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A Case Study Investigation into the Impact of Teaching Assistant Support for an Early Years Child with Autism in a Mainstream School Setting.

Autism Spectrum Disorder [hereafter ASD] is an additional learning need, which is seen a lot within the early years. ASD is a complex, multifactorial development disorder typically emerging in infancy or toddlerhood, which is marked by social isolation and unusual development patterns. Autism can sometimes result in challenges in social communication and interaction, along with restricted, repetitive behaviours and interests. (Joon, Kumar and Parle, 2021).

The National Health Service [hereafter NHS], (2022), highlights the characteristics which can be displayed by young children with autism. These signs could be struggling with change, avoiding eye-contact, withdrawing from play and a delay in holistic development. The National Autistic Society (2025) discusses that a core characteristic of autism is the social interaction and communication differences. This could be, limited, delayed or no speech, preferring not to make eye-contact, not engaging in a two-way conversation, find following 'social rules' confusing and being confused by metaphors and idioms, meaning they do not always understand hidden meanings or inference, resulting in them taking things literally.

As discussed above, children with autism might struggle with changes that are made to their day-to-day routine. Lawrence (2019) highlights how the school environment can be a trigger to children with autism. As the school day can be unpredictable, a child might think their next lesson is maths, however due to a change in circumstances, their next lesson is now P.E. This can cause a child to become stressed and anxious. However, it is also recognised that the rules which are set out in schools can be reassuring for children with autism. This can be down to a set of rules stating how to behave, which avoids the confusion of 'how to behave' for children with autism (Lawrence, 2019).

Teaching assistants [hereafter TAs] are extra adults, alongside the classroom teacher who support and guide children through school. They undertake jobs that are set out by the classroom teacher, in order to help achieve a child's full potential. The Welsh Government (2025) states that teaching assistants are a valued and integral part of the education workforce. Most TAs spend their time in classrooms

supporting teaching and working directly with pupils, however there are also TAs who support other roles within schools to ensure the school is running efficiently.

TAs will also have the job to support children with additional needs, such as autism. It can be seen that children with autism spend most of their time receiving support from TAs (Wood, 2019). Unlike teachers, TAs do not benefit from paid preparation time and therefore end up making up lessons and support on the spot, which results in poor practice. TAs are not only expected to function as teacher to children they have also been seen running intervention groups and supporting other children in the classroom. TAs spend their days being interrupted by teachers and other children. This results in the one-to-one time which a child with autism is allocated, being interrupted meaning the individual child is missing the optimal support that should be provided (Wood, 2019).

TAs are individuals who have a passion for helping and working with kids to help them thrive. The BBC (2025) highlights the qualification that can be achieved in order to become a TA, which is a Level 3 diploma or a T-level in education (England only). However, it states that to become a TA you can also do an advance apprenticeship, volunteering or even apply directly to a particular school.

For a parent recognising characteristics within their child that link to autism, the first thing they should do is speak to a professional like a GP, health visitor or special educational needs co-ordinator at the child's school. However, an assessment into whether the individual child has autism or not, can only be done by autism specialists. This process is not always easy and can be exceptionally long (NHS, 2022).

For best practice, TAs who are supporting children with Additional Learning Needs [hereafter ALN] whilst adhering to professional standards, must maintain up to date and current training. The ALN Code for Wales (2021) states that all teaching practitioners have a responsibility for their own professional learning and development, undertaking regular professional learning and training in relation to ALN.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legally binding agreement which is signed and agreed by over 150 countries which outlines the rights of every child, no matter their abilities, race, or religion (UNICEF, 2025). Article

3 of the UNCRC highlights that all organisations concerned with children must work towards what is best for every child. All teaching staff must work collectively in order to provide the best support that is needed for the individual child. This includes children with autism (Welsh Government, 2021).

As suggested above, it is important for TAs to abide by the professional standards for teaching assistants. In England teaching assistants should demonstrate an informed and efficient approach to teaching and learning, promote, support, and facilitate inclusion, use effective behaviour management strategies constantly and communicate effectively and sensitively with pupils (UNISON, 2018).

