

# The problems autistic children face in mainstream schools



Autism is a disorder with the brain which affects the learning developmental process of a person. It is a “ neurodevelopmental disorder condition that affects the functioning of the brain” as stated by the American Psychiatric Association (in Mulligan, Steel, Macculloch & Nicholas, 2010 p. 114). This can affect a person’s social interaction and communication ability to a point where they are deemed unsuited to work in a mainstream environment. Symptoms of Autism can be discovered from a very young age. Autism can be diagnosed according to an autistic spectrum which determines the severity of the person’s condition. This includes a list of disorders ranging from mild to major. The Autistic Society categorises Autism into three different types of disability (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006). One type is a very limited range of thought and behaviour with very limited scope for imagination where the individual may carry out repetitive or ritual-like actions which become a way of life. This may include focusing on minor details rather than focusing on the main object. For example the individual might focus on a piece of clothing rather than focus on the person wearing it or focusing on a particular part of an object rather than the whole object. Another characteristic is limited verbal and non-verbal communication with very impaired two-way conversational skills. An autistic person may also fail to understand another person’s emotions, gestures, or way of thinking and will treat these differences as alien compared to their own character. This may also lead to over-literalness when interpreting something. The final category is a difficulty with social relationships, with an expression of solitude and detachment from reality. I aim to try and find out if and why it is difficult for children, suffering from autism, to study within in a mainstream environment.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

I have wondered whether children with autism are able to enter mainstream education with their handicaps. One has to take into account the comfort zone of the child, how the child is able to cope socially with his surroundings and their ability to cope with peer pressure or bullying. The symptoms of autism are such that it has great effects on how children with autism learn. Each individual will have their own reaction to the learning they are exposed to. Therefore it is necessary that schools take time to accommodate those with disadvantages such as autism and manage each child's necessities. Even if schools and classes for children with autism have managed to devise a particular method of teaching specifically implemented to complement the children's autism, it may not be as easy to achieve in classes where there is only one child with autism or in classes that also include children with a range of different disabilities (not just mental). Without mainstream education, does this mean that children with autism are doomed to never be able to attain a high-position job in the future? I shall start by analysing from the point of view from teachers about possible mainstream education from a research carried out by Helps, Newsom-Davis & Callias (1999).

They make a point in highlighting the increasing significance of the teacher's role in helping children to learn. They mention that teachers work very closely with children and also work under ever-changing conditions; different children each year and the problems they individually or collectively pose. They highlight the importance of the teachers' ability to enrich their social and communication skills. An early intervention into the education of a child who suffers from autism is best in order for their benefit. Most importantly, they highlight "an integrated education in autism" (Helps, Newsom-Davis &

Callias, 1999 p. 288). Riddel and Brown (in Helps, Newsom-Davis & Callias, 1999 p. 288) states that there are increasing cases of children with autism undertaking education in a mainstream environment. It is not sufficient enough to rely on the skills of a good teacher alone, but some prior and extensive knowledge and preparation should be undertaken in order to deal with autism. Powell and Jordan (in Helps, Newsom-Davis & Callias, 1999 p. 288) also state that the “ normal intuitions of good teachers are likely to mislead when applied to autism”. This implies that normal methods of teaching cannot be applied in the same way and have the same effect it would over normal children. They supplement the argument that specific knowledge of the range of disabilities is crucial in achieving the best out of education for those with autism (p. 289). The research itself was conducted in order to find out what the teachers’ perceptions of autism were and what training they had received and how it was being applied in the appropriate setting. It turned out that 70% of mainstream teachers that had been researched had experiences of handling children with autism. Amazingly 5% of the 70% had any sort of specific training to deal with children with autism (p. 290-291). The research came to the conclusion that the majority of the teaching staff did not have a strong understanding or knowledge of the basic theoretical understanding of autism. Many remained unaware of the bigger implications of the condition and many believed in outdated beliefs that were either inaccurate or very superficial. I believe that this inadequate understanding and lack of attention to children with autism makes it extremely challenging for these children to have any chance of an equal footing with normal children in the mainstream environment. Although it should be noted that the survey research sample was only a handful of <https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

schools and teaching institutions in England, this cannot possibly be labelled as a research to represent the whole of England. The research itself was published in 1999 and with modernisation of technology and evolution in society; a change in these statistics is possible. But based on these results, those with autism face a challenge integrating themselves mainly due to lack of awareness on the teacher's behalf and this problem must be rectified.

