

Children with additional support needs: inclusion, advocacy and equity.

A). My chosen ALN to research is autism.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), inclusive education means that all children, whoever they may be, can learn together in the same school, one example is children with learning needs. The UNESCO Salamanca statement calls on all the international community, agreeing that all mainstream schools should accommodate all children by implementing practical and strategic changes (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE), 2018).

However, Cutting (2016) notes that statistics reveal between 2010-14 there was a 35% increase in the number of autistic children excluded from mainstream schools for a fixed period of time, stating that the numbers doubled in the last 3 years for pupils being permanently excluded. One of the main reasons for the exclusions made by schools was persistent disruptive behavior. Going forward, suggestions made for avoiding future exclusions included training for staff for better understanding and awareness for children with autism, with settings having a genuine inclusive ethos that values autistic children equally.

However, a study by Hodkinson and Devananda (2011) concluded that many teachers struggled to understand inclusion both in theory and in its practical application, and although efforts were supportive in trying to make the initiatives work, schools that gained most success included staff with greater levels of training which were high.

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) states that children with disabilities should not be discriminated against, therefore be able to be educated in mainstream schools. Research, however, suggests that children with disabilities have lower educational attainment than other children and are more likely to leave school earlier and with fewer qualifications (Mattingly et al. 2010).

Early intervention and diagnosis are key to supporting children with autism. One main reason for identifying a child's additional learning needs (ALN) is that it enables the child and their families to gain support, empowering them by providing

additional resources to enable them to benefit from their education. However, research by Dillenburger et al. (2016) recognizes professional practitioners are best placed to identify early signs of autism and have the invaluable opportunity to put in place targeted and effective early interventions. Although reports reveal staff training within the UK fall considerably below the recommended requirements and do not meet international standards of best practice. These findings have detrimental impacts on the quality of life and mental health for service users and staff.

Koegel et al; (2014) agrees with effective interventions for improving children's outcomes, commenting on how up until 1980's it was common practice to institutionalize people with Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Before the availability of comprehensive interventions, the outcomes for children were poor, research shows that interventions starting at their earliest points prevent significant negative consequences on children with ASD. However, Koegel et al; (2014) also comment on most, but not all children being included in regular education classrooms.

Early identification enables earlier interventions to be put in place therefore giving children the best chance to reach their full potential. However, it has been noted that the process of getting a diagnosis varies from country to country, sometimes even within the same country. Awareness about autism differs from nation to nation, and behaviors of children with autism may differ cross culturally. Therefore, diagnosis is a further challenge, for example children are encouraged to make eye contact with others in most European American families. However, establishing direct eye contact and interacting with others is considered a sign of disrespect in other cultures or communities (Bauer; Winegar and Waxman, 2016; Research Autism, 2018).

The research and findings about children's attainment and development of children between the ages of 3 and 7 years, collected by the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project (EPPE) highlighted the importance of good quality early years provision. The study also found that children most sensitive to the quality of provision are those children with SEN, emphasizing the role of preschool education as being an effective means of early intervention in SEN.

EPPE also demonstrated that better qualified staff offered richer learning environments, with lasting beneficial effects on development (Sylva et al; 2004).

National Health Service (2019) recommends next steps for getting a diagnosis through a visit to your GP or health visitor (for children under 5) or by speaking to your child's school special educational needs staff (SENCO) and asking for a referral for an autism assessment. According to Autism Speaks (2020) young children who receive the early interventions recommended have major long-term positive effects on symptoms and later skills. World Population Review (2020) agree, noting the rise in the cases of autism in recent years and stating that early diagnosis is key to improved outcomes.

Many children show symptoms of autism in early development by 12 months to 18 months of age or earlier, however many parents are not aware of the early signs and do not start asking for advice/support until they don't start talking at a typical age. Children can be diagnosed as early as 2, although not everyone is diagnosed early in life (National Autistic Society, 2018). Identification later may lead to parents and practitioner's ability to identify and diagnose. Koegel, et al; (2014) suggests including parents in the early interventions at the earliest point, working together to significantly improve and benefit the child and parents' wellbeing. A study by Resch et al; (2010) agrees with inclusive practice, noting parents' access to information and support for family greatly improved positive parent wellbeing.

