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What are the views and experiences of autistic teachers? Findings from an online survey in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Despite significant research into the education of autistic children and young people (CYP) and an increased awareness of the employment needs and rights of autistic adults, little attention has been paid to autistic teachers. We discuss findings drawn from an online survey in the UK in which autistic teachers and other autistic education staff ($n=149$) describe the lack of understanding, sensory impacts, mental health issues and the complexities associated with revealing an autism diagnosis as a result of their work. These issues can represent significant impediments to either entering or remaining in the school education profession. Positive experiences were also found and, from a social justice perspective, the possibilities of autistic school staff to constitute a role model for autistic CYP and to facilitate their educational inclusion are considered. Future directions in this under-researched area are also discussed.

Points of interest

- There is a lack of research into autistic teachers and other autistic school staff.
- Autistic school staff experience many difficulties in training, recruitment, job satisfaction and career development.
- Participants in our survey wrote that they lack support. They also find the physical environment of schools difficult and can experience mental health issues and prejudice.
- Some participants feared sharing the fact that they were autistic at work, but others had positive experiences of doing so.
- In the right circumstances, autistic staff in schools can make an important contribution to educational inclusion, particularly of autistic pupils.

Introduction

The education of autistic children and young people (CYP) has received a great deal of attention in terms of educational interventions, policy and research (Bond et al. 2016; Pellicano, Bölte, and Stahmer 2018; House of Commons 2020a), with an increasing focus on employability skills (Hart, Grigal, and Weir 2010; Shattuck et al. 2012; Martin, Barnham, and Krupa 2019). However, research informed by the views and experiences of autistic pupils suggests that, notwithstanding a strong emphasis on interventions to support their education, these inputs do not necessarily provide them with the help they need (Brede et al. 2017; Pellicano, Bölte, and Stahmer 2018; Wood 2019a). Moreover, despite some inconsistency in outcome measures (Howlin and Magiati 2017), the pattern of poor participation, exclusion and impoverished longer-term outcomes appears to continue for many autistic CYP and adults (Howlin et al. 2004; Hendricks 2010; Levy and Perry 2011; Wilczynski, Trammell, and Clarke 2013; Lord et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, school staff may feel they lack training in autism (Lindsay et al. 2013; Ravet 2018) and yet are considered central to the educational participation of autistic CYP (Kugelmass 2003; Symes and Humphrey 2011; Efthymiou and Kington 2017; Guldberg et al. 2021). This circumstance is regardless of whether or not they experience their own feelings of exclusion and alienation in the workplace (Soza 2015), or indeed if they are disabled themselves (Riddick 2003; Valle et al. 2004; Vogel and Sharoni 2011; Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky 2019; Neca, Borges, and Pinto 2020). Furthermore, despite a growing awareness of the value of 'insider expertise' in the autism research field (Milton 2014; Pellicano, Dinsmore, and Charman 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017), and a nascent literature on the experiences of autistic university lecturers and staff (Martin 2020), there is a dearth of understanding and research concerning autistic teachers. In the literature, there is a focus on transitioning autistic young people *from* school (e.g. Wilczynski, Trammell, and Clarke 2013), rather than transitioning autistic adults *into* schools, as professional educators.

Autism and employment

Research on autism and employment indicates that autistic adults are under-employed, both in the sense that they are not working at the level their qualifications or abilities would warrant and that they are subject to much higher rates of unemployment and job insecurity, and receive lower pay, than the general population (Eaves and Ho 2007; Hendricks 2010; Burgess and Cimera 2014; Taylor, Henninger, and Mailick 2015), or even other disability groups (Roux et al. 2013; Scott et al. 2017; Office for National Statistics 2021). Moreover, instead of tackling the poor psychological health and well-being and impoverished socio-economic outcomes of autistic people

(Howlin 2013; Cassidy et al. 2014; Hirvikoski et al. 2016), the focus instead has too often been on the purported costs of autism (Ganz 2007; Buescher et al. 2014; Rogge and Janssen 2019). Indeed, it is axiomatic to suggest that paying closer attention to the employment barriers faced by autistic people would help address the issue of the posited pecuniary burdens of this population (Howlin, Alcock, and Burkin 2005; Mavranezouli et al. 2014; Scott et al. 2017).

There has been some research into transition and rehabilitation programmes needed to prepare young autistic adults for the world of work (Howlin, Alcock, and Burkin 2005; Sung et al. 2015; Flower et al. 2019), or into support schemes and mentoring programmes designed to facilitate both employment and job retention (Wilczynski, Trammell, and Clarke 2013; Pérez, Alcover, and Chambel 2015; Nicholas et al. 2018). Other studies focus on behaviourally-informed interventions (Wehman et al. 2017), such as the provision of audio or visual prompts designed to facilitate on-task focus (Montgomery et al. 2011; Wilczynski, Trammell, and Clarke 2013). However, such programmes appear ill-suited for autistic professionals, while school settings, the source of considerable attention from the point of view of autistic CYP, are simply not considered within such formats.

