

Are mainstream primary teachers adequately trained to communicate with pupils with autism?

Perspectives from parents and teachers

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this mixed methodsE research was to seek both parent and teacher perspectives regarding whether teacher training in primary mainstream education is effective when it comes to support for pupils with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), with a specific focus on effective communication.

Questionnaires were used to gather data from both groups. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes, which aided in formulating conclusions and recommendations for teacher training regarding inclusive education for autistic pupils. Although the sample size was small, the key findings of this study showed that (1) the majority of teachers who responded felt that they had not received sufficient initial instruction regarding support for those with ASC, leading to a lack of confidence and perceived competence when it came to communication with autistic pupils, and (2) the majority of parents who responded did not feel that education is inclusive for their autistic children. Parents and teachers had differing perspectives about the communication methods used by mainstream schools. The study concluded that it is essential for both parties to work collaboratively in a meaningful way in order to maximise communication support.

KEYWORDS

AUTISM

COMMUNICATION

INCLUSION

TEACHER EDUCATION

ENGLAND

1. INTRODUCTION

In England, 1.57 million pupils have Special Educational Needs (SEN), representing 17.3% of all pupils (DfE, 2023b). For those who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in primary or secondary schools, the most common stated need is Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC): 32.2% of pupils with an EHCP are recorded as having autism as their primary need, equal to 116,000 pupils (DfE, 2023b). There has been a marked increase in the number of pupils with autism across the wider United Kingdom, with an estimated 1 in 100 UK children having a diagnosis (BMA, 2020). Over 70% of autistic pupils in English schools are in mainstream settings, with the rest attending specialist education, being home-educated or out of education altogether (NAS, 1921).

Autistic pupils are twice as likely as those who do not have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) to be regularly and unlawfully excluded from school for a fixed term (Guldberg *et al.*, 2021). They may be isolated, subject to discrimination (indirect and direct) and stigma. Autism has often been conceptualised around issues with the social interaction and communication skills of the person, and this is reflected in diagnostic manuals, for example, APA (2013). Little (2017) found that some teachers imply that autistic pupils themselves create a barrier to social inclusion as they do not 'fit in'. An increasing amount of research, for example, Sheppard *et al.* (2016) adopts a different, non-deficit approach and suggests that these barriers could, instead, relate more to mutual misunderstanding between people of different neurotypes. Issues with communication and interaction can lead to challenges throughout education and beyond: there is a vulnerability for anxiety disorders and depression for autistic people (Cage *et al.*, 2018) and also for the development of mood problems and chronic stress, often related to social communication challenges (Oakley *et al.*, 2021). Autistic females commonly fly

'under the radar' compared with males (Egerton *et al.*, 2016: 3): they may be less easily identified due to internalising or masking their difficulties and may possess a tendency for better social skills (Hebron & Bond, 2019). It is common for autistic individuals to be undiagnosed, isolated and stigmatised (Fox *et al.*, 2017; Goodall, 2018). The demands of mainstream schooling can be considerable, and when combined with pressures to meet the needs of large groups of very diverse pupils, teachers can find it hard to support autistic children effectively (Cook & Ogden, 2022).

1.1 AIMS AND HYPOTHESIS

'Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education' (Freire, 1970, pp. 73–4). Brignell *et al.* (2018) agree that learning to communicate effectively is essential, noting that parents, peers and teachers may not understand the individual communication requirements of autistic children. Challenges with communication can lead to behavioural difficulties, poor academic achievement and a reduced quality of life, especially for those with limited or 'non-standard' verbal communication strategies. The focus of this undergraduate research project was on training for mainstream primary teachers regarding communication with autistic pupils and whether it was perceived as adequate by parents of autistic children and by the teachers themselves. It set out to identify perspectives from both groups in a region of southwest England. The hypothesis was that parents and teachers would have differing views regarding the type and the quality of current school provision for autistic pupils' communication development.

