FRIENDS LIKE YOU: FRIENDSHIPS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS WITH ASD

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The aim of this research was to investigate the experiences and perspectives of friendship amongst mainstream Secondary School pupils with ASD.
STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

- Existing research
- Research questions
- Methodology
- Results
- Implications for EP practice
- Possible future research
INCLUSION

- Young people with ASD increasingly educated in mainstream schools (70% of all pupils with ASD; DSCF, 2008)
- A “complex and poorly understood area of education” (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008)
- Pupils with ASD are:
  - More likely to be excluded
  - More likely to be bullied
  - Likely to receive less social support from parents, classmates, and friends
  - At a greater risk of mental health problems
FRIENDSHIP

- Friendship supports development
- Tends to be a protective factor from bullying
- Better academic outcomes
- Contributes to overall wellbeing

- Is a significant factor in the lives of young people, with and without ASD
FRIENDSHIP IN PUPILS WITH ASD

- Recent review suggested:
  - Pupils with ASD likely to have fewer friendships
  - Less likely to see friends outside of school
  - Less stable relationships
  - More likely to have friends who also have ASN
  - Had some difficulty in identifying and defining friendships
  - Lower reported friendship quality

(Petrina et al., 2014)

- To parents, their child’s friendships are an important outcome measure (Petrina et al., 2015)
However...

- Much research covers wide range of ages
- Very focused on deficits over differences
- Most qualitative data not comparative

Need for investigation of:
- Friendship motivation factors
- Social activities and their function
- How friendships change over time

How any of these differ between pupils with ASD and typically-developing peers?
**Research Questions**

- **RQ1**: How do Secondary pupils with ASD rate the quality of their friendships compared to their typically-developing peers?
- **RQ2**: How do Secondary pupils with ASD perceive friendship in comparison to their typically-developing peers?
- **RQ3**: What motivates Secondary pupils with ASD to form and maintain friendships?
- **RQ4**: Do Secondary pupils perceive that their friendships have changed from Primary to Secondary School, and is this true of both ASD and typically-developing populations?
- **RQ5**: What purpose does social media serve in the friendships of Secondary pupils with ASD and how does this differ from their typically-developing peers?
- **RQ6**: How do parents of Secondary pupils with ASD perceive the friendships of their children, and how do these perspectives compare with those of parents of typically-developing pupils?
- **RQ7**: To what extent are Secondary pupils with ASD perceived by classmates as being within friendships groups in the classroom?
**Methodology**

- Convergent parallel mixed methods design

**Quantitative**: Friendship Quality Scale, Friendship Motivation Questionnaire, Socio-cognitive mapping

**Qualitative**: Semi-structured interviews with pupils and their parents, for ASD and matched typically-developing peers
PARTICIPANTS

- 10 Secondary School pupils & matched peers
- Matched by age, school year, and cognitive ability level
- The parents of all participants from both groups were interviewed also
- For SCM, 251 additional pupils were involved
RESULTS – QUANTITATIVE

- **Friendship Quality:**
  No significant difference on any subscale

- **Friendship Motivation:**
  No significant difference in scores of self-determination. TD pupils significantly more externally motivated.

- **Socio-cognitive Mapping:**
  Receive less nominations of friendship groupings, and more likely to be a Secondary or Peripheral group member
RESULTS – FRIENDSHIP PERCEPTIONS & EXPERIENCES

Pupil Theme 1: The process of developing and maintaining friendships

Category 1 (typical development): Complex interactive process
  - Sub-category 1: Reciprocal development of trust
  - Sub-category 2: Deeper level of social interactions

Category 2 (ASD): Controlled learning process
  - Sub-category 1: Learning to trust
  - Sub-category 2: Individual focus of friendships
RESULTS – FRIENDSHIP MOTIVATIONS

Pupil Theme 2: The driving force for friendship

Category 1 (typical development): Companionship role
- Sub-category 1: Source of entertainment
- Sub-category 2: Shared hobbies

Category 2 (ASD): Functional role
- Sub-category 1: Friend as protector
- Sub-category 2: Shared interests
- Sub-category 3: Sounding board for social behaviours
RESULTS – FRIENDSHIP CHANGES IN SECONDARY

Pupil Theme 3: 'Meta' Social Learning

Category 1 (typical development): Develop selective friendships
  - Sub-category 1: Continuity of friendships
  - Sub-category 2: Similar personalities

Category 2 (ASD): Feeling better understood by others
  - Sub-category 1: Homophily
  - Sub-category 2: Freedom of friendships in Secondary School
Pupil Theme 4: The role of social media in social learning

Category 1 (typical development): Extension of social contact

Sub-category 1: Chatting with friends online
Sub-category 2: Social media to develop friendships
Sub-category 3: Social media to continue older friendships

Category 2 (ASD): Giving purpose to interactions

Sub-category 1: Social media as safe space to interact
Sub-category 2: Gaming as way to develop friendships
RESULTS – PARENTS VIEW ON ‘FRIENDSHIP’ FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Parent Theme 1: Purpose of friendship

Category 1 (typical development): Self-improvement
- Sub-category 1: Improving self-confidence
- Sub-category 2: Developing independence

Category 2 (ASD): Companionship
RESULTS – PARENTAL ANXieties

Parent Theme 2: Parental worries

Category 1 (typical development): Finding right kind of friends

Category 2 (ASD): Later outcomes of social difficulties

Sub-category 1: Impact of negative experiences

Sub-category 2: Future romantic relationships
Parent Theme 3: Support for friendship for pupils with ASD

Category 1: Adult support
- Sub-category 1: Encouraging initiations
- Sub-category 2: Mediating friendships and offering reflections
- Sub-category 3: Teaching social skills

Category 2: Friend support
- Sub-category 1: Homophilic friendship
**Implications for EP Practice**

- Educating pupils/parents/staff on the what one might expect in a pupil with ASD
- Psychoeducation of pupils with ASD around benefits of friendship [If they are experiencing friendship difficulties/voicing discontent with their friendships]
- Help schools generate intervention plans, when necessary
- Begin this training early, for all, so from Primary onwards, can consider friendships, preventing later failures
POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH

- Longitudinal research following a set of participants through childhood and adolescence into adulthood, mapping their friendship trajectories
- Romantic relationships of pupils with ASD
- Comparisons of friendship experiences of pupils with ASD in mainstream schools, with those in mainstream with unit, to fully specialist provisions
- Examine impact of psychoeducation around benefit of social media on usage

Keep focus on differences and not deficits!