Schemes to help employers hire autistic staff (Howlin, Alcock, and Burkin 2005; Scott et al. 2017) provide insights into the multi-dimensional nature of autism and employment, shifting the focus away from 'within-person' presumed inadequacies towards a more holistic approach (Nicholas et al. 2018). Similarly, studies focussed on tackling the environmental adaptations needed to improve the working conditions and well-being of autistic employees (Booth 2014; Nicholas et al. 2018; Feinstein 2019) contribute to a better understanding of the barriers they face, as well as providing some solutions to these. Furthermore, companies such as Microsoft, SAP, Ford and Ernst and Young, amongst others, in recognition of the talents autistic people can offer, have set up recruitment schemes specifically for them (Remington and Pellicano 2019), aligned with tailored programmes to support their well-being in predominantly office workplaces. These areas of progress have taken place within a context of improved rights for disabled people, as endorsed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006), the Autism Act (2009), the Equality Act (2010) and, in the US, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990), for example, as well as an increasing recognition of the value of a social model of disability perspective in alignment with this legislation (Blanck 2020). Nevertheless, there is a failure to consider the panoply of work settings potentially available to autistic employees, or to address the complexity of the school environment (Johnson, Kraft, and Papay 2012) in relation to autistic school staff.

Indeed, despite a better understanding of how to facilitate the employment of autistic people, an increased awareness of the issues faced by

disabled university lecturers (Brewster et al. 2017; Martin 2020), as well as school teachers who are dyslexic (Riddick 2003), have learning disabilities (LD) (Valle et al. 2004; Vogel and Sharoni 2011), or other disabilities (Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky 2019; Neca, Borges, and Pinto 2020), there has been very limited research into autistic school educators. Lawrence (2019) reports on a single case-study of an autistic trainee teacher who, despite mixed experiences of the training process, hoped to become a role model for autistic pupils. Baird (2020) briefly considers theoretical issues of performativity and ableism for autistic teachers, while Murray (2019) provides suggestions on how to understand autistic pupils from the perspective of an autistic teacher. There are also occasional discussions on social media (e.g. Twitter #autisticteachers) and in blogs (Lawrence 2019). However, no evidence could be found of any in-depth research into this population. It is worth noting too that the focus is often on teachers alone, disregarding the multiple roles disabled people could be carrying out in schools, or the recommendation that all staff must be engaged with inclusive practices in order to achieve educational inclusion for disabled pupils (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Pellicano, Bölte, and Stahmer 2018).

This study, therefore, is placed at the intersection of two core issues. First, the substantial focus, in both research and practice, on how to facilitate the educational inclusion and participation of autistic CYP has not resulted in a significant amelioration in these areas, while their longer-term outcomes and employment remain similarly impoverished. Second, while steps have been taken to address the barriers to employment of autistic people (Lorenz et al. 2016; Flower et al. 2019; Martin, Barnham, and Krupa 2019), and of disabled people generally, in different work sectors, underpinned by improved rights (Toldrá and Santos 2013; Schur et al. 2017), scant attention has been paid to the issues faced by autistic school staff and the unique nature of the school environment. This study attempts to address the following questions at the intersection of these two issues:

> What are the views and experiences of autistic people working in an education role in the school sector in the UK?

> What is needed to improve the employment, well-being and progress of autistic people in the school education sector?

> What can be learned from autistic school staff about the inclusion of autistic pupils?

Procedure

We report here on an online survey developed with a committee of three autistic adults who work in schools: they were recruited via an autistic-led charity based in the UK. This process was in keeping with the understanding that disabled people should identify research priorities that apply to them,

necessitating participation and co-production in research endeavours (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2018). Additional theoretical principles informing the study relate to the value of inclusive education (Allan 2008; Liasidou 2012; Thomas 2013; Lim 2020), the importance of social justice in education (Nieuwenhuis 2010; Mladenov 2016) and disability rights (CRPD [UN DESA] 2006; Pothier and Devlin 2006; Hughes 2009; Della Fina and Cera 2015).

The survey, which took into account the need for strict anonymity and confidentiality and was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of King's College London, contained a combination of open, closed, Likert scale and multiple choice questions. The information sheet and consent form were incorporated into the survey, which was launched in November 2019 via Survey Monkey and was live for approximately four weeks. The survey was shared on social media, by autism charities, autistic-led organisations and via an online article in the Times Educational Supplement (Wood 2019b). It was also shared by some university groups and professional SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) contacts known to the authors. To be included, participants needed to: (a) be over the age of 18; (b) be working, or have worked previously, in a school in the UK and (c) have a diagnosis of autism, either professionally/medically diagnosed or self-diagnosed, or to be seeking/awaiting a diagnosis of autism. It was considered important to include individuals who were not formally diagnosed due to the reported difficulties of obtaining a diagnosis of autism for women (Carpenter, Happé, and Egerton 2019; Milner et al. 2019) and those without evident impairments (Fuentes, Hervás, and Howlin 2020).

