

Guest editorial

Damian Elgin Maclean Milton and Nicola Martin

The Editors of this special edition (Professor Nicola Martin and Dr Damian Milton) have worked together extensively and have shared values when it comes to education. We are advocates of universal design for learning (UDL) and inclusive practice which encourages and supports everyone to fulfil their potential. In order for this to become a reality the culture of the setting, the people within it and all aspects of the environment need to be sensitive to the requirements of all learners. Autistic pupils and students are the focus of this publication but we want to avoid the danger of singling out people with this label very specifically because often what works for autistic learners works for everyone. UDL principles demand planning for diversity and belonging rather than problematising and othering some individuals, often because of ableist assumptions that difference is a nuisance to accommodate.

Diversity adds value in our view and this perspective is shared by the contributors to this publication. Nobody thrives if they are faced with negative stereotyping, chaotic environments and unsympathetic responses. Labelling behaviour as challenging, rather than working out what the individual is feeling and how best to assist them, is from our perspective, counterproductive and inhumane. Intervening without adequately understanding what is going on for a person is not effective and we have not included articles which come from an arguably unquestioning behaviour modification orientated standpoint.

There is a wealth of research informed by autistic people which points to the harm caused by trying to steer individuals towards the “mythical norm” with scant regard for the impact on their wellbeing. We have included papers which consider the sensory experiences of autistic learners and how best to address issues of sensory overload which may well be causing them distress. “Indicators of distress” is a term we prefer over “challenging behaviour”. Autistic people have described distressing experiences far too often at every stage in their educational journey.

Included within this edition are papers which involve autistic researchers. Neither of us would consider editing a publication in which autistic voices were absent. We believe in lifelong learning and that school, colleges and universities are not the only places in which education happens. Papers which reflect on learning beyond the classroom and beyond compulsory education are included. Asking autistic researchers to comment on their own experiences of university provides useful insights which have the potential to impact positively on practice.

The collected papers in this volume speak with a similar ethos, with a focus on inclusion and mutual understanding. In research conducted by Milton (2017), autistic people often prioritised using the interests of learners to help within a secondary school setting, echoing the work of previous autistic scholars such as Dinah Murray and Wenn Lawson. This priority is further highlighted by the paper by Frederik Boven included in this special edition. Boven indicates how the passionate interests of autistic people can become a source of academic strength, yet warns they can also interfere with learning and may require specialist provisions.

It is also important to think about how those who do not communicate via speech can share their wisdom and this may well be the focus of future contributions. Creativity is required in order to make learning motivating. Examples of creative approaches are included such as in the context of Drama teaching and the facilitation of a safe space for mutual understanding and communication between autistic and non-autistic people, utilising Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. This paper by Jane Gurnett highlights the issue of sensory overload and how this can impact on autistic people within a learning environment and subsequently upon social interaction.

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Learning should be highly motivating and learners need to feel a sense of belonging in order to thrive. Autistic learners may develop deeper engagements with aspects of learning which they find particularly thrilling and argument presented here suggest that this is something which should be encouraged and built upon. Our perspective on autism and disability is influenced by social model thinking, and have no interest in any sort of “cure autism now” (or actually ever) perspective. We thus prefer social model language such as the term “disabled people” rather than “people with disabilities” but have respected the North American preference for people first language in the article by Baker *et al.* which challenges the negative assumption that autistic learners should be excluded from bilingual education and flags up issues of intersectionality. The paper by Hoy *et al.* tackles a commonly talked about issue for autistic learners of transition, in this case from primary to secondary school, yet does so by analysing qualitative data from multiple stakeholders.

This publication illustrates good practice in education in which autistic learners are thriving and contributing. It also showcases good practice in research in which an evidence base is developed upon which to make decisions about how to work effectively with learners. As editors of this special edition, and as being deeply involved in the work of the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC), we were pleased to see the paper by Searle *et al.* addressing the potential benefits of this approach when researching the experiences of autistic university students. The findings of this study indicated that respondents thought it was important to be interviewed by autistic researchers through their shared understanding, facilitating positive feelings and a sense of rapport in the interview process. This paper and that of Gurnett indicate the barriers to learning that can come from breakdowns in mutual understanding, or the “double empathy problem” (Milton, 2017), but also, along with the other papers in this collection, show how such understandings can be improved, and how autistic people can feel a sense of belonging within learning environments as a consequence.

This publication is not exhaustive and we hope to edit further special editions focussing on education. It is important to remember that globally there are many disabled pupils who do not access school, and university is not available in the main to disabled people living in poverty in the majority of the world. Also, as PARC illustrates, a university education to PhD level in the UK is no guarantee of employment commensurate with attainment and ability for successful autistic academics. We hope we have scratched the surface effectively and that there will be more to follow. Thank you to everyone who has contributed and to Professor Eddie Chaplin who has steered us through this process.

Reference

Milton, D. (2017), *A Mismatch of Salience: Explorations in Autism Theory and Practice*, Pavilion, Hove.