These days there is a growing demand for special assistance for those with special needs in education. A BBC article about this issue highlighted the fact that a couple of decades ago, those in mainstream schools would consider a child with special needs as an alien subject as placing special needs children into mainstream education was not common in the past (BBC Website, 2006). However these days, integration of children with physical and learning difficulties into mainstream schools has started increasing with more awareness towards their difficulties. The BBC also goes on to mention that many special needs schools were gradually closed down in the 1980s, in order to promote integrated education amongst children with special needs or those without any. Yet the report also goes on to question whether integration is such a good idea for autistic children. According to opinions of parents with autistic children collected by the National Autistic Society, one third of the parents would favour their children being educated in mainstream education, one third would prefer their children to attend a special needs school where they could receive sole attention and the remaining third preferred a mix between the two situations. According to the National Autistic Society, within a research compiled by Barten, Corbett, Roseblatt, Wither & Yullie, parents now want a range of provision including

mainstream schools with more emphasis in resources and more schools which cater especially for special needs (Barten, Corbett, Roseblatt, Wither & Yullie, 2006, p. 3). The report discusses whether parents had a choice whether they sent their children to mainstream or special schools. Over half of the parents who were surveyed by the National Autistic Society stated that they were not given a choice. 33% of parents felt that they were given an opportunity to choose for their children to be in mainstream schools. 59% felt that that once they their children had reached secondary school, their options of choosing school became a lot narrower. They suggest that help for children diagnosed with levels of autism at a secondary school level is lacking. Race and ethnicity apparently plays a role in having a choice or not. Races bar white British families were less likely to have a choice in choosing schools which suggests unfair discrimination. Half of the parents in the survey felt that they were not satisfied with the schools their children were enrolled in. The majority of parents stated that they felt autism-specific special schools were the most beneficial for their children. 43% of parents whose children were in mainstream schools thought that an autism-specific special school would better support their child. The report highlights examples with quotes from various parents including “ Mainstream school dismissed any intention of educating my son when they discovered he had autism” (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006, p. 9). The article also defines the word ‘ inclusion’ not merely just the act of placing an autistic child within a mainstream environment but also “ it is about making appropriate provision to meet each child’s needs and reasonable adjustments to enable each child to access the whole life of the school”

(Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille, 2006, p. 4). A child with  
<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

autism is not necessarily a child without some kind of talent. A child with autism can suddenly excel in a discipline or have talent to make up for its disadvantages. A school must identify the individual needs that should lay a marker for identifying what type of school they should attend and the support they will need to receive in order to complete their education. The theory of inclusion according to Harmon & Jones (2005 p187), “.... when special education students are included in the regular classrooms, they have greater achievement, better self concepts, and more appropriate social skills than those special education students who are placed together in one classroom”. Another example of the encouragement for mainstream education is highlighted with Rogers’ report (2004) where she highlights a school in Japan, the Boston Massachusetts Higashi School, which takes in only children with learning difficulties. They have come up with a curriculum with a teacher delivery that is based upon the common age rather than by developmental level (2004, p. 49). This shows that mainstream methods have spread across the world.