To provide the best possible support for children with autism, it is important that there is support put in place as early as possible. Early intervention is identifying and providing early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes (Early Intervention Foundation, 2023). Research has found that early intervention for children with autism, are more likely to have major long-term positive effects on symptoms and later skills. ASD can be diagnosed in children before the age of two when a child's brain is still forming and is more changeable than at an older age. Due to this, treatments have a better change of being effective in the long-term (National Institute of Health, 2021).

Therefore, this study will be exploring the impact of teaching assistant support for an early years child with autism, in a mainstream school setting.

Methodology

Research is a detailed study of a specific subject, especially in order to discover new information, or reach a new understanding (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

The research will be based in a primary school in South Wales where the researcher works. The participants of this research will be the school's head teacher, class teacher, teaching assistant and a child with autism in the researcher's class which is a year 4 mixed ability class of thirty-three children (seventeen girls and sixteen boys). Consent will be gained from all participants. The research will be based in the researcher's usual classroom to ensure that there is a familiarity with the setting and participants to ensure that the research is unobtrusive and reduces the likelihood of the Hawthorne effect. The child participant will be selected after discussion with the head teacher and class teacher. The child will be aged between 8-9 years and will have a diagnosis of autism from the NHS and will have an IDP (Individual Development Plan). Initially, consent forms and a study outline will be given and discussed with the adult participants. Within this meeting, a child participant will be identified on the basis of being in the class and having autism. The child's parents and carers will then be contacted with the consent form and study outline, giving them the option to allow the child to participate in the research or not.

As mentioned above, the Hawthorne effect is when there is change in the subject's normal behaviour, after acknowledging that their behaviour is being watched or studied. As a result of the Hawthorne effect, the data that is collected during these observations could be disrupted as it is not a full representation of their behaviour (Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2014). Alongside the Hawthorne effect, there is a risk of the Halo Effect, coming into play using this research. The Halo Effect is a cognitive bias in impression formation, where the overall judgement of a person's traits is influenced by the perception of just one specific attribute (Gabrieli et al., 2021). Within this research, to avoid the Halo Effect, the researcher will be familiar with the child and will only be focussing on the impact of a teaching assistant to the child.

When a small group of individuals are chosen to represent a whole, it is known as sample method (Rai and Thapa, 2015). The individual child with autism will be chosen specifically to be part of this research, which is also known as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling represents a group of different non-probability

sampling techniques. Purposive sampling relies on the individual researcher, when it comes to selecting the units, such as the people, events, and organisations (Rai and Thapa, 2015). In this research, the researcher will specifically choose the child to take part, due to them being diagnosed with autism.

There are two types of data that can be collected. The data that will be collected, as part of this study is qualitative data. Qualitative data is non-numeric information. Other examples of qualitative data are methods such as interview transcripts, diaries, answers to open-ended questions, audio-visual recordings. The benefit of qualitative research is that it gives voice to the lived experience which offers researchers a deeper insight into a specific topic or individuals experiences (UK Data Service, 2025).

The other type of data that can be collected is Quantitative data. Quantitative data means using measurements and numbers in order to formulate test ideas and results. Qualitative data usually involves summarising numerical data, in order to find differences and associations between sets of numbers (Wilson, 2017).

Mixed methods is a powerful strategy that is growingly used within early childhood research and combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. Using mixed methods provides the researcher with a far more complete understanding of the research topic, rather than just using one approach. Within mixed methods research, there is sometimes movement between different approaches and methods, due to methods being conducted before each other, which can provide a more in-depth research outcome (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). This research will be mixed methods and uses a focus group with the adult participants and in class observations by the researcher of the child and the teaching assistant.

One method of research that will be used is observations. Observations are more than just seeing what is happening, they are about taking children seriously, hearing what they have to say, respecting their interpretations and valuing their imagination and ideas (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). The Welsh Government (2008) also discussed how observations are key in informing practitioners of children's achievements and identifying next steps for learning. There are several types of observation methods/types. The observation method used in this research will be 'Target Child.' This is when the observer only focusses on one child for a set period

of time, and where they are able to record activities, interactions, and speech to understand their development (Care Learning, 2024). The observations for this research will take place in the morning sessions between 9.30 and 10.30am and last for half an hour. The researcher will observe the child and the TA working together. Whilst this is being conducted, the researcher will be sitting at an adjacent table so that they are able to note what the child and TA are doing and the child's levels of independence. The same procedure will be done when the child is working independently so that the researcher can note what the child was able to do on their own. In order to avoid the Hawthorne effect, the researcher will keep the same position throughout all three observations.