Sample

The final sample consisted of 149 participants, ranging in age from 19 to 62 years (median age = 40 years). 93 (62.4%) had a medical/professional diagnosis of autism, 36 (24.2%) were self-diagnosed and 20 (13.4%) were seeking or awaiting a diagnosis of autism. While 80% were female and 20% were male, gender identity was more complex: from the 136 responses to this non-compulsory question, 98 (72%) identified as female; 27 (20%) identified as male, and 10 (8%) identified as non-binary or agender. At the time of completing the survey, 100 (67%) were working in schools, and 49 (33%) were no longer doing so.

One hundred and forty-eight of the 149 participants provided information on the roles they held or had held in schools, with varying degrees of specificity and detail. A number of them either worked in a special school environment, including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs, for pupils excluded from school), or had a SEND role in mainstream school. Some worked across mainstream and special school sectors, and others were ancillary professionals who worked in different schools. For those in the secondary – predominantly mainstream – sector, subjects taught included English, Maths, Modern Foreign

Languages, Science (including Biology, Chemistry and Physics specifically), Geography, Computing, History, and Design and Technology.

For reasons that will become evident in the discussion of findings, an especially high standard of anonymity and confidentiality is required in the presentation of data. Therefore, if participants' roles in schools were uncommon or potentially identifiable, they were added to a broader category which most closely matched their work. For example, Higher Level Teaching Assistants, Learning Mentors, Family Support Workers and Communication Support Workers have all been included in the Teaching Assistant category. Two participants were a teacher and a deputy Head teacher in addition to being a SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) and so they have been counted twice in the information below on roles. Participants in this report are characterised as follows:

Teacher (including Heads of Department) (n = 78)

Teaching Assistant (TA) (n = 40)

SENCO (n = 8)

Other therapeutic or professional support role (n = 8)

Assistant/deputy Head teacher or member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) (n = 5)

Trainee teacher (n = 5)

Head teacher (n = 4)

Early years teacher (n = 2)

Similarly, in order to reinforce anonymity, participants in this article are referred to in relation to their biological sex, rather than their gender identity.

Analysis

The numerical data were analysed using simple descriptive statistics and have been reported elsewhere (Wood 2020a); they are included briefly in this report when relevant. However, our focus here is predominantly on the qualitative data derived from the open question at the end of the survey, and the comment boxes which were part of the 'other' option for some of the multiple choice questions. These were coded via NVivo and analysed thematically (Corbin and Strauss 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun, Clarke, and Rance 2014) using a process of constant comparison in which key words and phrases were identified and compared in context (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

This process resulted in seven interlinked themes: 1. Lack of understanding and support; 2. Poor treatment of autistic pupils; 3. Environment; 4. Mental health issues; 5. Problems with revealing autism diagnosis; 6. Positive experiences of revealing diagnosis and 7. Facilitating inclusion.

Lack of understanding and support

Participants who had left the education profession particularly highlighted the 'total lack of understanding' and a failure to provide necessary adjustments that had typified their time working in schools, especially in relation to school managers. A former TA complained that, even after an assessment by the National Autistic Society, there was a failure 'to put the support in place', while a former teacher asserted that 'support and flexibility' were 'non-existent'. Another former TA wrote that 'senior management were not understanding or willing to make adjustments', while for a former teacher, the school management were 'quite literally horrible'.

Participants still working in the education profession experienced similar difficulties, as some had changed schools in a bid to gain more understanding, or were considering leaving the profession altogether due to perceived double standards and inconsistencies. One teacher said he was 'viewed as an outsider' and 'undermined' in a specialist setting with many autistic pupils, and so was forced 'to quit'. For some participants, when management and colleagues don't adhere to school policies, it can be 'hard' as 'you feel like the only one actually following the rules'. One SENCO, who described herself as 'very rule orientated', reported a high level of distress and a desire to 'seek employment outside of the teaching profession' when management fail to 'meet their obligations'. Indeed, a number of participants specifically commented that 'reasonable adjustments' were not made, and one teacher complained that employers merely 'pay lip service to inclusion'.

Furthermore, the 'political aspects of education systems', especially those linked with school leaders perceived as being 'insincere or manipulative in their management style', were considered particularly challenging. This led a teacher to comment that, despite being 'well regarded', she could never progress to senior management due to being unable to navigate the 'cloak and dagger' nature of school politics.

Participants linked some of the difficulties to characteristics associated with autism that were neither recognised, valued, nor supported in their workplace. These included perfectionism, being too honest and 'too nice' (leading to bullying), dealing with unexpected demands, understanding the 'bigger picture', self-organisation, as well as additional specific, diagnosed difficulties such as dyspraxia. One former Head teacher asserted that 'my Asperger's played a huge role in me being unable to cope with the role'. Trying to make sense of social situations and 'unspoken social rules' were described as exhausting, worrying and time-consuming. For one teacher, not always knowing 'what to do or say in certain situations' means that any workplace can be 'hard'. However, on a non-compulsory question with pre-set options, only 5% (*n*=8) of all respondents (*n*=147) felt that being autistic hindered their work, whereas 16% (*n*=23) felt that being autistic helped them in their work.

A number of participants commented that they experienced difficulties because of lack of clarity of expectations from colleagues, or their own tendency to be 'literal'. One former trainee teacher wrote that he had not taken up the profession because of 'unclear expectations', while a current trainee reported sometimes 'talking cross-ways' with colleagues, which is 'challenging'. A former TA referred to 'unspoken agreements' which were not shared, while one teacher complained that 'very few adults say what they mean or mean what they say'.

