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A Critical Evaluation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as an Additional Learning Needs.

Before commencing on my poster, I would like to discuss -

What are Additional Learning Needs?

According to Dewis Cymru (2020) and Welsh Government (2018) additional learning need (ALN) refers to any condition or circumstance that requires extra support to help a learner reach their full educational potential (Smith, et al. 2017). The new system by Welsh Government (2022) is more inclusive and person-centred, applying to all learners from birth 25 years old.

According to Welsh Government (2024) and Young (2020) These needs may arise due to:

- Learning difficulties such as dyslexia
- Physical or sensory impairments, like hearing or vision loss
- Social, emotional, or mental health challenges
- Neurodiverse conditions, such as autism or ADHD
- Language barriers and
- Medical conditions that impact learning

I wish to discuss my topic of Autism.

According to Mencap (no date) and Canavan (2016). Autism is a lifelong condition, often called autism spectrum disorder (ASD), it is referred to as a spectrum because it encompasses a wide range of experiences and challenges. While autism itself is not a learning disability, half of those with autism may also experience a learning disability.

ASD is not a one-size-fits-all condition according to Mayo Clinic (2018). Since it is a spectrum, everyone's experience can be vastly different.

Autism, is characterized by three key features that can affect how someone:

- Interacts with others in social settings.
- Communicates with others and

- Experiences and perceives the world around them (National Autistic Society, 2024).

The signs and symptoms can vary widely but according to NHS Choices (2019) and Mayo Clinic (2018) common signs in children may include -

Social Communication and Interaction difficulties -such as

- Avoiding eye contact or difficulty maintaining it.
- Difficulty understanding social cues or forming friendships.
Does not respond to their name
- Limited facial expressions
- Difficulty understanding others' emotions
- Prefers to play alone
- Delayed speech or loss of previously acquired language skills. Delayed repetitive language, or challenges in understanding non-literal language (Young 2007).

Restricted or Repetitive Behaviours such as

- Repetitive movements like hand-flapping or rocking
- Insistence on routines and gets upset with changes
- Obsessive interests
- Unusual reactions to sensory experiences such as sounds, smells, tastes, etc (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

Other Characteristics may include

- Delayed developmental milestones (language, movement, cognitive skills)
- Hyperactive or inattentive behaviour

Sensory Sensitivities: Over- or under-reacting to sensory inputs like sounds, lights, or textures (National Autistic Society, 2024).

According to the Mayo Clinic (2018) ASD can present differently in individuals, especially between genders, with girls often masking their symptoms to fit in socially.

Within school environments the concern would be passed onto the additional learning needs coordinator (ALNCo) who will arrange the collection of detailed history for an **assessment and diagnosis** (Sakhuja, 2024).

Welsh Government (2021b) claims there is a national agreed pathway for neurodevelopmental assessment and diagnosis services across all seven regions in Wales, this ensures consistency and quality in the diagnostic process.

A multidisciplinary approach is crucial in ASD diagnosis, as emphasized by the Welsh Government (2018) and Mathieson (2015). Input from close contacts, including parents and caregivers, helps capture behavioural variations (Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016).

According to Wearmouth (2017) and CDC (2024) key professionals in the diagnostic process include Paediatricians, Child Neurologists, Educational Psychologists, and Speech-Language Therapists.

Children under eighteen are legally protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC, (2022) ensuring their fundamental rights In Wales, the Welsh Government (2021a) allows children and parents to challenge ALN and Disability Discrimination decisions, with advocacy support available.

Dewis Cymru (2020) says support networks assist parents of children with ASD, while children have the right to express their views in decisions affecting them, often requiring guidance from caregivers or professionals.

The *ALN Code for Wales (2021)* and the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014* promote inclusive, individualized support, emphasizing early and ongoing assessment, particularly for non-verbal children with ASD.

Following Diagnosis, Sakhuja (2024) claims various support services are available, including health and social care services, advocacy, and preventative services.

Children with (ASD) face multiple barriers in education and social settings:

- Communication barriers report by the National Autistic Society (2024) are challenges in verbal and non-verbal communication, including limited speech and difficulty with gestures, can affect classroom and social interactions.

- Kogan & Boyle (2015) reports of social interaction challenges: Difficulties in understanding social cues can lead to isolation and peer relationship struggles, often worsened by limited awareness among teachers and peers.
- Sensory sensitivities: Heightened reactions to bright lights, loud noises, and textures can cause discomfort and distractions, impacting learning engagement (National Autistic Society, 2024).
- Wearmouth (2021) reports on educational barriers: A lack of individualized teaching methods and classroom modifications can hinder participation. The ALN Code in Wales promotes a graduated response to ensure appropriate support at every stage (Welsh Government, 2020).

However, Wearmouth (2021) and Doherty et al., (2022) says academic, and social challenges affect autistic children, with communication barriers impacting group work and peer relationships.

