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Second special edition on autism and education

Welcome to the second special edition, which focusses on good practice in education of autistic people. Education is conceptualised broadly and encompasses the whole age range from early years into adulthood. It is necessary to bear in mind that autistic children become autistic adults and autistic pupils, if they are lucky, become autistic students. If they are even luckier, they go on to being autistic employees engaged in satisfying careers. These things should not be a matter of luck and we are reminded in more than one of the articles about the principles which underpin the 2010 Equality Act and UN Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Children and Families Act (CFA 2014) emphasises the importance of transition to adulthood and continuing access to education up to the age of 25 for disabled young people. Only those with “the most complex requirements” have access to the protection of an Education and Health Care Plan which is meant to facilitate a smoother transition between educational phases and into work or further education (although often fails in practice). The CFA fails to mention university as a destination post-school and this is problematic as growing numbers of autistic people are progressing to higher education.

Contributors to this special edition include autistic graduates some of whom, including the co-editor of this special edition, have gone on to gain doctorates. A particular strength of this volume is the inclusion of the authentic voices of autistic people and this principle underpins the work of the editors. We both operate within the context of university and The Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) and recognise the privilege of our employed status. Many autistic researchers (including PARC members) are not as fortunate because of the many barriers to employment encountered by autistic people, including those educated to the highest level.

Editors have only included work in which autistic voices are prominent. This principle applies to all aspects of our own research and we both strive to ensure that autistic researchers are properly remunerated for their expertise.

Common themes emerge within this volume and coalesce around the idea that autism should be viewed positively and holistically rather than as a set of deficits which have to be addressed and somehow fixed. The requirement to create positive learning environments is emphasised throughout and specifically discussed in practical terms both in the training on inclusive practice and sensory school papers. Sensory concerns present in the learning context are highlighted as an environmental barrier which needs to be understood and addressed in order to facilitate a positive learning environment for autistic learners.

While the positive learning environment idea may seem obvious, readers are reminded that unhelpful deficit model stigmatising discourses around autism are widely available. This concern is covered effectively in the paper that explores the experiences of educational professionals working with autistic children and young people in Poland that draws links between inclusive practice and social/neurodiversity models of disability, and the paper which considers self-advocacy and self-determination of autistic students. In the article on the impact of training of educational staff, the recommendations include being cognisant of the world views of autistic people and aware of the ways in which individuals perceive the world. Similar considerations are also echoed within the sensory school paper. Training interventions for staff which include authentic autistic voices are recommended and this is echoed in the

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paper which considers the sensory environment of the school. Interventions without understanding what is going on for the individual are inherently flawed and the editors would argue unethical.

Lifelong education is of interest to the editors and the volume would have benefitted from the inclusion of an article which considers this point in detail. Many autistic students are over 25. The majority of autistic doctoral students are over 25. We are also interested in transition to the world of work. Barriers to employment persist even for highly educated well-published autistic academics and this is a particular concern for PARC. *Advances in Autism* is working on a special edition which focusses on the workplace and we look forward to contributing.