Environment

The term 'environment' here is used to incorporate different physical aspects of the workplace, as well as broader social, communication and systemic circumstances that contribute to, or detract from, the health, well-being and functioning of individuals in their place of work (WHO 2010a).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the association of autism with hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to sensory stimuli (Bogdashina 2016), the physical environment impacted significantly on the participants in this study. Noise, including an inability to filter out background noise, bright lights, general busyness and crowds emerged as particularly difficult issues, leading to 'sensory overload', being exhausted or 'shattered' after the school day, even leading to meltdown. One TA complained that 'the lights are always too bright, the bells go on far too long', while another TA carried earplugs around at work. For another TA, 'busy school areas/corridors can be really difficult', a circumstance which is tiring and makes it difficult to 'keep going'. One teacher had to resort to going to the toilet to escape the noise, meaning that 'break times are not a break at all'.

Furthermore, having to deal with different types of change in the working environment, especially when employers did not leave sufficient adjustment time for changes to be processed, emerged as one of the most crucial – and difficult – factors for the study participants. These changes could be physical, organisational or more broadly professional in nature and, particularly when combined with more evident sensory issues, were highly stressful for some autistic school staff. This especially applied to changing classrooms, an issue of particular relevance to secondary school staff:

> I always teach in the horrible rooms that no one else wants – noisy, messy, too hot, problems with blinds, no privacy, etc. I am doing a different job from someone who has their own classroom. (current secondary school teacher)

Two teachers stated that not having their own classroom contributed to their pre-existing difficulties with organisation, and another teacher found supply teaching to be 'a nightmare'. For professionals in therapeutic roles, 'hot desking' was extremely problematic, as were 'sudden changes to

workflow'. For some staff, having their own classroom, or at least having to change rooms less often, would make a significant positive impact on their working lives.

Changes were especially difficult to cope with when not communicated effectively or in advance, with last minute decisions from senior management constituting 'a major source of stress'. Unpredictable elements in the classroom could also leave some autistic school staff unsure of how to respond, which in turn increased stress levels. Even changing equipment, such as computers, was found to be problematic, and anxiety could be particularly high around significant changes, such as the arrival of a new Head teacher.

TAs appeared to be especially vulnerable to changes over which they had no control, including the 'constant changing' of children they were expected to work with, sometimes on a daily basis, or the 'lack of advance notice of what teachers are planning for lessons'. Similarly, the lack of permanent contracts, the ending of fixed-term contracts, as well as redundancy were reasons cited by some TAs for no longer working in the education profession. Some TAs had had to give up work in schools because of very low pay, as 'being a TA is too low paid to live', especially when 'you're a single income household'.

Nevertheless, participants appeared to be able to cope with changes they could control, and not all had left the education profession for negative reasons. One former Head teacher had simply 'wanted fresh challenges', especially as he has a tendency to 'become bored quite quickly', and a former TA had simply 'fancied a change'. Some participants had decided to retrain into a different career, to pursue further study, or to devote time to caring responsibilities. Therefore, not all aspects of change were problematised by the participants in this study.

In addition, the 'easy or predictable', routine and structure of schools was identified by some teachers as being particularly suited to autistic people, especially when they have agency and control. One teacher stated that working in a school is 'a nice routine' and another that having 'complete control' over her environment, as afforded by the teaching profession 'made working life a lot easier'. Another teacher asserted that 'the structured day with a predictable timetable' is 'great' for her 'because I feel very secure about knowing who I will see and when', but that equally, there is still 'lots of scope for creativity in how exactly I want the lesson to go each time'.

Furthermore, when the right accommodations were in place, this was considered to have a considerable positive impact on participants' ability to do their work. One former teacher commented that, when he was able to work in the way that suited him, he was 'diligent' and 'effective'. A teacher stated that her school 'has a fantastic ethos of inclusion', and another education professional commented that some staff 'had been really thoughtful' in terms of their support for her working environment.

Mental health issues

The data indicated a significant correlation between the lack of support and the environmental difficulties autistic school staff experience in their work, and mental health issues and anxiety, leading to high levels of fatigue and even burnout. For some former members of staff, this was a reason for leaving the profession, as the job became 'soul destroying' for one teacher, and another teacher experienced a nervous breakdown. For a former TA, 'anxiety and large crowds' such as in the school assembly hall served to 'increase a sense of dread', meaning that, combined with other issues, it became no longer possible to do the job. Another TA was left feeling 'suicidal' after a difficult work experience, and a former teacher felt that ultimately, the working environment in different schools was 'harmful', leaving a sense of being 'traumatised, with little self-confidence'. Some former staff members were ultimately 'exhausted by demands' or 'burnt out' as a result of their work in schools.

Participants currently working in schools reported similar difficulties. One teacher, although now employed in a supportive school, had experienced 'several false starts, a breakdown' and had taken 'anti-anxiety medication' before getting to this point. At her previous school, poor management and a 'complete disregard' for the fact that she was autistic had led to 'massive issues, meltdowns, and probable PTSD'. Another teacher stated that support for mental health issues had been 'non-existent' throughout her whole career.