However, according to research by Hayes and Watson (2013) data gathered using The Parenting Stress Index, demonstrated that parents of children with ASD experience most stress. It identified that children on the autistic spectrum far outweighed the stress parents experience with children of other needs for example Cerebral Palsy and Downs Syndrome when put all together. These results echo the positive effects targeting the reduction of parenting stress as an early intervention. Providing parents with the skills/information and tools to overcome potential future challenging behaviors, can also facilitate positive changes in the behaviors of the child with autism.

Recent research by Russell (2020) however, reveals how even after a child's autism diagnosis, parents are still having a long wait to gain the support they need. Over 70% of the parents in a survey of nearly 4000 participants reported feelings of being

completely alone, without guidance/signposts and follow up support to sources such as speech and language therapy. However, in response to the findings of parents of autistic children facing sometimes years of anguish waiting for a diagnosis and support, the autism charity developed a free online guide/toolkit full of practical tips and checklists to support parents navigate their child's autism journey in their early years.

B). Barrier experienced and the impact this may have.

Wall (2010) describes autism as a lifelong developmental disability that can affect children and adults in a variety of ways and to varying degrees.

One example of a barrier that a child with autism may experience is the practitioners limited understanding and knowledge about autism. Exclusion rates in mainstream schools for children with autism is higher than those without special needs (Cutting, 2016). As noted by Wall (2010) without professional practitioners having good knowledge and understanding/training about all aspects of the condition of autism, practitioners will lack the ability to provide/support appropriately for the child. The impact of this could further inadvertently compound the child's difficulty through lack of knowledge.

(UNCRPD) agree, through training and investing in teacher training for inclusive education, teachers will be better prepared to support children and their families within an inclusive education system that enables them to work towards their full potential (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2012).

According to Marks (2017) children with ASD attending mainstream schools are being disadvantaged as it is unlikely, they would reach the same level as their peers who do not have additional support needs. Marks also continues to describe Montessori teaching and learning methods as beneficial to children with ASD, however he also comments on a heightened awareness needed from staff, for example of appropriate materials/resources used that are not suitable for use with children with ASD, indicating the need for further specialized training in the subject.

Lack of knowledge in these sensitive areas could cause distress for a child with ASD as many may suffer with hypersensitive skin for example and have difficulty processing sensory information, this could further impact on their behaviour.

National Autistic Society (2017) agree with the importance and need for further training of staff within early years settings, noting the differing sensory needs many children on the autism spectrum experience. Through autism training professional practitioners can learn more about the wide range of behaviours that a child on the autism spectrum may exhibit, therefore enabling them to plan the right support for the individual child's needs.

Fidler (no date) also comments on the many difficulties and behaviours autistic children present with, noting that teacher's knowledge and understanding about special needs children may be challenged. She also highlights teacher awareness, for example, and the hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli that children with autism may have. Without practitioners' prior knowledge, strategies will not be in place to help prevent triggers of inappropriate behaviours, and children with ASD may be impacted by such sudden noises or bright lights, this impact would be frightening and upsetting for the child. Therefore, Fidler presents how a prepared Montessori learning environment/staff can benefit children on the autistic spectrum, including Autism.

However, research by Danner and Fowler (2015) reported Montessori teachers had less knowledge about inclusion and special education professional development than non-Montessori teachers. The survey questioned a total of 250 Montessori and non-Montessori general education early childhood teachers, and attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities and their access to the curriculum. The important difference the study revealed between the two groups of teachers involved the knowledge about inclusion component. The study also highlighted the teachers with the greatest professional development in special education, revealed a positive change in knowledge about assistive technology, although not in skills or practice of that knowledge. Further professional development and additional teacher preparation would therefore benefit practitioner's knowledge on the topic of inclusion, to develop the skills and attitudes of Montessori teachers on the inclusion of children with disabilities.

According to a study by Glazzard (2011) evidence suggested that some teachers displayed negative attitudes towards learners with special educational needs, which led to a negative impact on the school's commitment to inclusion. One of the key

barriers to inclusion that was identified from the study was a lack of training for practitioners. The study also revealed a consensus from many of the practitioners who felt they lacked the training to educate children with special needs, leaving them to feel inadequate in their confidence and abilities. Glazzard also notes the study highlighted the need for practitioners to develop a shared understanding of what inclusive practice should look like, as failure to recognize the principles of inclusion lead to failings on their responsibilities for the education of all children. Therefore, practitioners should reflect on their own values in relation to the education of children with special educational needs.

