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Girls with autism in the classroom: hidden difficulties and how to help

As a woman diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and as a teacher and writer in the field of Special Educational Needs (SEN), it was perhaps inevitable that, sooner or later, my personal and professional interests would collide and my attention would turn to investigating girls with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) and their experiences of school.

The project

67 girls and women took part in this project. Ages ranged from 14 to 50+ and all had a diagnosis of an ASC (the majority identifying with the labels of Asperger's or High Functioning Autism). Some had been diagnosed while at school, others not until adulthood. Data was gathered via face-to-face interviews, email and an online survey. Participants were asked about both the positive and negative aspects of their school experience, as well as suggestions that they would like to make to educators on how to improve the school environment for girls with ASC.

Research findings

Positive experiences

All the women who took part in this project reported having strengths which they were able to put to good use in the school environment.

Many identified certain subject areas in which they excelled or were particularly interested in, ranging from Maths, Science and History to English, Art and Languages. Other women spoke about being able to focus for extended periods and having detailed knowledge of certain subject areas, especially if linked to a special interest.

Some noted very positive memories of extra-curricular activities, again, especially if these were linked to a special interest, such as art or music. Enjoyable interests mentioned included:

- chess club,
- domino society,
- taking part in foreign exchange trips
- helping to organise books in the school library.

Finally, many also identified personal characteristics which enabled them to do well in the school environment:

- attention to detail
- well-behaved
- ability to focus
- followed instructions
- good at reading and researching
- logical thinking
- being kind and helpful
- neat and tidy work
- a good imagination.

Implications for schools:

- Girls with ASC have many interests and strengths which can benefit them in the school environment
- These need to be recognised, encouraged and accelerated to support achievement and promote self-esteem
- Special interests can also be a way to meet like-minded people.

Negative experiences

Friendships and relationships

By far the biggest difficulty reported was in the area of friendships and getting on with others.

Difficulties related to this category included:

- wanting/needing to spend time alone but not having the opportunity
- struggling to meet like-minded people
- difficulty making and maintaining friendships, and relationships with classmates
- feeling especially isolated at break and lunch times
- being teased or bullied
- difficulties with group work.

All of these difficulties contributed to feelings of loneliness, isolation, being a 'social misfit' and related feelings of depression, worry and anxiety.

Implications for schools:

- Bring structure to the unstructured. Provide a range of activities for pupils at break and lunch times, and provide clear guidelines for group work. Allocate specific roles and make expectations clear.
- Make it 'ok' and 'normal' for students to use a quiet space when they need some time alone. School can be exhausting for those with ASC but there are also many other students who will benefit from knowing they have quiet spaces to use.

Learning and communication

Other difficulties reported relate to the areas of learning and communication. Many different preferences were noted, showing how no two girls with ASC are the same.

- Some felt able to communicate better in writing rather than through speech, finding the dynamics of class discussion too fast-paced to keep up with
- Others said they worked extremely well independently, and disliked group work.
- Some learned best by teaching themselves, while others valued the support of assistants or having catch-up classes.

Implications for school:

- Allow and encourage different ways of communicating and learning in the classroom (through discussion, writing, video, one-to-one and visual means).
- Work to students' strengths. Don't expect every student to participate in the same way but ensure that every student is given the opportunity to build skills supportively (e.g. by giving an oral presentation with a classmate, or recording it on video instead of standing in front of the class).
- "The all-singing, all-dancing lessons I had in school, and my daughter faces now, do not suit us all. Some of us have quieter ways of learning, and need time."

Interpreting the world

Finally, many girls and women in this study reported that difficulties at school related to how they interpreted the world.

- Some noted sensory differences: not being able to work with background noise, the smells and noise of the cafeteria, and feeling uncomfortable with staff who had loud voices
- Others identified difficulties with authority and rules, stating that rules had to make sense to them and be consistently applied, otherwise this caused confusion, frustration and increased anxiety
- Several respondents also identified that difficulties at school were not necessarily directly due to their ASC, but because of related issues – feeling misunderstood, low self-esteem, feeling depressed and lonely, and generally not 'fitting in' with the majority. Many said that they felt invisible, shy, quiet and overlooked.

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Implications for schools:

- “Mean what you say and say what you mean”
- Have clear and consistent rules and expectations.
- “Make us feel good about ourselves, help us to accept that this is the way we are and that is how other people are. Show us why misunderstandings have occurred without judging us. Allow us to have our own goals, targets and hopes, not ones that have been imposed by the school or other people.”

Conclusion

This is a very short summary of a larger project. Perhaps the conclusions that can be made from the research is that the best thing educators can do for girls with ASC is to find out how they learn best. Allow girls to work to their strengths, and encourage an atmosphere which embraces difference, making it the norm to be unique.