Moreover, the high level and complex nature of social interactions with adults proved particularly stressful and tiring, unlike participants' interactions with the children, which on the whole were viewed positively. A teacher wrote that although being 'fine with the kids', it is 'exhausting being a colleague' and that she struggles 'to understand the adults and some of their standards'. A TA complained of being 'mentally exhausted due to having to have so many social interactions with other staff' and another TA asserted that, as well as struggling with social anxiety and depression, 'there are many things (including sensory) that I find difficult about working with so many people'. Being exhausted, a TA stated, was problematic for home life too, creating a desire at weekends 'to hide away', despite having young children to care for. Meanwhile, a member of the SLT was on sick leave due to the 'bitchy and dishonest atmosphere in the school'.

While some participants had left the education profession due to these issues, some of those working in schools currently were experiencing impediments to their work and career progression as a result. One teacher was on the 'maximum dose' of antidepressants, keeping 'panic attack meds' in school, despite being on reduced hours, and so on less pay. Another teacher was due to step back from a class-based role for the second time in her career due to the risk of 'burnout', and a SENCO asserted that despite taking a demotion, she was still 'struggling'.

Ultimately, the need for help was not recognised, especially if the staff member appeared competent. According to a TA, 'sometimes the more capable you appear the harder it then feels to ask for help'.

Poor treatment of autistic pupils

For those staff in a SEND role, and particularly those working in an autism-specific role, there was evidence of frustration and a sense of injustice at the ways autistic pupils were sometimes treated, and this was also linked to their reasons for leaving the profession. One former TA wrote that she had left the education sector because she 'disagreed morally and ethically with a number of occurrences within the school' which had 'a negative impact on the autistic students'. Moreover, these injustices were reported to occur even in autism specialist settings. A former TA had stopped working in an autism-specific school, because the pupils 'were not supported as (…) they should've been', which was 'very distressing'. Another TA had left because of 'constant frustration' due to the 'pathology-based approach' in an 'allegedly autism specific school' where the pupils 'suffer bullying, ridicule and treatment that would be considered abusive were it to be inflicted on anyone else'. Similarly, a former teacher had done a single day's supply work in an autism provision which was 'the least autistic-friendly place imaginable'.

Current members of staff also shared these frustrations. A member of the SLT complained that 'schools have low expectations and little patience for children with autism', which is 'upsetting and frustrating'. Similarly, a current TA expressed frustration that 'autism awareness training' is 'led by non-autistics' who 'tend to say false and offensive things about autistic children' and make 'the ignorant assumption that no-one in the room will be autistic'.

Problems with revealing autism diagnosis

According to a question with pre-set options, 55% ($n = 27$) of staff no longer working in schools ($n = 49$) and 35% ($n = 35$) of those still working in a school ($n = 100$) said that no-one knew that they were autistic, and some participants, predominantly those who had received a formal or clinical diagnosis of autism, provided additional information on this point in the open question. Some had experienced derogatory reactions and prejudice once they had revealed their diagnosis and this had impacted negatively on their well-being and overall employment in the sector. A former TA asserted that he was 'never supported and thoroughly invalidated' after revealing his autism diagnosis, and 'set up to fail' from the moment he did so. This same TA also complained that he was 'not initially believed', while a former member of the SLT wrote that she was 'not believed to be autistic as a professional'. A former teacher said that one school where she had

worked had asked her not to inform parents that she was autistic, a factor that had contributed to her career being 'in ruins'. Indeed, this same teacher wrote that she is now unemployed and 'relying on food banks to survive', and an early years practitioner stated starkly that she was 'sacked after diagnosis'.

Current employees in the profession reported similar difficulties. An early years teacher who does supply work, feared not getting bookings if she was open about her diagnosis, a situation she can only manage by working part-time. A Head teacher felt that revealing his diagnosis would be 'a very positive message' for autistic pupils, but seems 'totally impossible', as doing so would both impair his professional standing and heighten his anxiety, he wrote.

This issue also impacted participants who were considering entering the teaching profession. A TA who was due to start a teacher training course was 'excited' but 'very worried' about disclosing her diagnosis because she had been 'mistreated in the past'. A former TA was also considering doing teacher training, and said that she would like to do this 'openly as an autistic teacher in training', assuming, she wrote, that autistic teachers are not 'banned' from the profession. However, she also feared the consequences of not sharing her autism diagnosis, meaning the necessary adjustments would not be put in place, leading to her being perceived as 'incompetent' and consequently 'dismissed from the course'. Indeed, a self-diagnosed teacher complained that he was 'regarded as an outsider' on his training course and reported that his tutor had tried to throw him off the course when he was struggling. Moreover, a participant who was a PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) student and 'openly autistic', found multiple barriers in the training process:

> …getting skills tests was discrimination nightmare, huge battles to get Disabled Students Allowance, training provider facing problems with schools not wishing to have me on placement etc. Great positive support from university tutors, but large prejudice (…) in schools.