Teachers in England must meet a set of Standards (DfE, 2011) and most will follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). All will need to adhere to legislation, including statutory guidance on inclusive support for pupils with SEND

in the shape of the SEND Code of Practice 0 to 25 years (DfE & DoH, 2015). This code emphasises the need for information-sharing and positive home-school relationships, yet research, for example, Azad *et al.* (2018) suggests that parents and teachers remain concerned about the level of communication with each other, are reluctant to ask the other for more involvement, and feel frustration when the other party does not trust their expertise or value their views. The recent SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023a) makes it clear that staff training around support for autistic pupils, and building parents' trust and confidence, are scheduled as priorities.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Autism is a complex neurological spectrum condition that is often misunderstood, especially as autistic traits present differently for each individual (Ruzich *et al.*, 2017). The diagnostic process, completed by autism specialists, is complex and challenging, hence the arguably tedious and lengthy assessment process (Thabtah & Peebles, 2019). Lack of awareness in schools regarding ASC can perpetuate myths and misconceptions such as the notion that autistic individuals always have a 'special talent' (John *et al.*, 2018, p. 845). Studies suggest that teachers' knowledge, training and awareness around autism is limited (Falkmer *et al.*, 2015; Harrison *et al.*, 2017), not just in England but globally (Gómez-Mari *et al.*, 2021). Potential reasons for this, explored by Ravet (2017) regarding Scottish schools, relate to a lack of opportunities for student teachers, limited access to training and also to autism specialists. Ballantyne *et al.* (2022) found inconsistency in autism knowledge among teaching staff, identifying five themes reflecting barriers to inclusion: knowledge, support, training, management of autistic characteristics and parental involvement. In addition, there is no evidence that supports the

notion of a single intervention that will meet the needs of every autistic learner (Bond *et al.*, 2016).

The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) states that all teachers are teachers of SEND. The Carter review of the quality and effectiveness of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses (DfE, 2015) recommended that SEND should be included in a framework for course provision. The ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) adhered to this suggestion, stressing the need for quality-first teaching adapted to the needs of every pupil. However, in England the number of different pathways into teaching and differing personal experiences of disability and SEN means that it is difficult to generalise regarding the depth and scope of an individual's preparation for teaching pupils with SEND, including those with autism in particular. In addition, the Code, the Teachers' Standards and the ITT Core Content Framework deliberately do not detail teaching approaches specific to particular additional needs.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research was approved by the institution's Ethics Committee, and throughout the project the University's ethical procedures were adhered to. Following a comprehensive risk assessment, the level for this research was deemed low. Requirements for participant anonymity, data protection and storage were followed (BERA, 2018).

A mixed methods interpretivist and comparative approach was used, one that sought to integrate quantitative and qualitative data within the same research study in a flexible, but intentional, way (Åkerblad, 2021). Mixed method research draws on the potential strengths of both, offering the opportunity to explore diverse perspectives (Shorten & Smith, 2017). Separate questionnaires for parents and teachers were designed with a mixture of Likert-scaled and multiple-choice questions. Alongside this, qualitative, open-ended questions were added to

offer richer detail for conclusions and the chance for participants to offer personal accounts.

Thematic analysis was chosen to identify common themes and patterns in the qualitative participant responses. Thematic analysis is an increasingly valued and commonly used method when analysing qualitative data (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). It was chosen as this was an undergraduate dissertation project and there are benefits for a first-time researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Thematic analysis does not require theoretical and technical knowledge compared with approaches such as grounded theory. It provides flexibility because it does not require adherence to a singular paradigm such as positivist, constructivist, interpretivist and realist approaches (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Castleberry & Nolen (2018) discuss the five steps of thematic analysis: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding. Initially, each completed questionnaire response was read through several times for familiarisation. Then, the quantitative data were graphed (see Figures 1 and 2). The qualitative elements were compiled into one document and key responses were noted via coding. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative data were transferred to a single document and reassembled into a table as themes. This was then cross-checked with the original participant responses to ensure accurate representation of the data.

3.1 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN AND PARAMETERS

As it is so common for there to be delays in obtaining a formal diagnosis of ASC (Crane *et al.*, 2016), the research also included contributions relating to pupils with traits of autism but without a formal diagnosis.

It proved notably difficult to gather a reasonable sample size from the limited response from local primary settings to emails and phone calls, likely due to the considerable pressures caused by the Covid crisis. Due to this, the teacher questionnaires were also shared on

social media platforms. Social media was also used to contact parents (via online parent support groups). After three months there were eight parent and six teacher responses, meaning that, even with the social media push, the study gathered a smaller sample size than was initially expected. It was requested that teachers who responded should be working professionally within a defined geographical area in the southwest of England. They also had to be qualified, although they could have completed their training in another region (location of training was asked). For the parents, their child had to be within the 4–11 age range (primary school) in the same defined geographical area as the teacher participants.

