Exploring the experiences of school exclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum

Dr Laura Gray
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Mainstream schools are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure they can meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015).

The distinct needs of autistic pupils require specific consideration in educational environments, including social difficulties, specific learning styles and cognitive patterns (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Many autistic pupils also have co-occurring mental health difficulties which require specific attention and support (Simonoff et al., 2008).
Pupils with autism report a range of negative educational experiences and a disproportionately high rate of exclusion (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Research has estimated that autistic pupils are, on average, twenty times more likely to be excluded from school than their peers (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000). These negative experiences may go some way to explaining the poorer outcomes and wellbeing of those on the autistic spectrum (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Parsons et al., 2011). Only two studies have explored the exclusion experiences of pupils on the autism spectrum (Brede et al., 2017; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017).
School exclusions

- Official and estimated figures for exclusions may be underestimated as they do not include ‘managed moves’ and illegal ‘unofficial’ exclusions.

- The definition of ‘exclusion’ used in this study includes:
  - permanent exclusions
  - managed moves
  - self-exclusion
  - parents removing their children from school
This study aimed to explore young autistic peoples’ school exclusion experiences from their perspectives – alongside the perspectives of their parents, their teachers and local authority professionals.

This study aimed to explore the pupils’ mainstream experiences, the process of exclusion and the experiences of alternative provision (AP).
Research questions

1) What are the characteristics of pupils on the autism spectrum who experience school exclusion?

2) Which factors contribute to the exclusion of pupils on the autism spectrum from mainstream school?

3) What happens during the process of exclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum?

4) What do professionals do to support the inclusion of young autistic people in mainstream school?

5) What are the features of alternative provision that work for pupils on the autism spectrum?
Methodology

- Social constructionist epistemological stance
- A multi-informant approach
- Inclusion criteria for pupils
  - Secondary school age
  - Diagnosis of ASD
  - Experience of school exclusion
  - Currently attending an alternative provision
Concurrent mixed-methods design

Quantitative measures
- Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (Wechsler, 2011)
- Social Communication Questionnaire (Rutter, Bailey & Lord, 2003)
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997)
- Adult/Adolescent Sensory Profile (Brown and Dunn, 2002)
- Paediatric Quality of Life Inventory (Varni, Seid & Rode, 1999)

Qualitative measures
- Semi-structured interviews with all participants
- Inclusive methodological approaches with pupils
  - Drawing the Ideal School (Moran, 2001)
  - Life Grid (Jalali & Morgan, 2017)
Inclusive methodological approaches

Non-ideal school

Ideal school
Analysis

Quantitative measures
- Questionnaire data were scored for the sample and compared to population norms

Qualitative measures
- All interviews (with one exception) were recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Data analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
- Data analysed separately for each participant group (pupils, parents, teachers, local authority professionals) and later combined due to the consistency of themes across groups, with differences highlighted in subthemes to offer a more coherent picture
RQ1: What are the characteristics of pupils on the autism spectrum who experience school exclusion?

- There is wide variation in the individual characteristics of the pupils suggesting that exclusion is not the result of individual factors.
- This would suggest school exclusion experiences result from school- and system- level factors.
Main findings for RQ2

RQ2: Which factors contribute to the exclusion of pupils on the autism spectrum from mainstream school?

- Autistic pupils had difficulties accessing the mainstream environment
- Autistic pupils struggled navigating the social world of secondary school
- Mental health needs of these pupils were not met and many developed mental health needs as a result of their negative educational experiences

“We didn’t realise he was in such a state of anxiety, chronic anxiety, that eventually he just shut down, he stopped eating and drinking over a period of two years and eventually I had to take him to casualty because I was so worried about him, and he was admitted as a potential suicide risk” (Mother)
Main findings for RQ3

RQ3: What happens during the process of exclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum?

- Parents reported having trouble navigating the complex local authority processes in an attempt to secure an appropriate educational environment.
- Autistic pupils spent significant amounts of time out of education.
- There was a lack of consistent professional involvement.
- School exclusion experiences had a detrimental impact on the child and their family.

“Meanwhile I was in the middle of it all just trying to cope with it” (Pupil)
Main findings for RQ4

RQ4: What do professionals do to support the inclusion of young autistic people in mainstream school?

- Professionals attempt to promote the inclusion of autistic pupils through empowering schools, collaborative working and advocating for parents.
- Barriers to support include capacity, inadequate resources and schools’ response.

“The complexity of the relationship between school and parents is one of the biggest factors in breakdown of placement” (Autism teacher).
Main findings for RQ5

RQ5: What are the features of alternative provision that work for pupils on the autism spectrum?

- Aspects of the alternative provision that were successful for these pupils include a focus on individual need, an inclusive ethos, positive relationships and a collaborative approach.
- There was uncertainty about the pupils’ future after alternative provision.
- Alternative Provisions may not all be suitable or equipped to support autistic pupils.

“If you think about it from an evolutionary perspective, it was probably exceptionally essential to the development of the human race, because I very much doubt if we hadn’t had people with heightened awareness, we’d never have discovered fire, because it certainly wouldn’t be a neurotypical that’s sitting there rubbing sticks or the twigs together for hours on end” (AP teacher).
Summary

- Overall, pupils in this study reported overwhelming negative accounts of their school exclusion experiences.
- Exclusion is not a result of individual factors but a result of school-level and system-level factors.
- Pupils spend significant amounts of time out of education while parents struggle to navigate the complex system in an attempt to secure an appropriate education for their children.
- Local authority professionals play a key role in providing an understanding of autism, encouraging schools to take responsibility for their autistic pupils and suggesting reasonable adjustments based on individual need.
- Alternative provisions may not be suitable for autistic pupils.
Implications for EPs

- A more preventative approach is needed to tackle the high rates of exclusion.
- EPs could tackle the issue of schools’ response to support.
- EPs could act as the consistent professional for a child and their family.
- EPs could support the transition of pupils out of alternative provisions.
- EPs could support schools to develop a psychosocial curriculum, equip school staff to recognise early signs of mental health difficulties and use therapeutic approaches to support pupils’ emotional wellbeing.
- There should also be an accountability framework and consequences for the use of unofficial exclusions.
Limitations

- One pupil had no formal diagnosis of autism
- This study did not use a comparison group
- This study included only 12 autistic children and focused on only two provisions in one local authority
Developments

- ‘We Need an Education’ campaign (Ambitious about Autism, 2018)
- Government review of Exclusions (March 2018)
- Landmark verdict in school exclusion case (August 2018)
- National Autism Strategy to be extended to children (December 2018)

**BUT**

- More research is needed in this area to further understand school exclusion for autistic pupils
- We need to tackle this issue at all levels (school, local authority, government)


References


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