This concern was reinforced by the prejudice and stigma revealed by colleagues when autism was discussed. One TA was unhappy with how school staff talked about and dealt with autistic pupils generally, meaning she had not felt 'safe' to disclose her own diagnosis for fear that she will be viewed 'in an unflattering light', thus impeding her career development. Similarly, a former TA felt that sharing her diagnosis would have had 'a detrimental effect' on how she was 'viewed and treated'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, some participants feared revealing or even pursuing diagnosis. A self-diagnosed teacher said that she would not seek a clinical diagnosis as she felt it would 'go against' her at work:

> I think that they would treat me differently and I wouldn't be given the respect I have now from other staff members or SLT.

Consequently, not revealing a diagnosis of autism was also associated with 'masking' or 'camouflaging' by some participants (Lai et al. 2017). A Head teacher asserted that sometimes he is 'very highly anxious' about his 'behaviour and actions' in case they accidentally reveal that he is autistic. According to other participants, having to hide being autistic at work, combined with social and sensory issues, contributed to their sense of exhaustion. One TA asserted that it is extremely tiring having to use 'a lot of social energy masking/coping in school', and for one former TA, 'looking like I knew what I was doing' led to a feeling of 'internalised shame'. Another former teacher was able to 'camouflage well', causing the school leadership team to mistakenly consider that everything was 'fine'.

This issue even impacted autistic pupils. A TA asserted that she had been instructed to try to ensure that autistic pupils performing in the Christmas show should 'not look autistic', thus reinforcing the message that to appear autistic in the school workplace is undesirable.

Positive experiences of revealing autism diagnosis

Some participants had a more positive experience of revealing their autism diagnosis, and this had led to better understanding and appreciation from the whole school community. One teacher wrote that 'being open about my autism diagnosis with staff, pupils and parents has been massively beneficial' and another teacher asserted that learning about his 'autistic nature' had in turn led the school to be more 'autism-friendly'. A TA wrote that the 'parents and pupils really appreciate my openness and honesty about my autism' and she considers that she can 'give honest feedback to colleagues about their classrooms and teaching methods without them taking offence'. This same TA had set up peer and sibling support groups for autistic pupils, which she described as 'amazing'.

Some of the participants, particularly those who were still working in schools and had felt able to share with others the fact that they are autistic, considered that they provide a positive role model for colleagues, parents, and autistic pupils. A teacher stated that she feels she has 'a responsibility to better educate people and provide a role model for autistic children' and a TA asserted that 'sharing my experience with pupils helps them so much'. Another TA wrote the following:

> What I do love though is autistic kids' reactions when I tell them I'm autistic. They always receive it well and want to know about how I cope and about my experience. We also gain a bond like suddenly we're all in the same club.

Participants considered that sharing with pupils the fact that they were autistic could 'reassure them about their own future prospects', and also provide their parents with 'a positive vision that their own autistic children can achieve'.

Facilitating inclusion

Despite experiencing communication difficulties in aspects of their work in relation to colleagues, a number of participants felt that they were particularly able to understand, empathise and communicate with autistic pupils and those with SEND. A former TA had 'struggled with colleagues and line managers', but placed a high value on her work with children. A SENCO asserted that she was able 'to understand and communicate with students with additional needs on a different level to others', and a teacher considered that she has 'a great connection with the pupils, particularly those with ASC'. Another SENCO wrote that her autistic traits enable her to 'empathise with a group of pupils who much of the time feel different and seek acceptance amongst their peers or even just in their own minds'.

Indeed, unlike interactions with colleagues, which could be difficult, overwhelming and confusing, communication with pupils was positive. Being autistic enabled participants to 'understand and support pupils better', whether they have higher support needs than their own – 'I can extrapolate my own experiences to understand theirs' – or have similar difficulties:

> I find reading people very difficult, with this in mind I always have a very constant emotional state – they always know what they are going to get from me, so that anxiety is reduced. I also never shout as I hate noise. All this helps when supporting autistic kids. (current TA)

Therefore, as well as having a positive impact on the well-being of pupils with SEND, participants considered they aided their inclusion, progress and outcomes. One Head teacher asserted that despite not being open about being autistic, he is able to run an 'autistic friendly' school. A teacher wrote that she particularly enjoys supporting autistic pupils as they respond well to her teaching style, and a former teacher stated that her 'pupils always achieved, and did better because they felt safe and understood'.

Moreover, participants considered that being autistic provided them with specific skills, such as having 'a super focus', leading to 'positive and productive outcomes'. For some school staff, their work was their 'special interest', as exemplified by a senior member of staff who wrote 'I have found my niche; my job is my hobby!' Facilitating the inclusion of autistic pupils also enabled a sense of being valued and accepted by colleagues. For example, a teacher wrote that 'having an autistic viewpoint has made me (in my employers' view) very good with pupils who have any educational need, especially those with Autism' and a TA asserted the following:

> I feel that in my place of work, I can be completely myself and I feel that that has helped the children that I work with. It has also helped my colleagues have a better understanding about autism.

In addition, a number of participants reported being viewed as good at their work. One teacher wrote that she is 'regularly graded as outstanding in all areas', and a former teacher reported that she had been told she was 'an outstanding teacher so many times'.