Both sets of questionnaires were generally similar in their design and scope. The questionnaire for parents included a question regarding the sex and age of their child, providing a potential opportunity to analyse a possible link between age of diagnosis and parent satisfaction of teacher communication competence. Teachers were asked about their teacher training experiences, whereas parents were asked about teacher training in general. Both groups were given the opportunity to add any further comments that could aid the study.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All parents stated that education is not inclusive for those with autism. Although they reported that interventions and support strategies were recommended on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and EHCPs, parents showed a lack of satisfaction with the support on offer. This would suggest that the need for urgent review and reform of the current system indicated by the government is timely: however, the very small sample size of this study needs to be taken into account. In addition, asking parents and teachers if they feel like education is inclusive leaves much to interpretation as they may have personal and very different definitions

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of what inclusivity means to them: teachers may see inclusion in terms of adherence to SEND policies and statutory requirements, maintenance of sufficient academic progress and data-driven decision-making, whereas parents may view inclusion in terms of staff flexibility, child happiness and social acceptance. This may help to explain why 50% of the teachers stated that education is inclusive for autistic pupils, indicating greater optimism than parents.

Analysis of responses showed that the males with a diagnosis had been diagnosed earlier than the females, reinforcing the view that because females are able to socially reciprocate or ‘camouflage’ social behaviours to a higher degree, they may experience delayed diagnosis (Wood-Downie *et al.*, 2021).

Both teachers and parents perceived limited initial formal teacher training on autism or SEND. Teachers felt that they entered the profession with some basic knowledge regarding SEND and SEND support, but a lack of preparedness was indicated. According to the teacher responses, 100% had engaged in in-

service training post-qualification. Some parents suggested the need for mandatory training on autism in particular, with a specific focus on the importance of adapting communication methods based on the needs of the child.

More than half of the parent group were unaware of staff using any particular communication strategies with their autistic child (Figure 1). It should be noted that this could indicate issues with communication between the setting and the family regarding what actually happens at school, rather than a lack of use by staff of the strategies.

However, all teachers indicated the use of visual timetables, the Picture Exchange Communication System® (PECS®) and Makaton (Figure 2). It may be that visual timetables and Makaton in particular, being employed very broadly in many settings, are part of the general classroom systems and are perhaps not discussed with parents as they are not viewed as autism-specific. This parallels Cook & Ogden’s research (2022) that found that mainstream settings tend to adopt generic strategies for inclusion rather

than the individualised provision that is required.

Interestingly, only 33% of the teachers were aware of ‘Alternative and Augmented Communication (AAC)’ (despite indicating that they use strategies that fall under this catch-all term), only 50% were aware of Assistive Technology and only one participant said they were aware of colourful semantics (Figure 2). This may indicate that training (ITT and in-service) around the range of specific communication strategies for autistic pupils could be improved, particularly methods using technology to promote independence and employing psycholinguistic approaches to speech and writing. It would seem to highlight, too, that the umbrella terms ‘AAC’ and ‘Assistive Technology’ may not currently be employed a great deal in training scenarios and in settings, despite some of their methods being used regularly.

75% of parents felt that their child’s teachers were not adequately communicating with their child in school. When asked to provide further explanation, there were some detailed

