**Autistic Children**

**Craig Goodall**

During my PhD research, autistic young people told me that [mainstream education was a place they came to dread](https://www.tes.com/news/autism-how-make-schools-better-autistic-pupils).

They experienced inflexible teaching approaches, bullying, confusion and fear, along with overwhelming social and sensory overload. All this exacerbated [their feelings of exclusion](https://www.tes.com/news/autism-5-research-based-tips-help-students) and otherness.

On average, autistic children have lower attainment and higher exclusion rates than their non-autistic peers. So, the importance of developing [an education system that supports autistic young people](https://www.tes.com/news/autism-if-only-i-knew-then-what-i-know-now) and allows them to thrive cannot be underestimated.

Voices of autistic pupils

However, placing an autistic child in a mainstream classroom will not automatically result in inclusion. We need structural changes to create an accessible environment, such as modifying teaching methods and approaches.

Although there would appear to be growing appetite to understand how we, as teachers, can better support autistic young people within our education systems, the most important voices – those of autistic pupils themselves – are not yet central to this discussion.

Too often, we consider education for autistic young people through the adult lens: that of [parents](https://www.tes.com/news/hub/parentscommunity) and teachers.

We have autism advisory teachers, autism education consultants and non-autistic autism experts. But we don’t listen to the young people themselves.

I asked 12 autistic young people, aged between 11 and 17, to tell me what they wanted from their education. They suggested the following.

1. ‘We like routine…’

Many autistic young people need routine (but not necessarily sameness) and [a sense of predictability](https://www.tes.com/news/autism-why-all-teachers-need-use-same-terms).

This allows them to feel a sense of order in what can be the chaotic environment of mainstream schools.

2. ‘…but we need flexibility’

However – and perhaps counterintuitively – they also want flexibility.

They want flexibility in how they are supported within the classroom. And they want flexibility in how autism-specific strategies are used, in order to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, based on shared diagnostic label.

Sixteen-year-old Ro spoke of how having the flexibility to work at her own pace, within her own routine, on a project of interest, enabled her to feel relaxed.

Dan, aged 11, spoke of how a visual schedule was imposed on him. This is a textbook autism strategy, often [discussed during autism teacher-training events](https://www.tes.com/news/autism-schools-why-more-training-not-answer). But this only served to frustrate him, as he neither wanted nor needed it.

3. ‘Understand me’

It was important to these young people that teachers had received autism training.

But this was not as important as teachers having a supportive attitude, within a broader school ethos of acceptance and understanding.

By being accepted, fewer children will have to camouflage or mask who they are.

A starting point for several of the participants was not being prejudged – or stereotyped based on the past experiences a teacher had of working with autistic pupils.

Fifteen-year-old Stephen described aspects of the relationship a good teacher would have with him: “Understand me when I’m angry. Listen to me. Understand me for me. Don’t hold grudges, and be willing to work with me. Take an interest in me. Look after me in school and give me boundaries. Change how they teach, so I can learn.”

4. Watch your language

Be mindful of how [language and terminology can impact on our beliefs and practices](https://www.tes.com/news/send-language-offensive-schools).

For instance, the term “high-functioning” can belittle the difficulties the young person is experiencing in the classroom. Likewise, the term “low-functioning” can pigeonhole a child as lacking capacity.

Importantly, it is not a linear continuum. I have worked with many children who fluctuate from so-called high-functioning to low-functioning.

5. Question your approaches

Be aware of how everyday classroom-management approaches, such as asking children to find a partner to work with, can affect an autistic student.

Sarah-Jane, aged 17, said: “As usual, I had no one, and I was made to pair up with the teacher. Often, [autistic children don’t have anyone to go to](https://www.tes.com/news/send-four-ways-make-your-classroom-more-inclusive), so are left alone.”

She suggested that pulling names from a hat for pair-work could help to reduce the burden and embarrassment of not being wanted by peers.

6. Make small adjustments

Small adjustments can support pupils. Sarah-Jane described how one school insisted on daily auditory mental [maths](https://www.tes.com/news/hub/mathematics), and made no adjustments for her having auditory-processing difficulties.

This not only isolated her academically but also illustrated the problem with labels such as “high-functioning” and “low-functioning”. While Sarah-Jane was considered able at maths (high-functioning), the lack of adjustment to allow her to use pen and paper during auditory mental maths sessions resulted in her being considered low-functioning.

'A good teacher is...'

To conclude, I offer some characteristics of a good teacher, suggested by Sarah-Jane:

* “A good teacher is someone who takes time to listen and understand the difficulties that a young person with autism faces in school. They realise that they have sensory issues with noise and crowds."
* "A good teacher realises that it can be difficult to make friends, and provides an alternative to playground activities, such as a quiet, reading or games room."
* "A good teacher understands that planned activities might need to be changed to meet the particular needs of someone with autism spectrum disorder."
* "A good teacher is someone who is patient, kind, understanding, helpful, considerate, calm and, above all, doesn’t shout a lot.”

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