The other method of research that will be used as part of this study is a focus group. A focus group defines itself, as it involves a focus on specific issues, with a predetermined group of people, participating in an interactive discussion. Thereby it is a focus group (Hennink, 2014). Wilson (2017) discusses the positives for using focus groups as part of research. This is that they are useful for revealing through interaction, the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and feelings of participants. This is also because they provide an insight into multiple and different views on the focused research, by engaging in a small group of individuals. In this study the focus group research is based on semi structured questions. Semi-structured questions are questions that are based on a topic, containing important questions regarding a certain topic, however there is not a script, and the questions might vary due to the level of information that is given to the researcher (Morgan, 2016). In this study, the researcher will start off the interaction by asking the head teacher, class teacher and teaching assistant about their teaching experiences and then later developing onto questioning them on their own personal understanding of autism.

Triangulation is a widely used strategy for strengthening the validity of qualitative social studies. It is based on the principle of confirming findings through the use of multiple methods. One key feature of this strategy is the potential threats to the validity of conclusions that can be caused due to a bias of one source (Wilson, 2017). One of the strengths of mixed methods research is the triangulation of several types of qualitative and quantitative data. This might be when both qualitative and quantitative data sets agree, it is clear that there is an agreement between two different methods but complementary sources of data (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). It has

been argued that there is a need for several types of triangulation when conducting qualitative research. Triangulation of various sources can mean the inclusion of multiple informants, such as interviewees and subjects under observation, it is thought that research like this provides more powerful findings (Wilson, 2017).

One way of measuring a child's engagement in an activity during observations is using the Leuven Scale of Engagement. The Leuven Scale of Engagement is a popular framework that highlights the degrees to which children demonstrate involvement in early education settings. The Leuven Scale is used as an observational scale from 1-5 which allows early years practitioners [hereafter EYP's] to assess the degree to which a child participates in an activity. Level 5 meaning the child's most involvement, and level 1 meaning the child's least involvement (MacRae and Jones, 2023). In this research study, the researcher will use the Leuven Scale when assessing the child's abilities and involvements with the assistance of a TA and when assessing the child's abilities and involvements when working independently.

Ethics

In order to conduct this research, the researcher will ensure that all steps taken are ethical. This section will demonstrate a critical awareness of ethical issues related to working and researching with and for young children.

In order for the researcher to include participants as part of their research. It is important that consent is gained, prior to the research starting. One part of this research involves adult participants. It is held that sane competent adults should be free to make their own decisions, therefore respect for the individual right to choose is at the core of ethical research. Consent needs to be informed, voluntary and competent. This means that consent is given in possession and understanding the relevant information, given freely and not as a result of pressure, and given freely by someone who is able (UWTSD, 2022, p.22). It is important that Voluntary informed and ongoing consent is understood and agreed with by participants and it is known that participants can withdraw at any point without needing to provide an explanation (BERA, 2024, pp.13). As part of this research, the researcher will make it clear to the adult participants what the research is about, why it is being conducted, who it is being conducted for and who is funding it, what the purpose of the study is and what will happen to results, what is expected from them if it agreed that they participate and how long it will take, and what anonymity and confidentiality mean in practice and an understanding that the participant does not have to participate but knowing that if they do participate, they have a right to withdraw at any moment. This is to ensure that the research aligns with University of Wales Trinity and St Davids [hereafter UWTSD] ethical guidelines for research (UWTSD, 2022, p.22). The researcher will recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason and understand that there can be no persuasion in order to make them continue as part of this research (BERA, 2024, pp.19-20).

The other part of this research includes the involvement of a child participant. Young persons aged 16-18 with sufficient understanding are able to give their full consent, however when research involves children under the age of sixteen, assent should be obtained by their parents or those in loco parentis (UWTSD, 2022, p.23). However, it is important that children themselves should be involved in the consent process. It has been suggested that children are capable of being involved in research and they

have a right to receive information, have their feelings considered, be listened to and to give and withhold consent if judged competent to do so (UWTSD, 2022, p.13).