In a journal report by Philip Whitaker (2007), he conducts a research experiment using surveys for parents asking for their opinions on their satisfaction of their children’s education. The majority of the children and young people in the research were educated in mainstream schools and had not been to special needs schools to receive supplementary help. Less than half the parents who were given the questionnaire returned with responses. This was very similar to the response rate of parents whose children were catered for in special schools. The outcome showed that more than half of the participants were either satisfied or very satisfied with the educational

support their children receive (Whitaker, 2007, p. 173-174). However the report also notes the possible problems that could distort the research findings. For example, the parents may not have the experience to judge whether the education and autistic resources are being beneficial towards their children. The parents who described themselves as dissatisfied appear to have concerns regarding many aspects of the provision made for their children as well as concerns relating to their children's experiences and progress (p. 174). The most common response was that of disagreement by parents. All but one of the rating items recorded only a very modest measure of agreement with the item referring to their relationship with the school in the results. Parents placed particular importance in gradual confidence in social skills, a clear understanding between teacher and child, and a broad capacity to enable to handle all types of children behaviour, a decent structure for children to be able to follow and to ensure that the child is happy within the study environment. Later in the report, it states that parents were worried overall about their children's social experiences at school. Across all respondents, only half of all children and young people were said to have friends and only one in five of the parents felt that their children were accepted by their fellow peers (p. 175). Issues during recess or break times seemed to be a particular issue for parents with 70% of them indicating this was a cause for concern. One in ten parents spontaneously mentioned bullying in their response to the open-ended questions and this was an issue that aroused understandably strong feelings. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that their children's happiness was such a prominent issue for so many of the parents. Comparing these statistics with the idea of inclusion, it appears that a potential barrier that could prevent children from

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>



integrating themselves is an unfriendly environment. A developed understanding with the teachers was also considered important in order to maintain the best results from education. However Whitaker's report placed more importance on the social aspect and surroundings unlike previous examples which placed importance on the increasing role of the teacher.

Another report by Humphrey (2008) states that research indicates that students with an autistic handicap are more susceptible to bullying at school. Furthermore, students with autism are more than 20 times more likely to be excluded from school than those without special educational needs (Humphrey, 2008 p. 24). Children with autism constantly have to fight stereotypes and unfair treatment simply because they are not normal. Humphrey's report seems to ally itself with Whitaker's point of view in that the social aspect is the most crucial in determining whether an autistic child settles or not. Singer (in Humphrey, 2008 p. 32) argues the autistic spectrum is often "associated in the public mind with images of rocking, emotionally cut-off, intellectually impaired children and "RainMan"-like savants". The relationships students with autism have with their peers could be both a barrier and an enabler to their successful inclusion in school. In a recent study according to the report, nearly all students reported being bullied at different levels of severity and frequency. Humphrey's research includes a dialogue during an interview with a student in which the student was reported to say: "People in my class know about my autism at school that's why they likely pick on me." If incidents of name-calling and physical violence were 'one-off' events, then they might not be considered unusual. Chan and Smith (in Humphrey, 2008) suggest that many students will

experience either petty name-calling or physical violence or in worse case scenarios both at some point during their schooling. Subsequently bullying and aggression towards these students turned out with more frequency than anticipated. This can lead to the unfortunate scenario of social exclusion. This can lead to a serious problem when an autistic child's behaviour impacts upon another child, such as irritation from the child's constant talking and consequently disrupts the learning environment which creates more unnecessary pressure for teachers and therefore the 'inclusion' technique fails. It appears to be necessary to create a friendly atmosphere and somehow integrate these children together in a positive manner and avoid conflicts or ostracizing.

I shall now try to expand on the idea of inclusion of autistic children together into mainstream schools. An 'inclusive' education brings all children together without highlighting differences. Those with disabilities will be grouped with normal children and be educated together. A research undertaken (in Reed, Osborne & Waddington, 2009) observed the performance rate of children with autism in mainstream settings and to determine their performances within the education system. The abstract reveals that there was actually no significance whether students were enrolled in mainstream or special needs schools (Reed et al. 2009 p. 1), although special schools did emphasise the importance of social and emotional behaviours. Although they note the upcoming progress of the inclusion process of children of all abilities, they question whether the actual inclusion policy will end up being beneficial to the students on a whole (p. 4-5). Harris and Handleman (in Reed et al. 2009 p. 5) suggested that the social

