children with ASD into primary mainstream schools, with widespread exposure of teaching staff to the challenges of teaching autistic children (Keane et al., 2012; Ravet, 2011). There is however considerable ongoing debate with regard to whether inclusion within mainstream schools is effective from the perspective of children with ASD, with a wide range of social and environmental issues still to overcome (Goodall, 2015). There is therefore an ongoing drive to change and improve policies and recommendations for the education of children with ASD, as well as to improve mind-sets and approaches to the support of autistic children.

An initial factor that may determine a child's ability to thrive in a diverse society derives from the inclusion policies that are set by the schools in question. The English government's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) almost immediately

lays the foundation by stating that each and every child, regardless of their culture, ethnicity, beliefs and individual needs, is entitled to "the best possible start in life" and the "support that enables them to fulfil their potential." (DfE, 2017a p.5) The EYFS ensures that every child is taught the same curriculum, yet Veale (2013, p. 243) explains how an inclusive setting also "implies a willingness" to encompass the needs of every child, rather than the child trying to adapt their own needs to the setting. Yet simply put, the National Autistic Society (NAS, 2018) defines inclusion as the "quality of a child's experience" - the child's best interests should always be a practitioner's main priority.

The definition of a disability is difficult to establish as the notion is so wide ranging and broad - Devarakonda (2013, p.116) sums up the definition as being "complex, dynamic, multidimensional and contested." The Equality Act (2010), however, states that a disability is "if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities." (DfE and DoH, 2015, p.16) Yet, with the symptoms and severity of ASD being so unique to the individual, it must be questioned whether SEN should be applied to all children with ASD and to what extent we should try and maintain these children in mainstream primary schools - in doing so, we must weigh up the benefits and costs of such. Reid (2011, p.18) states how 63% of parents do not believe that their children with ASD are being fully supported in the schools they attend - thus suggesting that for many children with ASD, attending a SEN school or having specialist provision introduced would be beneficial to the children, ensuring high levels of inclusion are also maintained. This is especially the

case as The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (DfE, 2017b) highlighted in their report that once provision for children with SEND has been introduced, the impact on the children's learning and development is great, with improved social skills, cognition and mental wellbeing.

Inclusion and Equality on children's learning and development.

The British Journal of Special Education published an article about the role of inclusion in mainstream and SEN schools. The policies which a school uses in regard to inclusion may have a greater effect on equality for the children attending - ensuring that every child is engaged. The study found that a negative social stigma around SEN schools was experienced by families and staff. It also highlighted that inclusion quality may be affected by the appearance, visibility and severity of the disability (Tuersley-Dixon & Frederickson, 2016 cited in Shaw, 2017) and that bullying and peer acceptance may also be prominent in mainstream schools. Although many mainstream schools reported deficiencies in resources and specialist experience, there has been an increased number of settings that are using resourced provision - this specialist provision has been found to have a positive impact on the child's 'Personal, Social and Emotional Development (Early Education, 2012 p.5), with the children having one-to-one help in the classroom (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2016 cited in Shaw, 2016). Furthermore, other findings from this journal concluded that both SEN schools and mainstream schools have "improved educational outcomes" (Shaw, 2017 p. 306) for their children with SEN.

As such, it has been stated that "equity in education is a promise to social justice, not to be denied because of disability" (Rioux, 2014 cited in Goodall, 2015 p.306), and that this equity stems from inclusion.

It is however recognised that inclusion within a mainstream school can have considerable benefits for children with ASD, as well as for non-affected children (Crisman, 2008). These include the promotion and development of better socialisation and adaptation to change, and a reduction in 'autistic-type' behaviours (Goodall, 2015) alongside promoting a wider, more balanced view of disability (Reiter and Vitani, 2007).

Conversely, there is potential for children with ASD to experience negative socialisation, as a result of bullying or social exclusion by their peers. This is quoted as a factor in the higher rates of absence of autistic children from school (Goodall, 2015); and has been used to explain in part why children with ASD commonly fail to reach their academic potential (Howlin, 2005). This is also a key factor in the parental withdrawal of children with ASD from mainstream schools, in favour of home schooling or of alternative education provision environments, with a concomitant high rate of child disaffection and anxiety as a result of their negative mainstream school experiences.

McGregor and Campbell (2001, p.202) have highlighted for example that 'the bustle and unpredictability of a mainstream class could be confusing or even distressing' and that 'the learning styles of those with autism could not easily be

accommodated'. Such factors are thought to be an important reason for the disproportionately high levels of exclusions of children with ASD from mainstream schools due to their challenging behaviours (with a quoted exclusion rate for such children of 21%) (Barnard, 2000), and with autistic children between 8 and 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded than children without the condition (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). This phenomenon is recognised to have a significantly negative effect on social, educational and professional opportunities in later life.