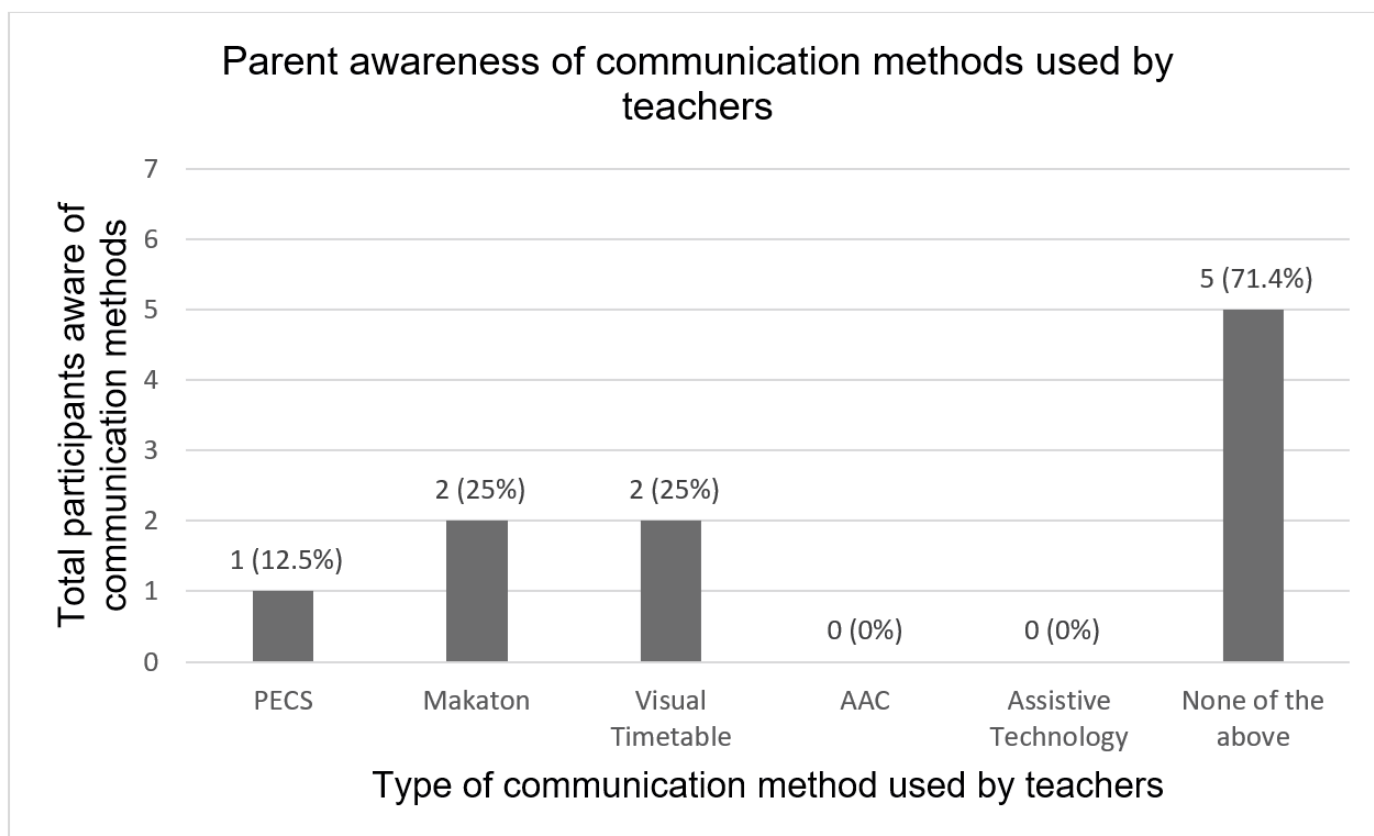


Figure 1 Parent awareness of communication methods used by teachers

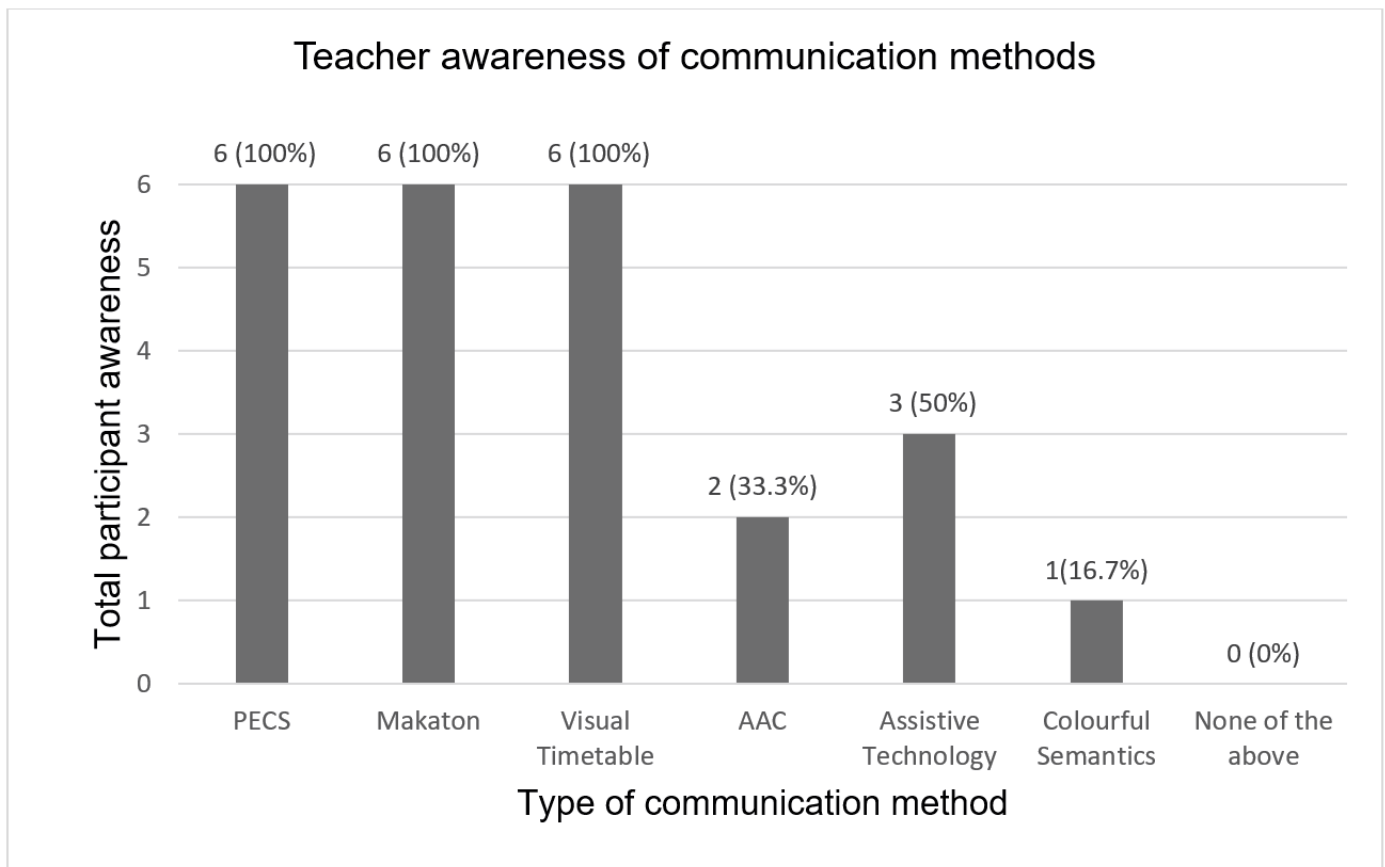


Figure 2 Teacher awareness of communication methods

accounts of personal experiences. For example, one parent identified that it was impossible for teachers to have been communicating effectively because the child was diagnosed in their last year of primary school and nobody recognised that they were autistic beforehand. There are implications here regarding both teachers' capacity to recognise autism (and other communication needs) and also the degree to which formal diagnosis has an impact both on provision and a parent's view of their child's educational experiences. Another parent stated that teachers forget or overlook their autistic child's communication and processing needs because they are capable verbally: the degree to which autism affects these areas differs widely. One parent identified that the school environment includes changes at short notice without explanation to their child, resulting in mixed messages and negative school experiences. Some parents discussed how teachers had failed to provide calm 'breakout spaces' for their child, with staff trying to attempt verbal communication

when the pupil was distressed and unable to participate in dialogue. One parent shared a concern that their child's needs would not be met until their difficulties became more obvious in school, despite trying to explain to staff the issues experienced by the family in the home environment.

One teacher wrote of a requirement for specific training on Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). However, this is not currently recorded as a separate diagnostic condition or a subgroup of autism in nationally and internationally recognised diagnostic manuals. Schools and parents may find themselves confused or in disagreement regarding 'labels' and 'profiles' that do not fit current diagnostic criteria (and, hence, that may hinder the acquisition of an EHCP).

Teachers recognised a need for further training on the importance of communicating with autistic children and also indicated a need for more communication with parents and carers. This links with guidance from NICE (2017)

and also the statutory requirements of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) regarding collaborative working and effective communication with families.