A report by Buck (2018) comments on a 4-year-old child being excluded from school 10 times in just over a year while waiting for a formal diagnosis for autism. On being told that the child had many autistic traits, recommendations were put forward for the child to attend 4-day placement in a different, calmer setting. Buck notes that many children on the autistic spectrum may become overwhelmed in school due to loud noises and bright lights. This creates feelings of distress and becoming overwhelmed in the situation, resulting in behaviour that seems naughty or disruptive, which goes on to the child being unfairly excluded from school. Buck reports how training for key professionals including the school workforce should form part of new autism legislation, and that better understanding would avoid discriminating against pupils on the autism spectrum.

National Autistic Society (2018) reports that of the 17% of autistic children that have been suspended from school, 48% of these children had been suspended 3 or 4 times. The statistics show that autism affects more than 2.8 million people inclusive of their families in the UK, noting that without the understanding children who are on the autistic spectrum, and their families are at risk of being isolated and developing mental health problems.

However, a report by the University of Cambridge (2017) comments on Professor Simon Baron-Cohens speech to the United Nations, which highlighted that the human rights of people with autism are still not being met. Professor Baron-Cohen revealed that even with the (UNCRPD) being adopted in 2006, people with autism are still being failed and they do not enjoy human rights to the same extent as everyone else. These failings create barriers to their involvement in society and to

their autonomy. Professor Baron-Cohen further commented that one example of human rights being denied of people with autism, was the right to education. Rates from the National Autistic Society demonstrate this, with 1 in 5 children with autism being excluded from school, for whatever the reason for exclusion, this is depriving children with autism of the right to education.

C). One example of support for a child with ASD in an early years setting is 1:1 support.

Some children with ASD may need additional help and support with education. Dewis Cymru (2020) states that most children can be educated in mainstream settings with additional support in the classroom. Department for education (DFE), (2018) notes that early intervention may benefit children who have special educational needs, putting support in place early on can reduce risk factors and increase protective factors in a child's life. This help early on can provide children with the support needed to reach their full potential and support their mental health. (NSPCC, 2020).

However, according to Nutbrown et al. (2013) those delivering early intervention programmes in early years settings should be qualified, have a good understanding of child development and the specific needs of the individual child that their supporting. Nutbrown et al. also highlighted the importance of practitioners having a solid understanding of special educational needs and disability, and having access to continuing professional development, so they are always on top of their skills and up to date with best practice.

There is great emphasis by Nutbrown et al. (2013) on raising standards and enhanced professionalism in the workforce and attracting the best people into the early years sector. However, despite recognizing the importance of high-quality staff being critical for positive life trajectories for children, evidence suggests there is insufficient regard for its workers. A Study by McDonald; Thorpe and Irvine (2018) revealed considerable challenges to developing and maintaining a high-quality workforce in many countries. The main reasons noted for shortages in staff into the early years' workforce was low wages, heavy workload, and lack of career progression paths as well as low social status. The effects of low pay and status can affect teaching morale. Ferguson (2019) agrees, reporting how nurseries are

failing vulnerable children amid a shortage of staff due to lack of training and low morale.

Kaye (2016) however notes the benefits of a Reggio Emilia approach within our mainstream early years settings and how we focus on holistic development, with all practitioners given the title of educator, therefore there is no hierarchy, this could be a stepping stone towards staff morale as all practitioners need to feel they are valued and supported in order to give their best to the children.

The role of a key person is described by Kelly (2015) commenting on the importance of good communication with the child and parents and building positive relationships ensuring continuity of care for the child thus supporting their emotional wellbeing. Within an early years setting and with one to one support, which may often be their key worker previously, children with ASD are able to thrive under the routine and structure of the day. Research by Ryan and Quinlan (2017) agrees with the premise of parents working closely with a designated key worker/one to one, thus lessening the burden associated with high levels of advocacy. The research from the study concluded parents need for greater collaboration between practitioners/parents and professionals, with a keyworker being a key factor to fulfilling the requirements and building partnership working between practitioners and parents.

Within an early years setting, our practitioners work is stemmed from Montessori's influence, building individual programmes of learning through regular observations, practitioners have a good knowledge of the child and their interests, providing learning opportunities based on their unique needs. Having observations in place to identify, gives practitioners abilities to pick up on a child with ALN (Isaacs, no date; National Autistic Society, 2017).

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