behaviour aspect may have more bearing in the investigation than the academic performances to achieve the most ideal inclusive settings. After concluding their research, the report discusses the potential difference between mainstream and special schools. It revealed that special schools made a stronger impression in aiming to improve social and behavioural aspects of the children. Although they hint that the results are not very strong indicators to advocate for a strong conclusion, they suggest that children are probably going to benefit more emotionally and socially by going to a special school (p. 12). Judging by this mini conclusion, I believe that the social integration is the biggest issue into helping a child settle. This report appears to suggest that children are going to benefit less by going to a mainstream school as they appear to have less focus on trying to improve a child emotionally and socially. Yet the report also explores other possibilities such as the provisions children receive at school and the parents' influence.

Humphrey & Lewis (2008) compiled a report on the actual experiences of students, who have autism, who attended mainstream secondary schools. They reveal that there is a “ significant impetus” to have more students who require special needs attention integrated into mainstream schools. They give two reasons as to why this sudden increase in integration is the case. First, Farrell and Ainscow reveal (in Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) that there is growing momentum for mainstream inclusion for children and adolescents with special needs (p. 23-24). The second is provided by Connor (in Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) who states that with the current increasing realisation that by grouping children who have autism together into one

class may not be the most beneficial for the children. They analysed 20 students across 4 secondary schools in the North-West of England through interviews. Teachers, Assistants, Parents and classroom/break time observations were also used in the investigation. The listed objectives included: exploring the perspectives of some autistic students within a mainstream environment, to log everyday experiences of the students, to identify their immersion into a school culture – to see if it is being beneficial or hindering to a student. A total of 20 students with Autism (age ranging from 11-17 years old) participated in the study. The student sample was taken from the four chosen mainstream secondary schools from the North-Western region of England. As standard procedures, consent needed to be granted by each school's management consultants including written consents from each student's parents accepting the purpose of the research. Then to question the students, the team of researchers would be accompanied by a member of staff (a person whom the student will have most likely studied under or whom would recognise). During the research they introduced diaries for students to keep record of their experiences; this was seen as a useful way of getting information which would have otherwise might have been extremely difficult to get hold of, a way to avoid potentially embarrassing or pressuring the students into forcing out their emotions. The diary method can gain access to personal and intimate thoughts that may not emerge in an interview context. However, if this method of using diaries were to become an actual part of the curriculum, I would suspect that some of the children would have no interest in using it independently and will rather rely on instruction to use it. Nevertheless, the diaries provide a less “intrusive” alternative to performing a series of interviews that would still

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

produce rich and meaningful data as the individual is under no pressure and can fill out the diary in their own way and time (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008 p. 27). Ethical considerations were observed for the study.

The results were separated into different analytical themes. The first topic to appear was the concept of what “autism” meant to the individual. The responses were negative and the individuals responded with responses such as “Oh my God I’m a freak”, one particular response from a student after being told that he had Asperger’s Syndrome (p. 31). It is believed that the students formulated their own view of themselves and how they deal with Autism through the feedback they receive from others. One student recounts of his frustrations that staff at his school had been notified of his Asperger’s syndrome which prompted an uncomfortable and embarrassed response: I’d prefer they didn’t know because everyone treats me differently and I don’t like being treated differently” (p. 31). An interesting contrast to the previous response was seen in a subset of students for whom their Autism was simply a part of their own identity. They had grown to accept and even be proud of their differences. As one student commented, “Sometimes I think I am normal, I’m treating this autism very well. I’m top of the class and doing very well and I’ve got a good future ahead of me and I’ve got a vocabulary, I’ve got very good friends” (p. 32). The mention of ‘friends’ shows how far this particular student has come to overcome differences and integrate himself into the mainstream environment and make a social connection.