Training is often viewed in the literature as crucial for the successful inclusion of autistic pupils (Hayes *et al.*, 2013), and for others with additional learning needs, and the views of both parents and teachers in this study correlate this. It is unrealistic to expect that all beginning teachers will have a deep and nuanced understanding of every aspect of SEND and inclusive practice, pointing to the need for effective – and ongoing – in-service support for all teachers. The responses from the parents appear to indicate a need for schools to highlight to families the details of any specific training undertaken by Early Career Teachers (ECTs) and support staff, and any ongoing in-service opportunities, in order to reassure families that all teachers are suitably equipped to support the progress of their children. This would possibly reduce the chance that parents underestimate the skills possessed by professionals. The research findings

from the teachers indicated views about ASC that countered each other: some teachers displayed a tendency to view autistic children as a homogeneous group, but there were also stories of feeling disempowered and lacking in confidence unless they had training on every single aspect of the various subgroups of autism, something that ITT providers would likely be unable to fulfil. The need, therefore for efficient and ongoing training once in post to support the specific needs of their current classes would appear to be paramount.

Significantly, the teachers reported issues that were wider than communication: one noted the tendency of mainstream school environments to be over-stimulating for autistic pupils. Another was more damning in their view: 'Data is put before need.' Both groups of participants agreed that the current EHCP system is not working: some parents referred to getting a Plan for their child as a battle, with a lack of communication between professionals, alongside the lengthy application process and waiting list highlighted as considerable frustrations.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Every child deserves an education that includes and supports them. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) has been in place for some time now, and there is awareness from all stakeholders that this has not been a 'silver bullet' and that provision for pupils with SEND requires change and considerable financial commitment.

The DfE has indicated the need for autism awareness training, for more transparency with parents, for greater emphasis on pupils' communication skills and for greater individualised support for SEND in general (2023a). A common theme in the study – for both teachers and parents – was that education is currently not as

inclusive for autistic pupils as it should be, mirroring the government's commitment to prioritising ITT and professional qualifications, partnerships with autism organisations and also improvements to the capacity of the specialist workforce (DfE, 2022). Initial and post-qualification training focusing on how to implement effective communication with autistic pupils using research-based strategies is arguably of paramount importance: a number of teachers in the study lacked awareness of well-documented methods and well-used terminology. The need to better understand the more subtle indicators of autism in females was also indicated. That said, trainee teachers may underestimate their knowledge of ASC (Vincent & Ralston, 2020), so it could be that the teacher respondents in this study were rather better equipped to support autistic pupils than they realised. In addition, although some teachers stated they had no formal training on autism support it is quite possible that it did indeed take place, but the event had been forgotten or the teacher was not in attendance. The latter is worth consideration as student teachers may pass their training and achieve Qualified Teacher Status yet not attend all taught input. In addition, unqualified teachers are employed in some settings.

A question regarding the specific teaching pathway of participants would have helped this research to give a picture of any possible differences across the provision spectrum, as trainee teachers' experiences regarding taught elements remain so variable. A useful future exercise would be to compare the perspectives of individual ITT providers and trainees regarding the quantity, quality and content of input regarding communication with autistic pupils. A larger sample size across different geographical regions of England – and also of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – could also yield useful comparisons. Future research

involving the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews alongside purposeful sampling would allow the collection of more detailed information from both perspectives, allowing exploration of personal and perhaps sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

This study confirmed the hypothesis that both sets of participants would differ in their views regarding both the quality of current provision for autistic pupils' communication development and the possible areas of improvement in relation to training for teachers. It appears that greater sharing by schools of details about the pre- and post-service training of their staff, and the particular communication methods used in their classrooms, is necessary in order for parents to feel secure that staff are employing effective research-based, individualised, support. As successful necessitates involving parents in a meaningful way and utilising their considerable knowledge, it would also seem pertinent for schools to pay great attention to any successful speech, language and communication methods used at home by families and also to involve parents and carers when planning training for staff.

Perhaps ironically, given the focus of study, the research did not ascertain the views of the pupils themselves. Research that listens to autistic children regarding best support, via whichever communication system works best for them, is an avenue that would yield significant findings and that would correspond with the drive for purposeful and pupil-centred practice. Ultimately, theirs are the voices that matter most. ■

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