There is therefore considerable variation in the effectiveness of education provision by mainstream schools for autistic children, with a frequent disconnect between aspiration and practice (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). It is clear that more is required than simply placing autistic children in physical proximity with non-affected peers, and that this alone frequently results in further social exclusion. For example, Ochs et al. (2002, p.400) have stated that 'physical placement of [autistic] children in inclusive educational settings alone is not sufficient'. Others have emphasised that behaviours will not simply normalise in this setting, especially as some children with ASD have shown difficulty imitating non-affected peers (Goodall, 2015; Ochs *et al.*, 2002).

Policy guiding a practitioner's practice

In England, the EYFS (DfE, 2017a) is used as a legal framework that all schools and Early Years Sectors must abide by. Included in this document are many policies and legislation that are referred to as a means of supporting the child's ability to thrive in a diverse and inclusive school society whereby equality is favoured.

One of the acts included is *The Equality Act (2010)*, a legal requirement that protects children with disabilities from discrimination. Such discrimination may arise in settings in the form of direct or indirect discrimination and in a failure to make reasonable adjustments. In doing so, practitioners need to appropriately allow for equity in the setting. For example, if a child with ASD in a mainstream primary school finds the act of changing into different clothes in a changing room full of other students for Physical Education challenging and distressing, then a reasonable adjustment to the practice may be to allow the child more time to change, allowing more space and privacy for the child or allowing the child to stay in their usual school clothes for the lesson. In doing so, the child will still be able to participate in the lesson, receiving the same learning and development opportunities as the other children. This Act is therefore found and immersed within the EYFS, allowing every child "Equality of Opportunity" (DfE 2017a, p.5).

Similar and linking to the *Equality Act (2010)*, the *Children and Families Act (2014)* states how EYPs "must not discriminate... and must make reasonable adjustments... to prevent them [children] being put at a substantial disadvantage." (DfE and DoH 2015, p.79, 5.10) This Act sets out means for EYPs to identify the needs of the child and encourage early interventions through the use of high

quality, inclusive practice and provisions (DfE and DoH 2015, p.19, 1.2). Such principles are also reinforced in the SEND Code of Practice (2014) that provides practitioners and settings with a statutory guidance that is aimed to support children's needs and requirements - it is stated how an important stage in this is the holistic communication between the parents, practitioners and children as a means of reaching "joint outcomes" (Nasen 2015, p.5). *The Children and Families Act* (2014) also covers a wide spectrum identifying the child's needs, ranging from cognitive needs and communicational needs to physical needs - in doing so, EYPs are able to formulate Education Health and Care (EHC) Plans that allow the most efficient, specialist provision for each individual child - presenting the best outcomes and allowing the children to thrive.

EHC Plans are crucial to the decision of where a child with ASD may be educated - the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) also states that such children should ideally have an EHC plan wherever they are educated. Otherwise, this document depicts that EYPs and the policies that settings uphold must "Do what is necessary to enable children and young people to develop, learn, participate and achieve the best possible outcomes" (Silas 2014, p.5)

Practice should not be biased towards certain individuals, but the implementation of these Acts can support practitioners striving for better equality for the children under their professional care.

Effectiveness of practice and provision.

There are conflicting pressures that come to bear on whether or how to include children with ASD into mainstream schools, such as a perceived right to inclusion versus a right to receive appropriate, tailored educational support from practitioners (McGregor and Campbell, 2001). The need to rationalise such conflicting perspectives is crucial, however, as the potential for impaired education could be more detrimental than the innate problems associated with ASD itself. The complexity of the issue is further heightened when practitioners must consider how each autistic child has individually specific needs (Guldberg, 2010). The problem is also exacerbated by the lack of clearly defined outcome measures to assess the success of a particular educational environment: as such, there is little evidence to support either a segregated or a non-segregated environment (Lindsay, 2003).

There is therefore considerable variation in the effectiveness of education provision by mainstream schools for autistic children, with a frequent disconnect between aspiration and practice (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). It is clear that more is required than simply placing autistic children in physical proximity with non-affected peers, and that this alone frequently results in further social exclusion. For example, Ochs et al. (2002) have stated that 'physical placement of [autistic] children in inclusive educational settings alone is not sufficient'. Other authors, such as Goodall (2015) have re-iterated their belief that the behaviour of children

with ASD is unlikely to become less problematic merely as a result of being surrounded by non-affected peers, because affected children are less able to imitate the behaviour pattern of those around them.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, when deciding whether a child with ASD attends a mainstream or SEN school there are many factors that should be taken into account. The school's policies on inclusion also have a major role in this decision - with some schools successfully removing the barriers to a holistic learning environment for every child. This may be in the form of specialist provision, tailored to the SEN of the children. Although this may be difficult due to a lack of funding and training, a mass of research shows the positive impact that this introduction to the classroom and settings have. As a practitioner, it is important to reflect upon practice, ensuring that the best outcomes are being put in place for the children at hand - it is also essential that practitioners have an understanding of how to best aid and support children with ASD as well as help parents and carers form their decisions.

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