The BERA guidelines highlight how principles of consent do apply to children and young people, just like adults. However, this is termed assent for those under the age of legal consent in the setting (BERA, 2024, pp.17-18). Within this piece of research, the researcher will consider the rights and duties of those who have legal responsibility for children, such as their parents or guardians. The researcher will gain consent for the child aged between 8 and 9, through the parent/guardian to abide by the BERA guidelines, ensuring that the child is aware of the research and it is confirmed by them also (BERA, 2024, p.18). The UNCRC displays the rights of every individual child (UNICEF, 2025). In order for the researcher to conduct this research with a child participant, the individual child must be informed of the right to withdraw from the research at any time, whenever they want to. The consideration for the right to withdraw for a child is the same as adults. The researcher will respect the decision of the child at any time where they decide to withdraw from this piece of research, allowing them to withdraw freely and under no pressure to continue.

Following BERA guidelines (BERA, 2024, pp.19-20).

Appropriate handling and treatment of participants data is required for the conduct of ethical research. The researcher will recognise the entitlement of both individual participants and institutions to privacy, which could involve anonymisation, pseudonymisation or employing 'fictionalising' approaches when reporting. When these approaches are used, the researcher must explain how and why they have done so (BERA, 2024, pp.22-23). In this research study, the researcher will not identify the specific school and will only refer to the participants as 'head teacher, class teacher, teaching assistant and child X.' The university as a Data controller and the researcher as a member of staff, have obligations under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 (UK GDPR) to ensure that the anonymity and confidentiality of all involved in research is done safely, and is followed at all times (UWTSD, 2022, pp.24-25). When an individual participates in research providing confidential information, the researcher must manage this in line with reasonable expectation. Confidential information should only be shared where there would be no surprise for the individuals concerned (UWTSD, 2022, p.15). In some circumstances, confidentiality may need to be broken, however the

participants will be aware of this as there will be a consent form provided, which will contain this information (BERA, 2024, p.24).

As part of this research the researcher will only ask questions which are related to the study and not ask personal questions. This is to ensure that there are no unnecessary questions which are brought to the participants, which is to avoid distress or upset to all participants involved.

As part of this research, it is important that the researcher acknowledges the data collected is safely stored and is used safely. The researcher is required to adhere to all legal obligations concerning the collection, storage, and use of personal data, in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and any subsequent legislation (BERA, 2024, pp.23-24). Researchers must obtain explicit consent from participants before collecting, storing, or sharing personal information with third parties (BERA, 2024, pp.23-24). In this research study, the researcher will obtain this consent from all participants by providing a consent form, containing all of this information, which will then be signed if they are happy to comply, and rejected if not. It is mandatory for to maintain accurate records, report any data breaches and demonstrate compliance with both the GDPR and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (BERA. 2024, pp.23-24).

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) plays a crucial role in supporting organisations across the public, private, and voluntary sectors by identifying individuals who may be unsuitable for working/volunteering with children. This is context, a child is anyone who is aged under the age of 18 (UWTSD, 2022, p.27). University staff and students who participate in research that includes one-to-one or otherwise unsupervised contact with children are subject to DBS checks. The necessity of these checks should be assessed by the researcher and their supervisor, considering the specific nature of the research activity (UWTSD, 2022, p.27). Due to the researcher conducting their research amongst children, the researcher will uphold an up-to-date DBS certificate which will be shown to all participants, to ensure that the researcher is suitable to undertake their study. This also provides protection for the researcher because they can make participants aware of the type of person they are, without withholding any information which can lead to incidences, especially when working with children.

The employers and sponsors have an ethical responsibility to safeguard the physical and psychological wellbeing of the researcher as well as the researcher themselves. Safety can be a particular concern in certain circumstances, maybe when research is undertaken in situations that are potentially risky. Researchers should be aware of the legal responsibilities as well as the moral duty of institutions towards the safety of staff and students (BERA, 2024, p.33).

To ensure that the University does not face any reputational risks, the researcher will conduct their research following all BERA guidelines and UWTSD guidelines which have been mentioned above.

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