This high level of skill was also linked to a sense of 'love' for the profession, a word which was used by 11 of the participants to describe their attitude towards their work. A former teacher had 'loved teaching and the classroom and got fantastic results from the kids' and a former TA had 'loved' working with children. A current TA said 'I love my job' and a teacher remarked 'I do love teaching'. Indeed, despite a number of difficulties and problems described by the participants, 22% ($n=32$) of those who responded ($n=146$) to a non-compulsory question about how much they enjoy their work in schools, rated their enjoyment at the highest level on a scale of $1-5$, and 41% ($n=60$) at the second highest level.

However, this expression of 'love' of the job was, for some former staff members, linked with assertions of sadness and regret for having left the education profession. One former teacher wrote that she was 'heartbroken' to no longer 'do what I love' and a former teacher was 'sad' about no longer applying her abilities in the teaching profession. Similarly, another former teacher was also 'sad' to not use her 'skills and autistic insight' in schools.

Discussion

The present findings suggest that autistic staff working in an education role in schools in the UK experience a number of impediments to their effective and successful employment in the sector. School managers were reported as failing to demonstrate understanding or to provide the accommodations autistic staff need to be able to carry out their work. This is despite the long-established rights of all adults to disability-specific support and adjustments in the workplace, and indeed at all stages of training, recruitment and continuing professional development (ADA 1990; CRPD [UN DESA] 2006; Autism Act 2009; Equality Act 2010; Della Fina and Cera 2015). Such rights are also concomitant with the social model of disability (Woods 2017), whereby the emphasis is on removal of barriers to participation (Berghs et al. 2019). Furthermore, no participants made reference to government support schemes for disabled employees such as Access to Work (House of Commons 2020b; DWP 2021), or the Work and Health Programme (DWP 2020), underscoring perhaps the contested nature of such schemes (Scholz and Ingold 2020).

According to the WHO (2010b, 6), the definition of a healthy workplace is one where employees are able to work in a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being'. However, issues such as noise, busy

environments, multiple and last-minute changes, – already well-established as impacting negatively on autistic pupils (Menzinger and Jackson 2009; Wood 2020b) – were also shown to take their toll on a number of participants. These circumstances resulted in high levels of fatigue or even burnout (Raymaker et al. 2020), a reduction in working hours for some, an unwillingness to seek promotion opportunities, stepping back from senior roles, or even leaving the profession altogether. Furthermore, despite a growing body of research into autism and employment (Burgess and Cimera 2014; Hedley et al. 2016; Sarrett 2017), and a developing awareness of the detrimental impact of certain work spaces on autistic employees (Lorenz et al. 2016; Feinstein 2019; Vincent 2020) and those who work in the university sector (Martin 2020), the failure to consider the needs and experiences of autistic school staff who labour within the same environment as autistic children represents a major gap in the literature.

Significantly, some participants in this study reported poor attitudes towards autistic pupils, even in putatively specialist education environments. This not only resulted in high levels of distress for those participants, or in their departure from certain settings, but reinforced a fear of sharing their diagnosis. Uncertainties over revealing diagnosis are similarly reported in studies focussed on teachers with LD (Valle et al. 2004; Vogel and Sharoni 2011), teachers and trainee teachers who are dyslexic (Riddick 2003) and on the employment of autistic people in the UK (Martin, Barnham, and Krupa 2019; Vincent 2020; Romualdez et al. 2021). For the participants in this study, being unable to share the fact of being autistic could result in 'masking' or 'camouflaging' autistic traits, a process found to be stressful, exhausting and to have a negative impact on self-esteem (Lai et al. 2017; Cassidy et al. 2020).

The combination of a lack of support and understanding from managers, environmental impacts, poor treatment of autistic pupils, and dilemmas over sharing diagnosis resulted in significant mental health difficulties, as reported by many participants, a finding of particular concern. This reflects not only a growing awareness of the high levels of mental health issues faced by autistic people (Cassidy et al. 2014; Hallett and Crompton 2018), but underscores the urgency of addressing the ongoing issues of prejudice and stigma, as well as the failure to provide necessary supports for the autistic adult population (Camm-Crosbie et al. 2018). These findings also suggest that the many years of awareness-raising campaigns (Ahmed et al. 2018), increased rights (CRPD [UN DESA] 2006; Autism Act 2009; Equality Act 2010) and significant research into autistic pupils, have not resulted in sufficient improvements for autistic employees, particularly within the school education sector. In addition, given the high proportion of female participants in this study and in the education sector in general (Department of Education 2020; UNESCO (United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organization) 2020), it must be considered if existing autism and employment support

schemes are suitable for all genders (Sung et al. 2015; Taylor, Henninger, and Mailick 2015).

Nevertheless, we also found, encouragingly, that some participants had positive experiences of sharing their autism diagnosis with the broader school community, and had been more valued by colleagues, pupils and parents as a result. Some of these participants considered they could also serve as role models for autistic pupils (Riddick 2003; Lawrence 2019), and provide reassurance to parents that one day, their own child could fulfil a professional role. Therefore, notwithstanding difficult pathways into the profession, teachers with disabilities can demonstrate great empathy towards disabled pupils, and facilitate their inclusion through innovative teaching methods drawn from their own, sometimes problematic, educational experiences (Neca, Borges, and Pinto 2020).