According to Howlin et al., (2004) though many have average or above-average intelligence, difficulties in communication, sensory processing, and emotional regulation can lead to academic underachievement, meltdowns, and withdrawal. Doherty et al., (2022) claims these factors contribute to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

Autistic social interaction is often misunderstood. Crompton et al. (2020) found that autistic individuals effectively share information among themselves, challenging traditional diagnostic assumptions. Studies by Williams, Wharton, and Jagoe (2021) confirm that autistic interactions are complex and nuanced, showing strong rapport and communication flow. Chen et al. (2021) supports this, demonstrating that autistic children form deeper connections with autistic peers, reinforcing the double empathy theory cited by Milton, Gurbuz, López (2022) suggesting social difficulties stem from mismatches between autistic and non-autistic individuals, rather than autism itself.

Kogan and Boyle (2015) The National Autistic Society (2024) and Armstrong *et al.* (2017) insist **on Support Strategy for children with ASD for Inclusive Education**. Including, differentiated instruction, they believe the use of teaching strategies tailored to individual needs, such as visual supports and structured routines, is vital for children with ASD.

Also, Douglas *et al.* (2015) says the use of Technology, Tablets, communication devices, and apps designed to support communication have proven beneficial for children with ASD in expressing themselves more effectively.

According to the Lovaas, 1987 study cited by ASD media (2024) behavioural Interventions is another suggestion. ABA is a well-established, evidence-based intervention that focuses on teaching socially significant behaviours through reinforcement.

Furthermore, Social Skills Training, Programs like PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) aim to improve social interactions by teaching children with ASD how to navigate social situations (Canavan, 2016). The use of sensory breaks, quiet spaces, and the provision of sensory tools can significantly improve focus and comfort in a classroom setting (Baker et al., 2008, Canavan, 2016).

Moreover, the inclusion of speech therapists, teaching assistants, and special education professionals, as recommended by the ALN Code in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021), can ensure that children with ASD receive individualized support (Bosanquet, 2021, NHS, 2024, National Neurodivergence Team, 2020).

Brown, (2021) and Crutchley, (2018) believe Non-verbal children with (ASD) encounter significant challenges in communication, education, and access to services, with verbal-based diagnostic and intervention methods often delaying essential support and increasing frustration. Pickard et al., (2018) claims Standardized curricula and limited training in alternative communication methods further restrict learning opportunities, while cultural and linguistic barriers contribute to disparities, particularly affecting disadvantaged children.

To address these barriers, Cihak et al., (2012) believes individualized support strategies are crucial in enhancing communication, social skills, and emotional

regulation. Key interventions include Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): Non-verbal methods such as PECS, communication boards, and speech-generating devices help children express their needs, reducing frustration and behavioural challenges.

Pickard et al., (2018) believes in Speech and Language Therapy (SLT): Targeted interventions using sign language, picture symbols, and digital tools improve functional communication and cognitive development, especially when introduced early.

The ALN Code for Wales (2021) advocates child-centered, individualized support, including IDPs for children with ASD. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 reinforces early intervention and cross-sector collaboration in education, health, and social services.

Moreover, Matos et al., (2022) and Nedungadi et al., (2023) suggest ASD diagnosis and support vary globally, influenced by culture, socioeconomic status, and healthcare access. Wealthier nations offer more diagnostic resources, while lower-income regions face barriers to identification and intervention.

In Conclusion

This poster examines the identification, barriers, and support strategies related to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as an additional learning need (ALN). It underscores the importance of a multi-disciplinary, individualized approach to diagnosis and support, particularly in alignment with the ALN Code in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023).

Key points include:

- Ongoing research is required to refine diagnostic tools and support strategies for ASD.
- Funding initiatives: The Welsh Government (2023) allocated £20 million in 2023–24 to improve learning environments for ALN learners, including sensory rooms, enhanced lighting, and better classroom access.

- Bangor University (2024) launched Wales's first postgraduate programme focused on ALN, addressing the demand for educators with advanced expertise.
- Inclusive support: Organisations like Sense(2024) advocate for ALN provisions that account for complex and multiple disabilities, emphasizing accessibility and inclusive teaching methods.
- Global education perspective: UNESCO (2018) promotes education as a tool for transformation, prioritizing gender equality and sustainable development through the Global Education 2030 Agenda.

Thank you for listening any - Questions

Are teachers being inclusive of children with ALN?

Answer

According to Pit-ten Cate *et al.* (2018) 'Teachers are tasked with addressing the needs of diverse children and many educators feel unprepared and, as a result, may be hesitant to integrate children with ALN into mainstream classrooms.

An article by The Guardian (2019) heavily criticised schools and Local authorities in England saying ALN were breaking budgets, and the parents complain that the schools are anything but inclusive (National Association of Head Teachers, 2021). However Welsh Government (2018) new guidance was Planning to increase access to schools for children with ALN.

Questions

How do parents feel about having a child with ASD or ALN?

Answer

Hayes and Watson (2013) Studies frequently indicate that families with children who have (ASD) endure higher levels of parenting stress compared to families with typically developing children or those with other disabilities.

However, Boyes Turner (2017) says the findings of a GL Assessment report in 2017, found parents to be 'Hooked on labels not on needs and that Parents are to blame for misdiagnosis of ALN influencing symptoms observed by what parents are saying.

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