Autistic School Staff Project

The Experiences and Needs of Autistic School Staff: Summary Report of Phase 2 Covid-19 Findings

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Introduction

Phase 1 of the Autistic School Staff Project (ASSP) was started in 2019, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. An online survey was launched in the UK, resulting in 149 participants who held a variety of education roles in schools. The findings of the survey have been summarised in this downloadable report. You can also find more information about Phase 1 on the ASSP website.

This current report concerns part of **Phase 2**, which was developed in 2020 – 2021, funded by the John and Lorna Wing Foundation. The research component of Phase 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 33 of our Phase 1 participants who had chosen this option. The Phase 2 interviews were informed by the findings of Phase 1, particularly in relation to **change** and **sensory issues** (Wood and Happé, in press). Phase 2 took place during the coronavirus pandemic, and so questions were included to ascertain how participants were responding to Covid-19, lockdown, remote working and/or changes to working practices resulting from the pandemic.

This report is a summary of our Phase 2 findings on the experiences and needs of autistic school staff in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on their work and associated issues.

The interviews took place between July 2020 – December 2020, predominantly after the first lockdown in the UK (approximately March – June 2020), and before the second lockdown (which began in mid-November 2020). During the first lockdown, schools were open to a select group of children only (e.g. children classed as 'vulnerable'), with a phased return for all other children over the subsequent months. Although not all nations in the UK took the same steps at the same time, broadly schools remained open for all pupils for the start of the second lockdown.

The interviews were conducted either by email (n = 15) or on a one-to-one basis with a researcher (n = 18), depending on the preferences of the participants. The summary below of the Covid-19 interview findings results from preliminary thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003). More detailed analysis of the findings is currently being prepared for academic publication.

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Participant characteristics

As for Phase 1, we included in Phase 2 participants who were no longer working in the school sector at the time of completing the interview (n = 12). This has enabled us to collect some important findings on the difficulties some autistic people experience in the education profession. This report is drawn predominantly from participants still working in schools when completing the interview (n = 21), as they were able to comment directly on the impact of the pandemic on school and home working practices for school staff. Participant characteristics of the whole sample are as follows:

- 28 were assigned sex at birth as female and 5 as male
- 21 identified as female, 3 as male, 4 as non-binary and 5 did not provide information on gender identity
- 27 participants had a clinical diagnosis of autism; 5 were seeking an autism diagnosis; 1 self-identified as autistic
- Participants ranged in age from 25 – 63 years. The median age was 41 years
- Their experience in schools ranged from 0.8 – 31 years. The median was 10 years
- 25 participants worked in mainstream schools and 2 in special schools. 6 participants had experience of both types of settings
- 14 participants were teachers; 10 were teaching assistants (TAs); 4 visiting professionals/advisors; 3 deputy Head/assistant Head teachers; 2 SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Advisors)

Key findings

1. Dealing with changes resulting from the pandemic
- The disruption to routines was found to be difficult. This also created problems with self-organisation, particularly if working from home.
- The widespread and frequent changes in schools impacted many aspects of participants' work, including the curriculum, the length of lessons, use of indoor and outdoor spaces, classroom allocation, teaching groups and break times. Adjusting to these changes was difficult.
- Not being able to work in the usual classroom was problematic, as was having to move around to the pupils, rather than the other way around: this requires additional planning and organisation and can have negative sensory impacts.
- Changes were brought in swiftly and not always communicated effectively. Changes implemented without consultation or warning were considered especially problematic.
- Participants felt that positive changes, e.g. a calmer school environment, a more flexible approach to teaching and learning (see below), should be maintained post-Covid.

2. Sensory impacts

- The sensory impacts for autistic adults and children and non-autistic children were perceived as predominantly positive.

- The classroom environment was felt to be improved because of the removal of displays and general clutter. They had more fresh air as windows were left open.

- The beginning and end of the school day were found to be calmer because of how drop-offs and pick-ups were organised.

- There was more outdoor learning which was considered to benefit pupils as well as staff.

- There were no bells and groups were smaller, meaning corridors were less busy. There were no large group assemblies. Children were found to be calmer.

- It was perceived as beneficial to children to be allowed to wear their P.E. kit all day and not have to get changed from their uniform for P.E. lessons.

- Adults working from home appreciated being able to wear comfortable clothes.

- It was considered beneficial for some autistic children to be accessing their learning from home, or to be only spending a short amount of time in school.

- It wasn't always possible for autistic children to access all of their sensory therapy, e.g. water play or deep pressure activities, due to the need for social distancing.

3. Communication and social interaction

- The need to use the phone more during lockdown was found to be problematic, but increased communication by email was considered useful on the whole.

- Poor communication from management was found to be stressful.

- Remote meetings could be better because they were more efficient and there was less time on social niceties. However, online meetings could be longer, and the social rules were not clear.

- Smaller groups/bubbles were considered better for children and there were fewer behavioural issues.

- Not having to be around other adults as much was beneficial and less tiring than usual.

- Lockdown meant that social groups could be accessed remotely, and this was an advantage.

4. Technology

- Technology could be complex and tiring, but learning new technical skills was appreciated.

- Training was easier when virtual.

- There was more flexibility in terms of how children accessed learning, particularly for children with disabilities or school-based anxiety.

- Some adaptations, e.g. remote meetings, had been requested in pre-Covid times, but were considered to be impossible. In lockdown, these adaptations became an obligation.

- Some participants felt that some of these changes should remain in place post-Covid for autistic school staff and for children who have difficulties accessing school-based learning, or who need a more flexible approach.

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5. Health and well-being

- Participants suffering from anxiety prior to the pandemic found this increased significantly once the first lockdown started.

- Health concerns were high, especially in relation to coronavirus.

- Uncertainty over e.g. changes due to take place, increased anxiety.

- The blurring of home/school boundaries (due to home-working) was problematic, particularly if different personae are adopted in and out of work (masking). Home-working meant it was more difficult to find 'down time'. Some participants returned to school because of these issues, despite fears about Covid-19.

- The increased emphasis on hygiene in schools was appreciated.

- Having a supportive network helped with anxieties about the virus and home-working.

- The emphasis on well-being (rather than the standard curriculum), or the Recovery Curriculum (Carpenter and Carpenter 2020) for when children returned to school, was appreciated and it was felt should remain a central component to teaching and learning post-Covid.

Summary of the views and experiences of autistic school staff of Covid-19

Findings were positive and negative in nature and provided predominantly by participants working in schools at the time of completing the interview. Dealing with change was difficult, especially when changes were frequent and communicated at the last minute. Working during lockdown brought sensory benefits both at home and in Covid-secure schools. Home-working was initially appreciated, but the blurring of home/work boundaries was difficult. Communication and social interactions were easier in some ways during lockdown, but there were additional uncertainties regarding social norms. Autistic children appeared to benefit from the changes made. Technology was useful but also complex and tiring. Anxiety levels about coronavirus could be high. Some of the changes implemented as a result of Covid-19, such as the availability of remote meetings, calmer school environments and flexible approaches to learning, should continue post lockdown.

Acknowledgements

References

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