Another set of results concentrated on the particular traits of Autism and how it was reacted to within the classroom at school. One example shows a student gaining confidence due to his particular strong and precise interest <https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

in certain elements of sporting talents, with his classmates asking him questions on how he is able to maintain strong interest on such a topic. Unfortunately aside from curiosity, it also inevitably leads to incidents of bullying due to the “social naivety” of the autistic students, making them very vulnerable targets (p. 33). An example shows how a student took a joke literally and frustrated the individual who started the joke who resorted to verbal bullying which in turn upset the student who had been the original victim of the bullying. A student’s relationship with his/her classmates proved to be a make-or-break factor in his/her attempt to integrate into the school community. Nearly all of the autistic children were victims of bullying and teasing which can have a drastic effect on the children’s moral and overall satisfaction of being at school. Samples of diary entries revealed that bullying occurred often. Inevitably those with special needs are most likely to be targeted by bullies simply because they are different. Depending on the individual, he or she may not possess the character or resilience to shrug off or confront the bullying. However there were instances where it would be counteracted by support from (and often enduring friendships with) fellow peers. There are examples of students who have expressed their feelings through crude drawings (p. 36). Undoubtedly this type of situation will lower any student’s self-esteem and confidence, let alone students with special needs. The report goes onto talk about the levels of anxiety and stress in school. The school environment itself was a considerable source of anxiety. Students thrived off order and predictability which composed their everyday school life, implying any kind of change to a routine would throw off the students and potentially bring about a negative reaction. This also possibly shows that these children crave structure or something to follow, especially

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

during the younger years. There were some who were able to deal with distractions but for others, it was not as easy to ignore and they felt upset and could not concentrate and therefore could not progress.

Finally the theme of working in conjunction with the teachers also came up in the report. Students reacted differently once again to teacher's assistance. Most welcomed that there was somebody looking out for them, reassured to know that they could turn to someone for help. However, students also felt pressure due to the lack of discretion from teachers. It was obvious for everyone to see that they were receiving extra support which only served to highlight further the differences between themselves and their peers. This made them more uncomfortable and resentful to the fact that this difference in ability was exposed. The presence of a teacher only helped to impede their attempts to integrate and make friends in the classroom. It seems apparent that a teacher's understanding is important, as highlighted earlier in the essay. The teacher must also have confidence in dealing with children. A lack of understanding of individual student's needs resulted in the teachers, in this report, depending on assistant staff members to prepare work for a student. The final key theme to emerge from the study was how the way in which students with autism attempt to understand and assimilate themselves successfully into the mainstream school environment, set against contexts in which they feel both very different from others but also the same, and experience both acceptance and rejection.

In conclusion the argument that autism poses within an educational setting will be inevitably different for every child. Some children are capable of

handling general education classes with assistance, while others would

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>

possibly benefit better from a self-contained classroom where they are not mixed with mainstream. Students were experiencing adaptations to common ways of working and interacting that seemed to lead to a more positive experience of schooling. It is important to acknowledge though that whilst useful, the children's views and experiences themselves are a part (albeit a significant one) of a larger picture, and any full account of the inclusion process must also be explored deeper. It is a mistake to assume that because a student with an autistic disability is still academically able, he or she should be able to cope in mainstream school. On the contrary, as demonstrated in the current research, difficulties in social communication and interaction experienced by such students are likely to increase their exposure and vulnerability to bullying and social isolation which can lead to depression and feelings of not belonging. These are one of the most obvious reasons why autistic children have to overcome so much. Having teachers that are aware and are able to integrate the children with autism has a huge bearing on whether the children are able to settle themselves amongst their peers. The parents must also be vigilant in order to choose the correct schools and to also detect when their child is unhappy and is not benefiting from the learning environment. Family influence counts a lot when it comes down to children. Regardless of the type of school they attend, those with Asperger's syndrome must be taught in an environment that understands and caters for autistic children. It requires schools to be responsive to the needs of individual children by teachers and also provide support to staff that should have ideally some sufficient background and training in identifying the different aspects of autism and how to respond to given situations. Although many of these research articles claimed that their

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problems-autistic-children-face-in-mainstream-schools/>



survey samples were too small to be considered a nationwide survey, the recurring themes help to certainly give an idea of the possible reasons of difficulty autistic children face when placed in a mainstream education.

Word Count: 4482