Participants in this study held posts across the mainstream and special school sectors, and a range of roles and subject specialisms was represented. This suggests that, whether or not in a SEND role, autistic school staff could be facilitating inclusion in varied ways, as well as making a broader positive impact on school life by dint of autism-specific skills (Scott et al. 2017; Vincent 2020) and specialist interests (Hendricks 2010; Koenig and Williams 2017; Grove et al. 2018; Goldfarb, Gal, and Golan 2019). Autistic staff can also promote a greater understanding of autism across the whole school community, a factor considered essential if the inclusion of autistic pupils is to become a reality (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Pellicano, Bölte, and Stahmer 2018). Indeed, not all aspects of the school environment were found to be problematic, and many participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction or even 'love' for their work, a perspective redolent of the association of autism with a 'passionate mind' and intense interests (Lawson 2011; Wood 2019a). Teachers in particular identified that the routine of schools could be very suitable for autistic staff, and a number of participants reported being rated highly in their work. Nevertheless, teaching assistants, who arguably lack agency (Sharples, Webster, and Blatchford 2015), appeared to particularly suffer from changes over which they had no control, and were also impacted by issues concerning poor pay and insecure working conditions.

While research into various support schemes for autistic adults in the world of work has had mixed results (Hendricks 2010; Hedley et al. 2016; Remington and Pellicano 2019), appropriately targeted programmes have been found to be beneficial, leading to an increase in permanent contracts, higher pay and a decreased reliance on state benefits (Howlin, Alcock, and Burkin 2005; Mavranezouli et al. 2014; Scott et al. 2017). These appear to be particularly effective if the multiple factors that can impact autistic employees are taken into account, including the nature and format of job applications, interviews, transport issues, the difficulties created by excessive noise levels and distracting stimuli (Lorenz et al. 2016; Nicholas et al. 2018;

Vincent 2020), and the availability of mentoring (Milton et al. 2017; Martin, Barnham, and Krupa 2019).

Moreover, some studies also report less tangible, but equally important benefits of supporting autistic employees, such as a contribution to the diversity of the workforce, increased understanding of autism, and promoting a culture of inclusion (Howlin, Alcock, and Burkin 2005; Scott et al. 2017). These issues underscore the fact that discussions about disability and employment should be uncoupled from ideas about costs, productivity and commodification, and aligned instead with principles of social justice (Gould and Harris 2012; Mladenov 2016; Centre for Social Justice 2017). From this perspective, legislation is acknowledged to be vital, but nevertheless of limited importance if not combined with more fundamental values (Nieuwenhuis 2010). Moreover if, on the basis of justice in education, one of the principal roles of educators is deemed to be facilitating the autonomy and agency of children in school (Brighouse 2002), then we must ensure that their teachers are not denied these same rights.

Limitations and future directions

As one of the first studies of its kind into autistic school staff, this research has limitations. The survey only ran for four weeks, and the self-selecting sample may not be representative. This study also suggests the need, in future research, for broader methodological approaches, in countries beyond the UK, and to focus more specifically on the different roles autistic education staff hold in schools. Furthermore, considerations of pupil and parent perspectives on the value of autistic educators would constitute an important addition to this area of research.

Conclusion

The lack of research into autistic school staff represents a significant gap in the field, which this study begins to address. While some issues, such as difficulties with communication and dealing with social complexities, as well as autistic strengths including attention to detail, persistence and a strong work ethic, have been highlighted in broader literature on autism and employment (Scott et al. 2017; Vincent 2020), there is a dearth of in-depth studies into the unique nature of the school working environment. This is despite the considerable research into the difficulties autistic children experience in schools (Ashburner, Ziviani, and Rodger 2008; 2010; Brede et al. 2017), and the well-established rights of disabled employees (ADA 1990; CRPD [UN DESA] 2006; Autism Act 2009; Equality Act 2010). This indicates that legislation alone has not enabled autistic employees to flourish at work, resulting in 'a

tremendous shortcoming and a waste of human potential' (Hendricks 2010, 131). How can we hope to effectively include disabled pupils if we do not support disability, diversity and inclusion in the school staff? Furthermore, this study reveals the need for greater consideration of the needs of autistic teachers in training programmes, and for school leaders to be provided with guidance on how to support neurodiverse staff across the workforce.

A preoccupation with the costs of the autistic population and an impairment focus in relation to employment, has meant that the particular strengths and needs of autistic professionals have received limited attention (Richards 2012; Moore, Kinnear, and Freeman 2020). Encouragingly, our study indicates that, when autistic educators are understood and supported, they can make a unique contribution to schools, facilitating the inclusion of pupils with SEND, being role models for autistic pupils, and providing expertise across subject specialisms and diverse roles. We must therefore do more to understand, support and enable the recruitment, training, professional development and well-being of this important, but heretofore overlooked, population.

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