

Facing the challenge: a review of autism education in England

Dr Glenys Jones
Autism Centre for Education and Research
University of Birmingham



Research Team

ACER Team:

- Dr Glenys Jones
- Dr Karen Guldberg
- Dr Mitzi Waltz
- Professor Rita Jordan

PLUS:

- Annette English (Regional Partnership work)
- Penny Richardson (Local Authority brief)



Role of the AET

- *'It ain't ignorance that's the problem – it's knowing so many things that ain't so'* (Mark Twain?)

- A key role of the AET is to disseminate **good, evidence-based information** about the autism spectrum and what makes a difference in terms of their education to:

children, parents, carers, families and those working with them



What constitutes good evidence?



- Positive reports from children and young people, their parents and professionals
- Data from well designed research studies
- Expert opinion – recommendations from experienced practitioners
- Positive outcomes in terms of school attendance, inclusion, employment, independence skills, reduced stress, quality of life

Many positive advances in the education of children and young people on the autism spectrum over recent years



- Increase in awareness and understanding of the autism spectrum amongst professionals
- Increase in outreach services to schools
- Many useful resources on the autism spectrum (books, DVD, websites)
- Many biographies written by adults on the autism spectrum give insights and strategies
- Increasing consensus on what makes sense in terms of interventions

Aims of the research



- To inform the work of the AET
- To identify challenges in the education of children and young people on the autism spectrum
- To examine the support provided to address some of these challenges
- To identify good practice and innovation across agencies and sectors

Research methods: January to April 2008



- Literature review and an analysis of recent guidance on the autism spectrum
- Questionnaires from, and interviews with:
 - Parents and carers across England
 - Professionals and providers
 - Children and young people on the autism spectrum
- An audit of training opportunities

Challenges in doing research



- Diverse population
- Confirmation of diagnosis; information on dimensions may be more important than diagnostic category
- Many children follow more than one intervention and staff change, and vary in their expertise
- Choice of outcomes – from whose perspective - researcher, practitioner, parent, the individual?
- Issues in assessment
- Most studies are short-term

Challenges for children and young people on the autism spectrum



- School is one of the most challenging environments they face (demands on social understanding; communication; flexibility and sensory processing).
- Taught by staff who may not know about the autism spectrum and misinterpret behaviours
- Response of the peer group (issues of friendship; bullying; isolation; reduced knowledge of what's OK/not OK)
- Is their perspective taken into account when planning and making decisions?

Challenges for parents/carers



- Finding an ally who understands their child and is keen to address their needs
- Gaining access to staff within schools to share ideas and concerns
- Educating the rest of the family (often child's father, grandparents and siblings)
- Living with their child 24/7 – and coping with and managing their range of emotional states

Challenges for practitioners



- Lack of knowledge on the autism spectrum
- Many competing demands on their time
- Ethos and support provided within the school from colleagues
- Opportunities to visit other schools and share ideas and strategies often limited
- Finding time to engage effectively with individual pupils and with parents/carers

Potential solutions for children and young people on the autism spectrum



- Practitioners need to gain their views on what is needed and what they value
- To focus on their strengths and interests and use these as motivators
- To facilitate friendships within and outside of school for those who are keen to have a friend
- To raise the understanding of the peer group in schools about the autism spectrum

Potential solutions for parents, carers and families



- To offer a range of options in terms of parent support and training in terms of venue, times, whether individual or group
- To genuinely listen and take account of what parents value and say they would like
- To encourage parents to bring friends or family to meetings and events
- To ensure good transitions and the continuity and consistency of support and strategies between settings and phases of education

Potential solutions for practitioners



- Resources on the autism spectrum which they can access easily (eg books, DVDs, Internet).
- Access to visiting staff who have expertise in the autism spectrum
- Development of a whole school approach and an ethos where staff can ask for advice and gain help from others
- Opportunities to gain knowledge from parents/carers on what works well at home
- Asking the child or young person what will help

New resources on the autism spectrum



- Inclusion Development Programme on the Autism Spectrum for all Early Years settings, all mainstream primary and secondary schools and students on Initial Teacher Training courses. (out in March 2009)
- www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/sen

Resource for health care professionals



- The NHS in Scotland has developed a website on the autism spectrum for all those who work in health (eg GPs, nurses, dentists, hospital staff). This can be accessed free at:
- www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/asd

Research that is needed



- To evaluate the benefits of different types of educational setting (eg mainstream; units; bases; special; specialist)
- To explore the impact of training on practice in schools and by parents/carers
- To develop ways of gaining the views of children and young people on the autism spectrum
- To identify factors which prevent some parents and families from accessing services
- To evaluate different models of outreach support and their benefits to schools and families

The full report on the research can be accessed at:



- www.nas.org.uk/aet
- There are also summary reports for parents and carers and for practitioners and a short leaflet written for children and young people.
